

A special interview from the knitting universe!

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# Knitter's Magazine

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*A new tradition*

**Fall  
Pastels**

**CELTIC**  
Legends of Style  
and Colorwork





The Knitting Universe  
Alexis Xenakis

# Classic Elite's designing women

Pat Chew, Kristin Nicholas, and Linda Pratt—a triumvirate of business,

**"K**ristin, there's a party set up in our room!" **Classic Elite Yarns'** owner **Pat Chew** is trying to get the attention of **Kristin Nicholas**, Classic Elite's director of marketing and product development. But their booth at the Chicago National Needlework trade show is crowded with store buyers. "Kristin, you've got to come with me," Pat insists, and seeing me in the crowd adds, "You too, Alexis; I need your help upstairs."

A svelte woman with prematurely silver hair, Pat is wearing a dark sports jacket, wool skirt, and her signature sculptured silver pin. She leads the way to the Classic Elite suite on the 9th floor of the Holiday Inn Mart Plaza and Kristin and I tag along, wondering what the excitement is all about. "I walked into our room to start getting things ready for tonight," Pat is saying, "and found a party! I couldn't believe it. And you know what, Kristin, neither will you!"

I expected to run into wall-to-wall people. It was a party all right: the kitchenette counter full of liquor, beer, soft drinks, glasses, and ice; the glass tables laden with nuts, other munchies, and flowers. Right next to the lime wedges—could it be?—was a bowl full of my favorite maraschino cherries.

"Help yourselves," Pat says with a laugh. I couldn't take my eyes off the cherries. Pat, reading my mind, says, "Let's have a party!" She sits and looks at Kristin and continues her tale. "I walked in here and found all this; so I called the hotel. They told me this is a party for a group of bankers— and what was I doing in their room?"

vision, and sales—have raised Classic Elite Yarns from the ashes of a 9-alarm fire in 1987.

An unlikely trio—a Wellesley student with a knack for business; a dyed-in-the-wool creative force; and a management grad who cut her retail teeth at Bloomingdale's—

Pat, Kristin, and Linda have created yarns, patterns, and a style recognizable to many knitters. How did they do it? ALEXIS

XENAKIS takes you to the banks of the Merrimack River, in Lowell, Massachusetts, site of one of America's first industrial parks, (where Classic Elite Yarns' mill still spins the only American-made mohair), and where these three women are designing their company's—and some would say shaping knitting's—future.



For the next fifteen minutes, with the needlework show in full swing downstairs (and sales director **Linda Pratt** and Classic Elite staff taking care of business) Pat is trying to make the catering manager now on the phone understand that no, it would *not* be possible for them to change rooms because they themselves are throwing a party tonight in honor of Kristin's book. The invitations have already gone out—with this room number on them.

Kristin calmly continues to sip her soft drink. Somewhat at a loss to understand it all, I'm swallowing one maraschino cherry after another, like Percy, that cute little dog in 'Pocahontas,' discarding the stems in the waste basket.

Pat is not making much progress on the phone, and her patience is exhausted. "Look," she says to the manager, "we can't move, we're not moving. If this party isn't out of here in five minutes, I'm putting everything out in the hall... What? Of course we didn't touch anything!"

I barely have time to get rid of all the cherry stems before the door opens and a catering crew appears as if by magic and begins to move the party to a different venue. "That's that," Pat says to Kristin, "let's go sell some yarn!"

They walk down the hall on the way to the showroom floor talking and laughing, not unlike two friends who have known each other a long time and like each other very much. You know, the kind of close friends you'd ask over to help you paint a room in your house.

#### The business woman

"No, not just a room!" Pat says later that evening. "We painted her entire first floor!" The *right* party is now in full swing, with lots of shop owners, designers, magazine editors, mail-order and company people celebrating the publication of **Knitting the New Classics—60 Exquisite Sweaters from Classic Elite**, (Sterling/Lark).

