

MIND CRAFT

New titles show how working with one's hands can be good for the psyche, the soul, and the environment

By LELA NARGI

The most zeitgeist-y craft titles are more than pattern books. They not only give instructions for knitting a sweater or stitching a quilt, but also advise crafters on how to use up their stashes, repair what they already own, and embrace the care, time, and effort that go into acts of creation.

These books position making things by hand as a path to a less consumerist, more centered, maybe even more spiritual existence. Preferred materials are upcycled, scavenged, reclaimed, reused, or otherwise sustainably collected. And in pretty much every genre of craft, these materials—plant-based dyes, clay, wood, hemp, cork, small-batch wool—have their origins in forests, fields, gardens, streambeds, and recycling bins.

“There is a quiet craft revolution happening,” says Monica Perdoni, commissioning editor at Leaping Hare Press. “It ties in with a growing awareness of consumerism and waste, and how a simpler lifestyle can help us reconnect to the natural world.”

Reuse and Repair

Siblings Sonya and Nina Montenegro live on an organic farm outside Portland,

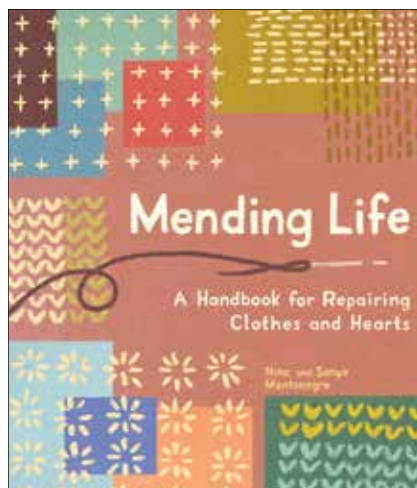
Ore., and teach handcrafting skills, beekeeping, and other sustainable arts. Susan Roxborough, executive editor at Sasquatch, discovered the Montenegros' sewing zine on their Etsy shop and won at auction their first book, *Mending Life*.

Like the zine, *Mending Life* is heavily illustrated rather than photographed. When Sasquatch releases it in March 2020, it will be just the fourth craft title from the publisher. Roxborough says she was drawn to the book's artwork and to its timeliness vis-à-vis sustainability

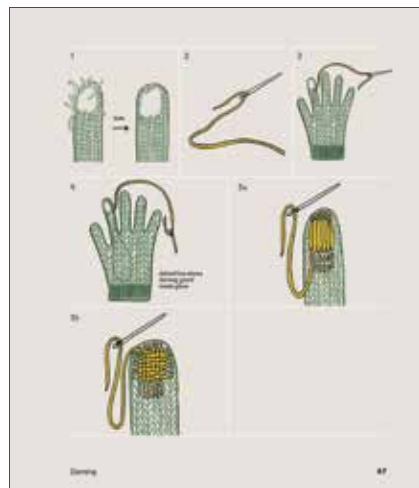
trends; she sees the title as a potentially strong seller through special sales channels. “The authors are speaking to what many of us are waking up to in the world—how horrible fast fashion is on the environment, and the importance of really caring for your things,” she says. “But mending here is also a healing act, and a way to express yourself.”

It can also be a mindfulness practice. “The care you show when mending a garment strengthens your connection to

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In *Mending Life*, siblings Sonya and Nina Montenegro highlight the practical and emotional benefits of patching, darning, and more.



The Politics of Yarn

PW talks to Clara Parkes

In 2000, Clara Parkes started the *Knitter's Review* e-newsletter to tilt her skills as a tech magazine editor toward a topic she was passionate about—yarn. She's since published six books on fiber craft, including 2017's *Knitlandia* (10,000 print copies, per BookScan). Her seventh, *Vanishing Fleece* (Abrams, Oct.), documents her purchase of a bale of wool in 2013, tracing it from its origins on the bodies of 500 Saxon Merino sheep through all the steps that get it from raw material to finished skeins. Along the way, she gives voice to farmers, shearers, mill owners, and dyers, who represent a once vibrant, now threatened, industry.

