



by *Sandi Rosner*

Intarsia is a knitting technique that cycles in and out of fashion. In the early '90s, knitting magazines featured pullovers with large-scale world maps or zebra stripes, while yarn companies showed sweaters that were a patchwork of different yarn textures. If you think pictorial knits are just for children's wear or the ugly Christmas sweater, think again. For Fall 2007, Chanel featured a pullover with a large penguin design in its ad campaign. And argyle is a classic motif that never really goes out of style.

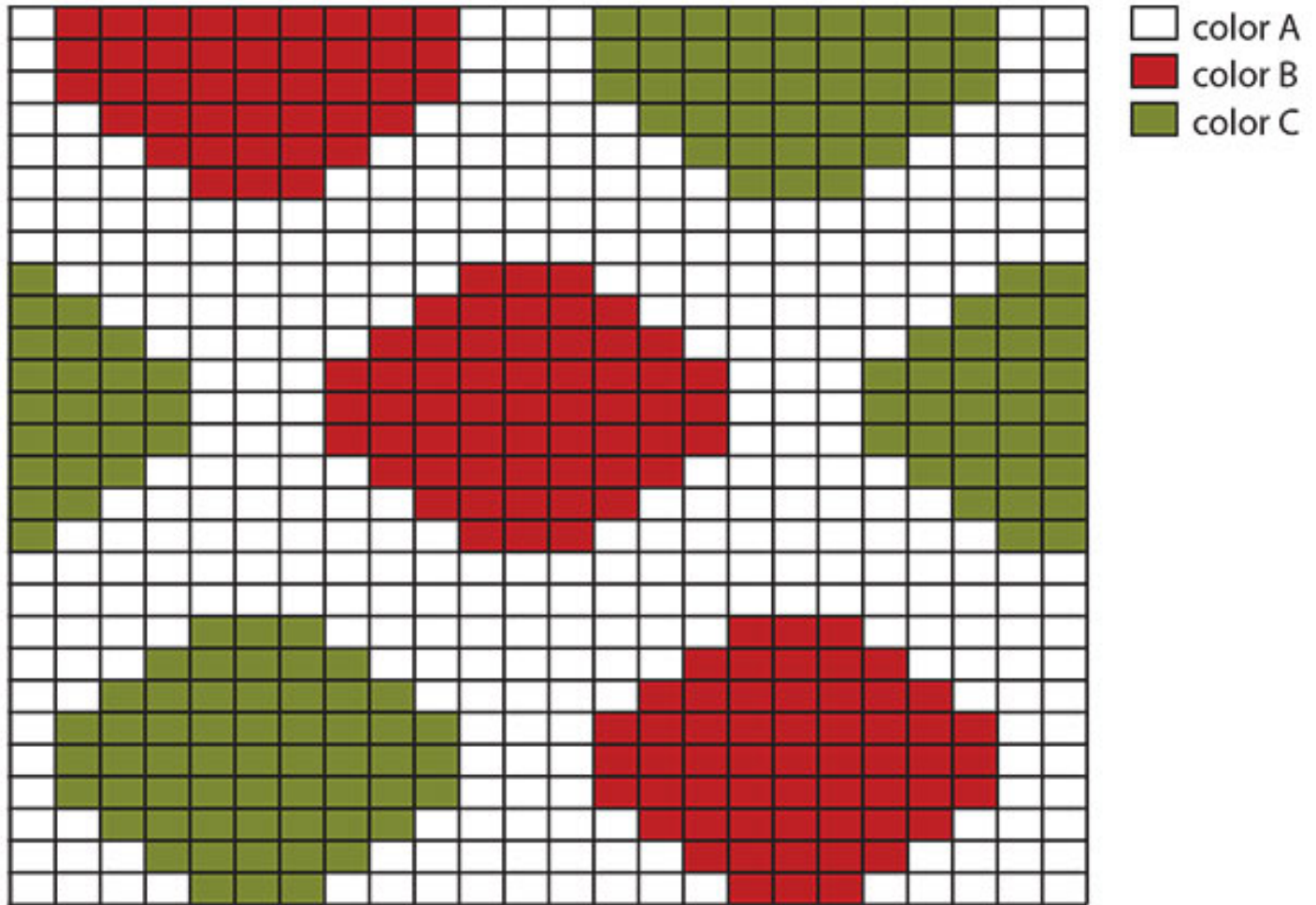
Intarsia is due for resurgence. In this issue of Twist Collective, intarsia is used for my design, [Interleaf](#). With only basic knitting skills, you, too, can master this technique.