Pat is enjoying herself: "Kristin had me cutting stencils and 'dragging' the woodwork. She drew them, I cut them—and that was the easy part! The hard part was the sponging..."

"Pat did a fabulous job," Kristin explains, "but it was hard for her because she likes orderly things. So she painted the back stairs instead! Linda and I had no problem being messy, and artistic. My house has become my canvas!"

"I loved it," Linda chimes in, "Kristin uses techniques I either don't know, or want to try. I now live in an older, white apartment—with a hefty security deposit... so I can't do my own decorative painting. Helping do Kristin's house was fun."

When Pat, Kristin, and Linda aren't celebrating or painting, they are running

Classic Elite Yarns from a historic 150-year-old 5-story brick mill in Lowell, Massachusetts. Adjacent to the Merrimack River that powered the 'first urban industrial park,' at the beginning of the American textile revolution, this mill complex was ravaged by a 9-alarm blaze in 1987. Classic Elite Yarns survived with smoke, fire, and water damage, with its spirit intact.

"That was a terrible time," Pat recalls, "I had only been here for a couple of years. My ex-husband Bill asked me to help him after his two managers left to form a competitive company. I was a full-time student, studying economics at Wellesley and MIT, had never worked in my life, and what did I know about selling yarn? So I hired someone to do the marketing, and it was a disaster. I was a year into working, still didn't know much about running the business—and then Kristin showed up.

"Kristin was 25 years old when she walked into my office, young, in a pleated skirt, a preppie—a kid! Bill had been telling me I should talk to her—and I never, ever did what he told me to do!

Kristin picks up the story. "I was living in New York and working in the garment industry as an assistant merchandiser, putting together a product line and presenting it to a sales force. I was doing private label, some real awful knitwear, but it gave me the basics: I worked with factories, specs, lab dips (specs sent to the dye house to be matched), designing, ordering fabric. It was a good background to learn how to run a business.

"Mark, now my husband, is from Massachusetts. We had decided to get married, but he was working in the

Midwest, I in New York City—so that wasn't going to work out! I had been an Elite customer, and when I called to order yarn, I said I'm trying to move to New England, do you have anything available? The woman I talked to said, "Why don't you send us your resume?"

"Little did I know that I was talking to the owner of the company, Pat Chew! Mark and I happened to be going to Europe, Pat told me about the yarn fair in Cologne, Germany, so I timed my trip to see the fair—and ran into Pat at the show. She said, "Why don't you call me when you get back?"

"I did, and came up for an interview, and got the job. My first day at work was five days after I got married. I got on a plane, flew to Chicago for my first TNNA show with Pat, set up our booth—and was left for three days to sell yarn by myself (Pat's daughter was getting married.)

"I sold lots of LaGran mohair, a yarn I loved, and I started thinking that maybe I could really turn this line into something very special. I had a vision of what the line could be.

"I knew that I had to update the products, because some colors were outdated. The company had a weaving background, sold to a lot of production hand weavers and was influenced by their needs. But I knew there were also a lot of knitters out there, that this yarn could be knit! I would have to develop it into a fashion line, which would appeal to hand knitters. That's what I was hired to do, but it took a while, in fact it took 6 to 7 years, and, of course, now it's a challenge to keep it going!

"One of the first things I had to do was find a spring yarn, because we didn't have any nice cottons that were knittable.

Photographing in Great Britain for the Fall 1995 Collection gives Classic Elite's

contemporary sweaters an antique look.



CLASSIC ELITE YARNS



Lowell Worsted Mills spin the only brushed mohair in America.

That's how Newport came about. Typically, before I got here, a color line would have 9, 10 colors. I knew we had to make a splash, do a decent color line, so we did 18 colors. I picked all the colors I thought would sell, presented them to Pat, but she was not impressed!

"I hired Kristin to do marketing and product development, and I had the confidence that she could do it, but actually letting her do it was something else again. In the beginning," Pat confides, "I wanted to have control over everything, including our color line. Kristin kept saying, 'You've got to trust me, you've got to let me do it.'"