How did you evolve from reviewing yarn to writing about the agricultural side of wool?

When I began *Knitter's Review*, I assumed that I could go to any yarn company and say, "Tell me about these fibers and where they came from," and it would be easy to piece together a story. At the end of the day, though, a lot of yarns were pretty similar. The turning point was in 2006, when I stumbled upon a skein of Cormo yarn; everything about it was traceable and had intention behind it. The more I looked, the more interested I became in the story of the people who put it together and the lives they were trying to support.

Did you expect your newsletter subscribers to share your interest?

I got emails from tons of people after I wrote [2009's] *The Knitter's Book of Wool*, saying they had no idea there could be so much nuance to a skein of yarn. So when I got the chance to buy the bale, I knew other people would be into it: not just fiber artists, but anyone curious about the clothing on their bodies and the complicated story about what's happened to textiles in America.

How has your readership changed over the years?

Since I started my advocacy work, ranting more about wool, I've found a whole other world of people; they're finding me through their fiber farmers, or they sew, or they farm, and there are also more general interest people who don't have *knitter* as the number one word in their Ins-



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tagram profile. That's been very inspiring.

What do you hope readers learn from your latest book?

I want to remind them of the human consequences of what they wear. I'm hoping they can have a better understanding of just how many people and families and communities and livelihoods are touched with every purchase they make, and I wanted to put a face and a name to as many of them as I could. Do you need 39 sweaters in your closet? What about three well-made wool sweaters that will last 30 years and sustain multiple communities in multiple states that help keep land in agriculture? I hope my readers will under-

stand how tenuous it all is. The U.K. has the Campaign for Wool, and I think we need something like that here, to champion the American wool industry. I hope I can pull in my platform to help us achieve that.

—L.N.



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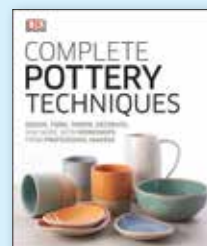
The Way of Clay

In line with other crafts that favor materials drawn from the Earth, pottery is having something of a moment, with several publishers releasing comprehensive instructional books that are aimed mostly at beginners. “There’s a tactile aspect to clay,” says Storey publisher and editorial director Deborah Balmuth in explaining the uptick in titles, “and a sense of reconnecting through craft to natural and local materials. We’re seeing a big focus on using what nature is providing.” Here, we round up a selection of new books that delve into the finer points of working with clay and glaze.

Complete Pottery Techniques

José Carvalho, Charlotte Grinling, and Charlie Trueman. DK, Aug.

This compendium by three professional potters leads would-be claysmiths through the basics—choosing designs, learning to shape them on the wheel, then glazing them—all enhanced by color photography that lends a close-up look at technique. The book also offers advanced instruction in types of glaze, manipulating finishes, and adding texture.



From Clay to Kiln

Stuart Carey, photos by Alun Callender. Lark, Sept.

Carey, who teaches at a ceramics studio in London, directs his book’s instruction at beginners, using what he writes is his “unique insight into the problems newcomers face when working with” clay. Step-by-step photography leads readers through, for instance, the various hand positions for shaping clay on a wheel. A troubleshooting chart in the back matter runs through problems and solutions at all stages of the process.



Handmade Tile

Forrest Lesch-Middelton. Quarry, Oct.

An architectural tile maker in California who is known for historically inspired pieces, Lesch-Middelton offers instruction in creating, decorating, designing with, and installing ceramic tile. Q&As with notable tile artisans lend inspiration.



Mastering Kilns and Firing

Lindsay Oesterritter. Quarry, Oct.

Looking beyond the foundational materials of pottery to focus on the various methods used in heating clay into finished forms, Oesterritter, a ceramicist in Virginia, explores raku, pit and barrel firing, and kilns, encouraging artisans to be as ambitious as they dare (“Another option for your kiln is to make your own bricks”). She also interviews clay artists with varying areas of expertise.



