

The Renaissance of Latvia's ethnographic mittens



What will 9,000 hands have in common during the NATO Summit in Riga this November? 4,500 pairs of traditional hand-made Latvians mittens!

That's what the NATO Summit Latvia Task Force has prepared for Summit guests. The mittens were specially knitted by hundreds of women and men around the country ranging in age from 30 to 86.

Each pair features a unique design, utilizing a wide variety of traditional colors, patterns and

symbols. For Latvians, mittens are much more than a way to warm your hands. Every ethnographic Latvian mitten tells a story, marks an anniversary and represents a specific region in Latvia (Vidzeme, Zemgale, Latgale and Kurzeme.) Some mitten designs are specially intended for weddings or other special events. There is even a rich tradition of folkloric etiquette associated with the wearing, storing and displaying of mittens. (More about [The story of a thousand year old Latvian mitten](#))

All, mittens for men and women are different in size. Men's mittens in general are bigger. In addition, more dramatic and reserved colours are characteristic for men's mittens. The colours in women's gloves are brighter and more cheerful.

The ornamentation elements are "blended in" from one neighbouring region into another; therefore the identification of a mitten to a particular region can be characterized more precisely by the composition of its colours and shades.

Latgale is a land of linen; therefore linen-grey light colourings predominate in gloves of this region. Similarly, bright and joyful colours are characteristic for Latgale and also Kurzeme. Also the word "rakstaini" more precisely characterizes mittens from Kurzeme, because their ornamentation is brighter than in other regions.

Calm and vibrant earthy colours are the basis of mittens from Zemgale. However, light and beige colourings are typical for Vidzeme.

For most Latvians, this project is a special source of national pride, because it combines tradition, culture and history with something of lasting practical value that will be enjoyed around the world.

Please, enjoy it!

Galleries of the mittens.

- Latvian men`s mittens from the Zemgale region of Latvia ([men`s](#) / [women`s](#))
- Latvian mittens from the Kurzeme region of Latvia ([men`s](#) / [women`s](#))
- Latvian mittens from the Latgale region of Latvia ([men`s](#) / [women`s](#))
- [Latvian mittens from the Vidzeme region of Latvia](#)

-
1. Why will especially knitted mittens be given to the guests of the NATO Riga Summit?
 2. Who will receive the mittens?
 3. How many pairs of mittens will be knitted?
 4. Who will knit the mittens for the NATO Summit guests?
 5. How many knitters are involved in the knitting process?
 6. From which region do most of the knitters come from?
 7. How many pairs of mittens will one person knit on average?
 8. What is the average age of knitters?
 9. How many pairs of mittens are knitted during a day?
 10. How many grams of wool are used for one pair of mittens?
 11. What is the difference between mittens for men and women?
 12. How does the mitten ornamentation of the Vidzeme, Zemgale, Latgale and Kurzeme regions differ?
 13. Interesting Latvian beliefs about mittens

1. Why will especially knitted mittens be given to the guests of the NATO Riga Summit?

Latvia's ethnographic knitted mittens are one of the treasures of Latvian culture and part of the wealth of Latvia's ethnographic ornamentation. Mittens are symbolic of Latvia. Each of them will be a product of individual handwork whose quality is recognised worldwide and will be a special souvenir of Latvia, as every pair of mittens will be unique.

2. Who will receive the mittens?

The ethnographic mittens will be given to NATO Summit delegations and media representatives, who will take with them this unique souvenir that is special for Latvians to more than 26 Nations all over the world.

3. How many pairs of mittens will be knitted?

All together Latvian master handicrafts women and men will knit 4500 pairs of mittens in the different ethnographic ornamentation and colours of the Vidzeme, Zemgale, Kurzeme and Latgale regions.

4. Who will knit the mittens for the NATO Summit guests?

Women from the rural association called "Akorande" will knit mittens with the ornamentation of the Kurzeme and Latgale regions, and the handiwork company "Ramid" will knit mittens from the regions of Vidzeme and Zemgale.

5. How many knitters are involved in the knitting process?

In total, 268 knitters are involved in the knitting process and 3 of them are men.