### **What is Intarsia?**

The word intarsia is derived from the Italian verb *intarsiare*, which translates as "to inlay." In knitting, intarsia is the technique that creates isolated blocks of color.

Unlike Fair Isle, stranded, or mosaic knitting, a separate ball of yarn is used for each block of color and the yarn is not carried along the wrong side of the work. Because there are no strands across your stitches, intarsia retains the same elasticity as plain stockinette stitch.

Designs for intarsia are usually presented in charts, where each box in the grid represents one stitch. While contemporary charts use color in the grid to correspond with the yarn color, older charts may use symbols, with a different symbol for each color.



Note that the chart grid is not square. That's because in stockinette, each stitch is wider than it is tall. The chart is drawn to reflect a ratio of five stitches to seven rows, a typical stockinette gauge. If you decide to venture into charting your own designs—and I encourage you to do so—remember to work with a grid that is wider than it is tall. If you chart your design on a square grid, the picture will flatten out when you knit it.

Intarsia is usually worked back and forth in rows. As you finish each section of color, the yarn is dropped. This leaves it in position to pick up and use when you encounter this section on the next row. If you work in rounds, you'll find that your yarn is at the wrong edge of the color section. While it is possible to work intarsia in the round, the techniques for doing so are far fiddlier than just working flat and making seams and are outside the scope of this article.

## The Step-by-Step

Intarsia is as easy as stockinette stitch—simply knit the right-side rows and purl the wrong-side rows, changing color according to your chart. The only trick is interlocking the yarns to prevent holes at the color changes. Here is how it's done:

As you end one color, drop the yarn to the wrong side of the work. Pick up the new color from beneath the old color, trapping the old color strand. Here is how it looks on the right side, as we finish working with beige, and begin to work with rust.



Here is how it looks on the wrong side, as we finish working with rust, and begin to work with beige.



Notice the line of neat interlocking loops where the two colors meet.

You are not limited to straight lines with intarsia. Work diagonals the same way by working to the color change and then picking up the new yarn from beneath the old.



You can carry the yarn across two or three stitches with no problem. If the color change is traveling farther than about half an inch (1.5 centimeters), it is better to break the strand and rejoin when the color is needed again.

## **Managing the Yarn**

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The biggest challenge in working intarsia is managing your yarn supply. When there are only two or three color sections in a row, you can easily work each from a separate ball of yarn. But in a complex design, you may have dozens of color sections in a single row. Working from multiple balls of yarn in this situation becomes ungainly.

There are three popular options for managing small amounts of yarn: bobbins, butterflies, and loose lengths.

Plastic yarn bobbins (easily found at your favorite LYS) allow you to control a small amount of yarn. Wind your yarn around the bobbin, then bring the end through the slit to prevent unwinding. Release the yarn and unwind as needed to complete each row.



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To make a butterfly, wind the yarn in a figure eight around the index and pinkie fingers of one hand, keeping the working end free. As you near the end of your yarn supply, slip the figure eight off your fingers and tie the end around the "waist," securing it with a half-hitch. You should be able to pull the working end to free yarn as needed. Butterflies can easily contain 15 or more yards of yarn.