Painting on Pottery

Tania Zaoui. Search, Oct.

For crafters who don't have access to a ceramics studio, a kiln, or even clay, French artist Zaoui focuses on what can be created from preformed, unglazed, ready-to-decorate dishes and other objects available at crafts stores, with the application of ceramics paints and home-oven heat.

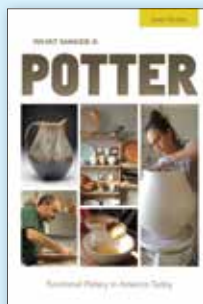


What Makes a Potter

Janet Koplos. Schiffer, Oct.

Koplos, an honorary fellow of the American Craft Council and a contributing editor to *Art in America*, showcases the biographies, philosophies, and handiwork of dozens of American potters. Not only does artisan pottery allow “a relationship between the user and the maker invoked by the sensations of touch,” Koplos writes in the introduction, it’s also a humane and ecologically sound alternative to “mass-produced china made at slave-labor wages and imported vast distances using fossil fuels that damage the environment.”

—L.N.



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it,” as Swedish clothing store owner Kerstin Neumüller writes in the foreword to *Mend & Patch* (Pavilion, Oct.). Through basic instructions complemented by photos, she makes room for a reader’s personal preferences, offering guidance in both invisible mending and more decorative mending that’s meant to be noticed.

At Abrams, editorial director Shawna Mullen sees a similar interest in environmentally friendly handi-craft. “The focus on climate change seems to have readers striving for more sustainable practices,” she says, with “tactile, natural materials.”

Abrams is pitching *Reclaimed Wood* by Alan Solomon and Klaas Armster (Oct.) as a “field guide” to salvaging wood from barns, water tanks, and bowling alleys, then using the material to spiff up homes, offices, and public spaces. Aside from the DIY instruction, Armster and Solomon,



partners at Brooklyn’s Sawkill Lumber Company, present an aficionado’s appreciation for the history of wood in the United States.

A bonus, says Abrams editor-in-chief Eric Himmel, is that woodworking “is a rare craft that appeals to men.” It’s a traditional perception but not entirely unfounded. In December 2018, Fox Chapel saw a sales spike for the backlist title *20-Minute Whittling Projects*, thanks, says director of marketing David Miller, to online shoppers searching for “gifts for boys and men.” He’s hoping for similar success with the woodcraft titles and associated patterns that

Fox Chapel is adding to its new store on Etsy. The site, he says, offers easy-to-read analytics and makes it easy to target an already eager customer base. (For more woodworking titles, see “Board Meetings,” p. 28.)

That base may well include 20-some-

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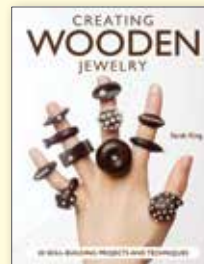
Board Meetings

Woodworkers tend to be tuned in to sustainability issues—after all, their craft relies on a finite resource. New titles includes several that emphasize recycled materials or are otherwise mindful of creating something meant to last.

Creating Wooden Jewelry

Sarah King. Fox Chapel, Dec.

The author makes an appeal for “designer-makers,” as she calls her potential readers, to consider using discarded, offcut, and found wood in their creations. A jewelry artist whose work has been sold at Barneys, Liberty London, and elsewhere, King leads readers through her process, her inspirations, and 20 projects—including ebony rings, oak necklaces, and walnut pendants—all meant to help readers build skills as they go.



The Forest Woodworker

Sjors van der Meer and Job Suijker. Search, July

Projects small (carved spoons) and larger (chairs) use green wood—recently cut and unseasoned—as a starting point, paying as much attention to exploring processes and materials as giving instruction. The authors’ mission is to reacquaint readers with what they call “old skills” while helping them reconnect with nature, develop “forest awareness,” and learn to slow down. A well-crafted greenwood chair, they point out, could last 100 years.