"I had to fight to get the colors I wanted," Kristin continues. "I stood my ground—and luckily one of the colors she had said we'd be stuck with was the best selling color! So Pat never bothered me again..."

"Those colors sold fabulously well," Pat says. "So that was it. Kristin has been responsible for yarns and colors ever since."

"It was a lot of luck," Kristin says, "there was a gap in the market. Knitters wanted fast projects, and at that point there were no chunky cottons. So Newport hit the market at the perfect time and we did very well with it. We would still be offering it now, but the manufacturer went out of business."

"Classic Elite has always had Kristin's influence and she has done very, very well," Pat says. "But there's a lot more to running a yarn company than deciding what colors, yarns, and patterns to have. Kristin made it possible to free myself from marketing and product development to deal with our customers, day-to-day business, and our manufacturing division, Lowell Worsted Mills."

"We are fortunate to be able to spin our own mohair novelty yarns—LaGran, Sharon, Mini and Lace Mohairs—for both Classic Elite and for fabric and home decorating manufacturers. We also sell

yarn to ready-to-wear designers for their sample collections.

"The last operating mill in Lowell, and the only spinners of loop mohair in the country, Lowell Worsted obtains all of its raw stock from American sources. It is then spun into a strong bouclé yarn in a variety of weights, which can be brushed out to a luxurious fluff depending on the design of the yarn and the finished article. Many of our forty or so workers have been employed for over two decades in our mill, and take pride in the yarns they spin."

"There are a lot of yarns we import, but the staple of this company—LaGran mohair—is being made right outside my office door every day. I feel close to the product, and to the employees who make it."

"We have a great staff, and every person that answers the phone is a knitter. Our customers are also delighted by the fact that most of our patterns are designed by people who work here."

#### The sales manager

"We are a hands-on, customer-friendly company, and it's really working," explains Linda Pratt. She has been quietly listening to our conversation and decides to join us. "Pat is the force behind Classic Elite, Kristin is the vision."

"Linda came to Classic Elite in '86 to market our mill overruns," Pat says. "Then we decided we needed a company sales representative on the road in New England, so we got her out of the office and onto the road for a couple of years. Then she became director of sales."

Besides directing Classic Elite's sales force, Linda is also responsible for the Tiber yarn line. "We took on Tiber to fill the high-fashion void for shops that weren't interested in our classic yarns," Linda explains. "A lot of our Tiber shops are now picking up the Classic Elite line and becoming regular customers. On the other hand, because our Classic Elite customers have confidence in what we do,

they're willing to try the Tiber. This way, we have increased and diversified our customer base."

When Linda began selling at Lowell Worsted Mills she was used to a different style of sales, having previously worked as a merchandising executive at Bloomingdale's. Here I was 'director of obsolescence,' which meant moving our older inventory," Linda says. "Being on the road as a sales rep gave me more feedback as to what was going on in the marketplace."

"My metamorphosis from mill sales to sales director was made possible due to my prior retail experience and my management background. The moment I walked into Classic Elite Yarns, I knew that I would be able to do more, I just didn't know what it was going to be!

"We're a team," Pat says smiling. "Kristin does the design, Linda does the sales, I do the business. We want our customers to come back—because they are happy with the quality of the yarn—it looked good, it worked up quickly."

"Kristin is the reason Classic Elite has blossomed," Linda says. "She has such foresight and is able to anticipate new trends. We all wondered about our ethnic kits at first, but as soon as we got to TNNA in Chicago and everyone fell in love with them, there was no question!"

#### The visionary

"There's a sign on Kristin's door that I gave her five years ago," Pat says: 'Out of all this, something wonderful will happen.' And it really has!"

"It's hard to believe that we do it all right here..." Kristin Nicholas says, realizing that her turn has come. "We design the patterns, labels, and packages; the pattern writing and proofing; and the desk-top publishing. How the world has changed: when I got here there wasn't even a correctable-ribbon typewriter!"