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You can also join yarn as needed, a yard or two at a time. These manageable lengths of yarn will become entwined on the wrong side of your work as you knit, but it's easy to just pull the strand you want free of the jumble and continue. When you run out of a particular yarn, just join in another



strand. If you can splice the yarn, there will be no extra ends to weave in.

My preference is to use manageable lengths of yarn in places where only a couple of yards are needed, and to use butterflies where a larger yarn supply is desired. I find that the weight of bobbins causes them to swing like pendulums, creating annoying tangles.

In this swatch, seven different yarn sources are in use – one for each spot and one for each section of background color.



Wrong side

I determined that each spot required about 1½ yards (1.4 meters) of yarn. I roughly measured out the length of the strand needed, and just left it hanging loose. You can estimate the yarn required for a color section by counting the stitches to be made in that color, wrapping the yarn around your needle the same number of times as the number of stitches, then adding in 6 to 8 inches (15 to 20 centimeters) for the tails.

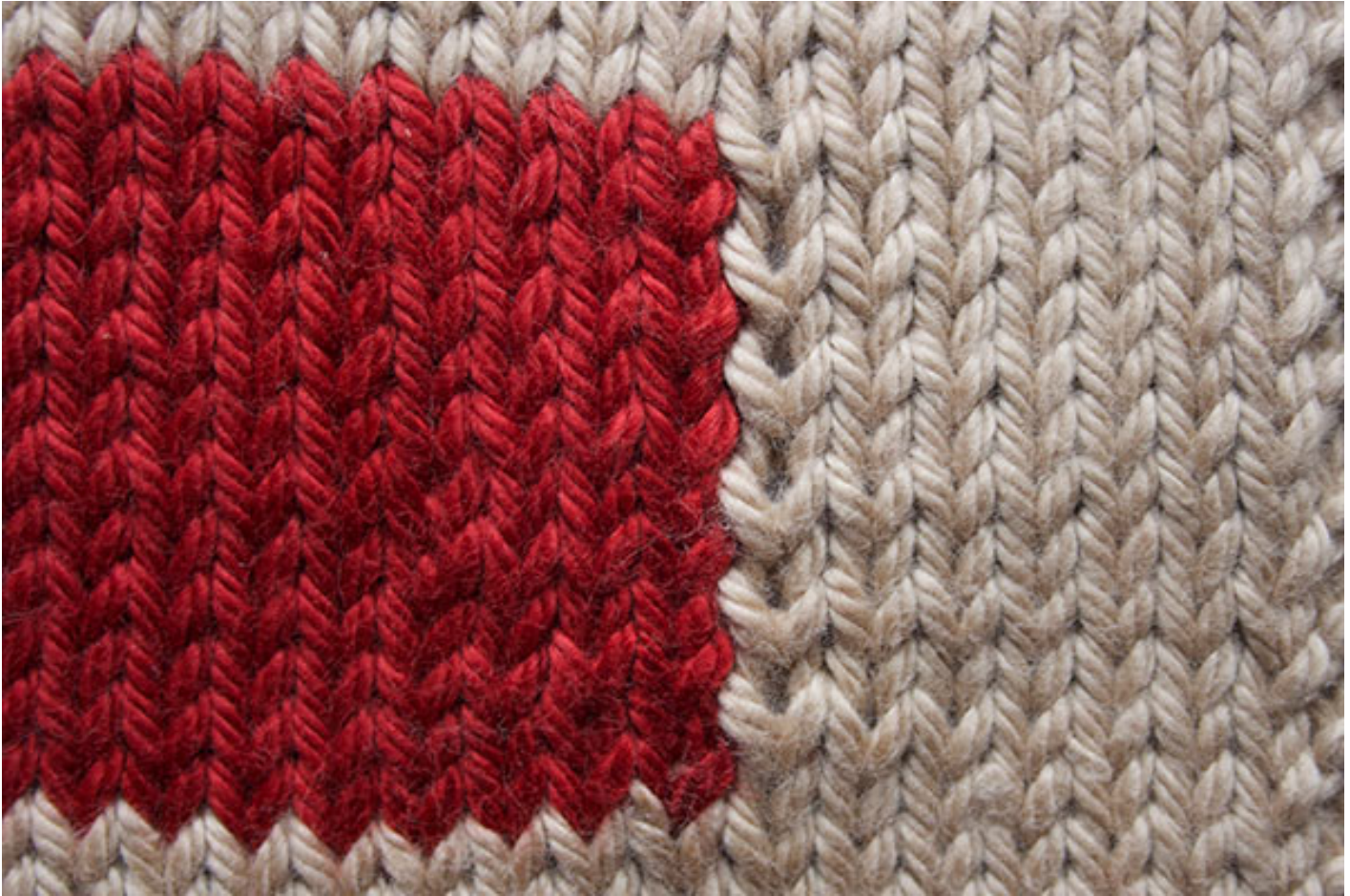
For the background sections, I wound butterflies. I've also included a bobbin, just for the purposes of illustration.