Hand Hewn

Jack A. Sobon. Storey, Oct.

Drawing on 7,000 years of tradition, Sobon, an architect who specializes in timber-frame buildings, showcases timber-framed porches, rooms, barns, and houses—all built without hammering a single nail. The book, which mingles woodworking with home construction and sustainable living, is about what Storey publisher Deborah Balmuth calls “honest building,” aimed at people looking for “meaning through the expression of creativity.”



One-Day DIY

J.P. Strate and Liz Spillman. Page Street, Jan. 2020

Spillman and Strate, business partners and YouTubers whose Rehab Life channel has 227,000 followers, here guide readers in how to economically build their own furniture and home decor—think butcher-block islands and midcentury modern-style bookshelves—with rented tools, precut wood, and minimal time investment.



The Way of the Woodshop

Aleksandra Zee. Dey Street, Oct.

Instagram darling Zee (123,000 followers), a California woodworker whose desert-hued feed positions her as a lifestyle influencer as much as an artist, invites readers to find a personal aesthetic and learn the beauty of working with their hands.

Projects include the practical (a worktable) and decorative (a walking stick tapestry), all of which encourage tapping into the spiritual side of the craft. "As an imperfect being," she writes, "I find that by working with wood and all its inconsistencies, I can also tackle my own."



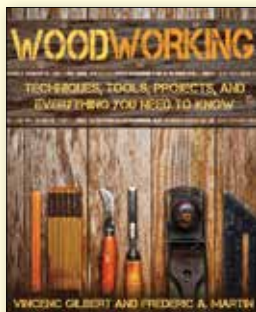
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Above, a dinner party table setting at Aleksandra Zee's wood-working studio includes wooden coasters and natural dye bandanas, two projects in *The Way of the Woodshop*.

Woodworking

Vicenç Gilbert and Frederic A. Martín. Skyhorse, Mar. 2020

Expounding on everything from species of wood to types of hardware and finishes, the authors note that it would be "pretentious" to imagine they'd summed up a centuries-old craft in one book. Instead, they write, their goal is to help readers teach themselves how to craft, thereby building a lifetime's worth of skills and knowledge. Step-by-step projects include a bookcase, a folding table, and a magazine rack.



—L.N.

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Hobby & Craft Books

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things who want to surround themselves with “beautifully made things,” says CICO publisher Cindy Richards, “as a counterbalance to our mass-produced, throwaway society.” In October, the publisher will release *Crochet Stashbusters* by Nicki Trench, featuring projects such as hats and cozies meant to use up materials left over from other patterns. It’s one of several titles—including *One Skein Crochet* by Ellen Gormley (Interweave, Aug.) and the Take Two Fat Quarters sewing books by Wendy Gardiner (Search, Mar. 2020)—aimed at helping crafters use what’s already on hand.



Material Good

With 17 patterns for totes and backpacks, belts and baskets, *Create with Cork Fabric* by Jessica Sallie Kapitanski (Stash, Sept.) is, likewise, a sustainability-oriented title. It’s a traditional, pattern-centric sewing book that introduces a new material: cork fabric



In *The Wild Dyer*, Abigail Booth shows how to draw pigment from plants including madder (red) and woad (blue).

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is touted throughout as “natural,” “ecofriendly,” “long-lasting,” and “vegan.” C+T acquisitions editor Roxane Cerda says it fits in with other titles on her list that nod to topics including stash-busting and recycled textiles.

The Wild Dyer by Abigail Booth (Princeton Architectural Press, Oct.) approaches eco-consciousness from the perspective of color. Booth grows dye plants in her garden—comfrey and rhubarb, to name two—and works the land as well as her fabric as a means to connect with the natural world. Dyeing with plants, she writes, makes affordable the luxury of crafting with sustainable materials.

Chronicle distributes PAP (both publishers are owned by the McEvoy Group). Rob Schaeffer, senior acquisitions editor at PAP, says that because Chronicle’s sales team has expertise in marketing high-end crafts books, his imprint has an opportunity to diversify beyond architecture books and “build up a presence in the craft world.” Like other publishers, he sees a millennial readership for eco-minded craft books.