Does Kristin really find time to design at work?

"No, not during the day, not here! The phone's ringing, there's so much to be done; I don't feel right sitting and swatching. So when I go home—and I'm in my busy designing-creativity mode—I'll swatch for 3 or 4 hours at night. If I don't have time to figure out the pattern, I might bring it to work and do it here, but most of it happens after hours when it's quiet. It's creative, stimulating, to be at home with my things."

Kristin lives in a small 1890 Victorian house, in Eastern Massachusetts, two miles from the New Hampshire border. "My husband Mark and I filled up the yard with a garden," Kristin says. "Every year we keep making it a little bigger. We have corn and sunflower row hedges, a wood burning stove. We heat our house with wood Mark cuts on our land; it's cold in the winter, but you can always

## 10 The Knitting Universe

CLASSIC ELITE'S DESIGNING WOMEN

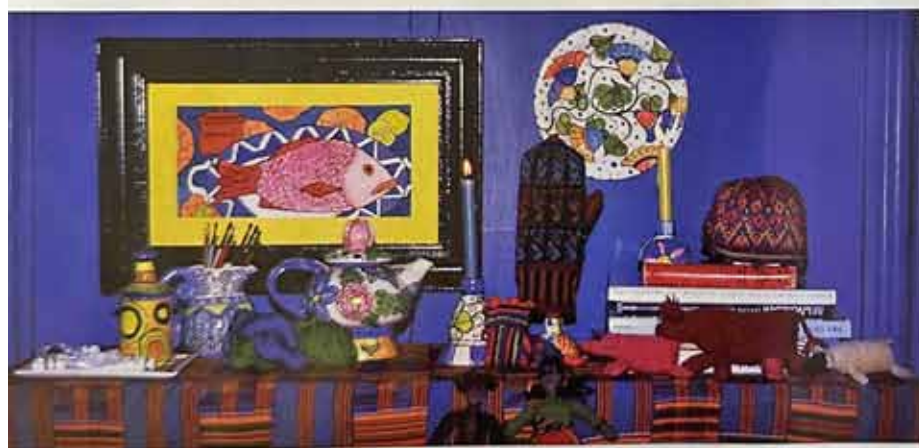
Kristin's most distinctive styles of Aran stitchery and ethnically inspired motifs are shown in these two designs knit in

Tapestry Wool/Mohair for the

Fall/Winter Pattern Collection.



Kristin Nicholas' array of knitwear, pottery, artwork, inspirational forces, and design tools.



wear sweaters, which is good!

"We have chickens, laying hens, two dogs and two cats. And we keep sheep at the farm Mark grew up on. Sounds like a menagerie, doesn't it? Sometimes in the winter, frequently we'll have an orphan lamb in our kitchen or in our living room, in front of the wood stove."

"Of course, the house is filled with yarn. I've always made things, ever since I can remember. That comes from my mother: she always wanted us to be productive and creative at home. My mother had the patience of a saint, because she had five little girls running around making messes in the kitchen, or painting, or sewing. But she really nurtured that creativity within us."

"Kristin has always been highly motivated and creative," her mother, Nancy Nicholas, says from her home in Northwest New Jersey. "When she gets an idea there's no stopping her—she keeps doing it until the end. When she was just a little girl, she had all these projects. In eighth grade, I remember her crocheting a large shawl, sitting by the hour figuring out the pattern. I was amazed she was able to do it. She worked, and worked on it, and had it done in no time."

"She started knitting when she was about six, knitting back and forth on a little scarf. And then she would make little things for the dolls. She was always fussing with something, always busy."

"She used to say to her sisters, 'Never

make a sweater for a boy, because once you do, that's the end of the relationship, the kiss of death!' But I'm wondering about that now: she knit for Mark when they were going together, and *that* worked! But I guess she must have known of several people for whom that may have been true."