### **Troubleshooting Tips**

The two biggest complaints knitters have when working intarsia are uneven stitches at the color change and dealing with all the yarn ends.

Take a look at the column of stitches on either side of the color change in this swatch.



Notice how enlarged stitches alternate with shrunken stitches in the columns? Why does this happen?

As you insert your needle into each stitch to knit or purl, you are enlarging that stitch to accommodate the second needle. Where is that extra yarn coming from? It can't come from the stitches yet to be worked, since the needle is holding them open. The extra yarn comes from the stitch just before the current stitch. As you insert your needle, you pull a bit of yarn from the stitch just before to enlarge the stitch you're working. That little bit of yarn is pushed along as you work your way down the row, enlarging each stitch in turn. When you reach the end of the row, or in this case, the end of a color section, that last stitch is always a little bigger than its neighbors. This is especially apparent when working with an inelastic yarn, like the cotton used for this swatch.

It is possible to fix these uneven stitches. Use the tip of your needle to pull on the left-hand leg of the shrunken stitch below the stitch you want to reduce.



This will shift the extra yarn from the enlarged stitch to the shrunken stitch, evening things out nicely.

Personally, I think the fix is more trouble than it's worth. I've decided to embrace the imperfection of these uneven stitches instead of letting them bother me.

## Finishing Touches

Working a complex design in intarsia can leave you with literally hundreds of yarn tails to weave in—a daunting task. I recommend you don't leave it all for the end of the project. Set aside a little time at the end of each knitting session to neatly weave in your yarn tails. Be sure to weave the ends into a section of the same color to avoid having a contrasting color peek through.

Some knitters choose to weave in their ends as they go, using a method similar to that used to catch floats in stranded knitting. I think this is a technique best reserved for highly textured yarns. I find that it disturbs the smooth surface of the stockinette stitch in a way that draws attention, like a disturbance in the force. For best results, use a tapestry needle to weave in the yarn tails on the wrong side.

## Designing Your Own

Once you've made a simple intarsia project, you're sure to feel inspired to try your hand at original designs. Team logos, favorite symbols, even a purple dinosaur are all within your reach.

Remember that the grid is not square. You can purchase knitter's graph paper with a proportional grid, or make your own using a graphics software program or even Excel. Use a grid with the same stitch-to-row proportions as stockinette stitch. Lay the grid over the image you want to reproduce, and trace it out.

Simplify your image as much as possible. Think in terms of large chunks of color for your intarsia chart, and add fine detail using duplicate stitch or other surface embroidery after the knitting is done. Buttons, beads and googly eyes are great sewn embellishments.

*Sandi Rosner is a knitter who wears many hats: designer, technical editor, writer and teacher. She loves the little details that elevate a knitting project from homemade to handmade. Follow her blog at [www.knittinginwinecountry.blogspot.com](http://www.knittinginwinecountry.blogspot.com).*