6. From which region do most of the knitters come from?

Most of the knitters come from Vidzeme. It is interesting though, that they do not knit mittens from their own region but together with the Latgale' knitters will produce mittens with the ornamentation of the Latgale region. For their part, the Latgale's knitters are making mittens with the ornamentation from the Vidzeme and Zemgale regions, but the Zemgale's and Kurzeme's knitters – produce mittens typical of the Kurzeme region.

7. How many pairs of mittens will one person knit on average?

In those regions of Latvia where there are fewer knitters, one knitter will have to make up to 30 pairs of mittens. However, in the regions where there are more knitters, one knitter will make 3 pairs of mittens.

8. What is the average age of knitters?

The average age of the knitters is 60 years. The youngest is 30 years old and the oldest knitting master is 86 years old.

9. How many pairs of mittens are knitted during a day?

The longer the experience, the faster mittens are produced. It takes about two days to make one pair of mittens. The most skilful knitters can make a pair of mittens in a day.

10. How many grams of wool are used for one pair of mittens?

Up to 90 grams of wool can be necessary for one pair of mittens. In order to knit all the proposed mittens, approximately 383 kilograms of wool will be used. It will be necessary to shear 38 sheep in order to gather the amount of wool necessary for all the mittens.

11. What is the difference between mittens for men and women?

First of all, mittens for men and women are different in size. Men's mittens are bigger. In addition, more dramatic and reserved colours are characteristic for men's mittens. The colours in women's gloves are brighter and more cheerful.

12. How does the mitten ornamentation of the Vidzeme, Zemgale, Latgale and Kurzeme regions differ?

The ornamentation elements are "blended in" from one neighbouring region into another; therefore the identification of a mitten to a particular region can be characterized more precisely by the composition of its colours and shades.



Latgale is a land of linen; therefore linen-grey light colourings predominate in gloves of this region. Similarly, bright and joyful colours are characteristic for Latgale and also Kurzeme.



Also the word "rakstaini" more precisely characterizes mittens from Kurzeme, because their ornamentation is brighter than in other regions.



Calm and vibrant earthy colours are the basis of mittens from Zemgale.



However, light and beige colourings are typical for Vidzeme.

13. Interesting Latvian beliefs about mittens

Mittens and socks should be knitted in summer, then they will be warm, soft and strong. /A. Zvejniece, Lubāna./

One should not wash new mittens when there is an old moon, they will lose their color and let through the wind. /K. Zilbers, Meņģele./

One should not wipe their nose in a mitten. Whoever does that never gets rich. /J. Andriņš, Taurkalns./

One should not give their hand to another with a mitten on, otherwise they will give away their luck/A. Tidriķe, Pabažu jūrmala./

We would like thank rural association "Akorande" un "Ramid" ltd. for its co-operation!

Information from <http://www.rigasummit.lv/en/id/cats/nid/698/>



The story of a thousand year old Latvian mitten

A short history

Latvia is famous for the fact that the oldest mittens have been found here by archaeologists. They are estimated to be approximately ten centuries old. The tradition of knitting mittens stems from the cold weather of Northern Europe; although it is worth

mentioning that centuries ago mittens played a decorative role as well. By fastening them behind the waistband, they were worn in summer as a bijouterie and adornment. For several centuries they were the main form of gift and endowed with magical significance.

Nowadays Latvian mittens, so diverse in their colours and patterns are still an essential part of our winter clothing. Although there is always the possibility to wear synthetic gloves, the originality, tradition, warmth and sense of Latvia that is knitted into a mitten will be always worth a compliment.

To fit together like a hand and a glove – mitten traditions at weddings

Mittens are a very important part of several Latvian traditions. Probably the most popular role played by mittens is at a wedding.

Tradition says that before an unmarried girl entered into marriage she had to fill a hope chest. Mittens were an important part of the chest. The most lavish chests contained several hundred pairs of hand made mittens. They were given as gifts. Early tradition calls this giving process *dedicating* or *devoting*. The mittens were given to the mother-in-law, father-in-law, brother-in-law, and other people involved in organising the wedding. They were dedicated to cows, sheep, and horses and left in places where the newly-weds were going to live. The most exiting fact is that every mitten had to be knitted in a different design using different patterns; otherwise the maids were laughed at. This could not have been done if not for the rich and diverse Latvian ethnographical culture. The symbolism within the mittens

Every mitten has its own story, as every pattern knitted has its own meaning and brings with it its own wish. Most of these patterns have been derived from the Latvian tradition of deities and gods. Every deity and god had its own tasks and mission and it was represented by one or more symbols that characterised it.