At Chelsea Green, which uses the tagline “the politics and practice of sustainability,” the narrative history *Fibershed* (Nov.) takes its name from the nonprofit author Rebecca Burgess founded, which brings ecologically sourced textiles to the marketplace. In the book, Burgess explores the realities behind mass-produced garments, the carbon cycle, and natural fibers. She seeks to reconnect the dots, she writes in the introduction, between the “impacts our clothes have on land, air, water, labor, and our own human health.”

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Hand and Heart

The notion that crafting can feed the soul is not new, but it's enjoying renewed vigor with titles such as *The Knit Vibe* (Abrams, Oct.) by Vickie Howell, former host of the PBS TV show *Knitting Daily*. Interviews with high-profile knitters, knitting community builders, and mindfulness gurus, all discussing their connection to craft, form the bulk of the book, which also includes about two dozen patterns.

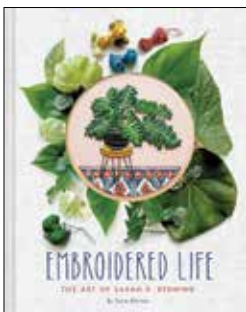
Mindful Thoughts for Makers by Ellie Beck (Sept.), book nine in a 12-book series from Leaping Hare, Quarto's conscious living imprint, joins similarly themed titles for birdwatchers, cyclists, and gardeners. Beck, a textile artist with 40,000 Instagram followers, encourages readers not only to reacquaint themselves with what she calls the "innate" act of making, but to "lean in to the stillness and quietness that can come from the experience."

The book "focuses on the process, experience, and nature of crafting, which any maker will understand," says Leaping Hare's Perdoni. "Hopefully, it will interest potential readers who hadn't previously thought how mindfulness can be explored through the practical and expressive mediums of creating."

This is of a piece with *The Mindful Maker* by Clare Youngs (CICO, Oct.), in which another designer with a healthy Instagram following (67,000 strong) shows readers how to "make new things from old, slow down, and take enjoyment from the act of crafting and the peace it instills," says CICO's Richards. *The Mindful Maker* covers multiple disciplines—sewing, embroidery, macramé, weaving, felting, punch needling—that Richards says appeal to an readership of millennials "keen to experiment" while doing their best to save the planet.



Such books may find even younger readers, if Jonathan Larson is anything to go by. He taught himself to crochet at age five and, with his 192,000 follower-strong Instagram account, connects with people worldwide through his craft. Not yet a teenager, he's the author (with his mother, Jennifer Larson) of the recently released *Hello, Crochet Friends!* (Kwil, ages 5–12), which shares the story of Jonathan's adoption from Ethiopia and the sense of community he's found through crocheting; it includes one pattern.



Embroidered Life by Sara Barnes (Chronicle, Sept.) explores the artistic practice of Sarah K. Benning, a contemporary embroiderer with 501,000 Instagram followers. It's a testament to the growing relevance of this branch of needlecraft, the mindfulness that can result from its practice, and its potential for being easy on the Earth. Benning "embraces sustainability in her embroidery," Barnes writes, "and tries

to be conscientious by using secondhand textiles."

The title offers an introspective counterpoint to *Threads of Life* by Clare Hunter (Abrams, Oct.), a wide-ranging history that explores the role embroidery and other needle arts have played in "identity, protest, memory, power, and politics," according to the publisher.

Why We Quilt by Thomas Knauer (Storey, Oct.), also a history, visits with dozens of quilters and learns their many motivations beyond the simple satisfaction of the act—to connect with tradition and loved ones, to express creativity, to move beyond consumer culture, and even to change the world. In its six chapters, it manages an impressive feat: it nails every prominent craft trend of the season. ■

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Lela Nargi is a freelance journalist in Brooklyn who's written several books about craft.