The symbolism within the mittens

Every mitten has its own story, as every pattern knitted has its own meaning and brings with it its own wish. Most of these patterns have been derived from the Latvian tradition of deities and gods. Every deity and god had its own tasks and mission and it was represented by one or more symbols that characterised it.



Jumis - (from root *jum- roof-*) was the god of sky and fertility, symbolising also the germ of life and mysteriousness. He is associated with „double-plants,” such as two corn stalks or trees which have grown together and share a trunk or stem. During harvesting, some stalks of the crops are bent to the ground and secured in that location with stones. He is depicted as a short man with clothes that resemble ears of wheat, hops and barley.



Zalktis - was the god of well-being and fertility, about whom little is known. He was associated with snakes.



Krusts - (the Cross) the oldest ornamentation in all cultures. It guards, blesses and brings happiness.



Saule - (The Sun) was the goddess of the sun and fertility, patron goddess of the unlucky, including orphans. She was the mother of the daughters of the sun and lived on top of a mountain and flew across the sky on her chariot. At night, she sailed across the sea. She is a beloved Baltic Sun Goddess sometimes recognised as a red apple, setting in the west. Saule is reborn as her daughter, the morning star at the Winter Solstice.



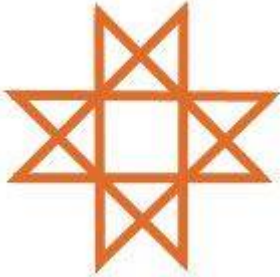
Mēness - (Moon) was the god of the moon and war. He was one of the suitors of the Saules meitas (the Sun's daughters). Mēness counted the stars and determined that Auseklis was missing, and stole Auseklis' bride. He was usually a rival of Saule, the sun, his wife who sheared him into pieces after discovering his adultery. Alternative names include Mehness, Meness, and Ménulis in Lithuanian mythology.



Laima - (Luck) was the personification of fate and of luck, both good and bad. She was associated with childbirth, marriage, death, prolificacy, and domesticity. She was also the patron of pregnant women.



Māra - (Mary) is the highest-ranking goddess, a female Dievs (God). She may be thought of as the alternate side of Dievs (like in Yin Yang). Other Latvian goddesses, sometimes all of them, are considered her alternate aspects.



Auseklis - (from root *aust-* dawn-) also called Lielais Auseklis ("great Auseklis"). He was associated with Venus, and with both Meness and Saule, the moon and the sun. He is the symbol of the morning star, the usher of the new day.



Ūsiņš - was the god of horses, bees and light, mentioned by Jesuit Joannis Stribingius in 1606. His symbol indicates a sun-carriage. He took care of horses during the summer, then transferred the power to Mārtiņš at the festival of Mārtiņi.



Dievs - (*god*) was the supreme god. The same word refers to the Christian deity in modern Latvian. In ancient Latvian mythology, Dievs was not just the father of the gods, he was the essence of them all. Every other deity was a different aspect or manifestation of Dievs; this is most true with Māra and Laima. The name Dievs was also interpreted as Sky. Though he courted Saule, no actual wife is known. His sons are known as Dieva deli (Sons of God). He is historically the same god of Indo-European religion as Tyr, Zeus, Jupiter and Dyaus Pita.



Jānis - (or *Jahnis*) was a deity associated with Jāņi, the Midsummer's Night festival. After Christianization, he was associated with John the Baptist, through a process of syncretism. Once every year, Jānis at midsummer came to bring luck and fertility to the people of Latvia. In modern Latvia, it is very popular name for males.

Resources:

Latvian Education Information System, "Ritms un simetrija Latviešu cimdu rakstos", <http://www.liis.lv/cimdi/frame1.htm>

World Federation of Free Latvians, "Latviešu ornamentu pamatelementi un to nozīme (simboli)", <http://www.pbla.lv/izglitiba/ornamenti.htm>