"Every Christmas, it wasn't a present unless she gave something of herself: she always had to make something for you. She is still doing that to this day—it might be a pair of needles with some yarn in a box, with the promise that you'll get it in a few months, but it will always come!"

Can Mrs. Nicholas think, or find in the attic, any disasters from Kristin's early creative period? "I have a hard time thinking—and had an even a harder time finding—any! Kristin was always able to turn something around, was able to make it work!"

Somehow, Kristin has always been able to do just that. "I basically learned from my mistakes. If something bombs, I try not to do it again! While developing new yarns, I am also working on designs. When I first began here, I didn't quite know what I was doing."

"Most of the time it comes from knowing how to knit and what the yarn is going to do, and then trying a swatch. My textile science classes in college have been a lot of help (textile construction, flat pattern draping, and clothing design) as have my art classes, (weaving, batik, surface screen design, jewelry making). But the biggest influence when I was first learning to develop my own patterns—like for so many of us—was Elizabeth Zimmermann. A professor told me, 'go buy *Knitting Without Tears*, read the gauge section, and everything will make sense to you.' She also told me to get a stitch glossary. Basically, with those two books, and my background, I was off."

"We don't really commission many designs from freelancers, because we have, and have always had a talented design team besides myself, including Linda, Susan Mills, Cathy Payson, and Gerlinde Faria. We do the swatches, all the sizing, and then send the project to a very talented pool of knitters who knit for us—If it's a knitter I've been working with for several years, they might call in and say, 'I don't think this is quite right, it's turning out too small.' We discuss it, and perhaps have to do some new math."

"When we're ready to look at outside designs, I send out a packet of information telling designers what I'm looking for: lace work, cables, short cropped sweaters, twin sets, that kind of thing. The theme for the last few years has been 'family' sweaters that someone would want to wear all weekend long, or that you want to live in—and maybe give to one of your kids."



"When the designs come in, I lay them all on the floor and pretty much things get changed at this stage: I go over with the designer how wide the neckline should be, how deep the sleeve drop, so that I know exactly what I'm getting. That comes from experience after doing it for many years.

"We know, for example, that if we do a plain stockinette sweater with a cable in the center, it'll be our best selling pattern. But what you have to do is give it an interesting shape, fashionable, updated silhouette. We want to keep the design classic, updated, yet not too far out. That's what we specialize in.

"We consider three things when designing: the yarn, the stitches, current fashion. And we also look to museums, art books, textile books, artifacts from different countries. We choose a theme and build on it. Of course we try to stay in tune with what's happening in knitwear, so we can create a collection that's current. And we subscribe to a color service.

"The knitting has to be easy. That's what people want. That's how the Classic Elite look has evolved—clean lines, simple shapes, timeless designs. We always



Kristin's whimsical decorative style carries over into her handmade pottery and favorite 'canvas'—her home.

LEFT Kristin's interest in interior decorating and knitting culminates in the 'Inspired Interiors' Pillow Collection; RIGHT 'The Eclectic Gift Collection'—for knitters who want to try something different.

keep all these three things in mind. And an easy, stylish, project will always encourage new knitters. When I was first developing our style, I thought about what I would like as a knitter and tried to make the look young and upbeat, but not so young that mature women couldn't wear it.

"For years, people have written to us saying, 'Why don't you put your patterns in a book?' We picked a nice collection of cotton knits; summer sweaters, cardigans; color work; plain-and-simple, very easy sweaters; and we've got a section on cables. It's what Linda Pratt calls, 'Classic Elite's Greatest Hits.' [See 'Knitter's Books,' p. 101.] That was a lot of fun; I'd like to do it again!"

It's late. No time to bring up her pottery, which she started when she realized that her hobby, knitting, had become her career. But unlike knitting, she can't undo it when the glaze bubbles or the color turns...

Outside the windows the Chicago River shimmers in the moonlight. The guests—and the maraschino cherries—are long gone. Kristin, Linda, and Pat are still engaged in animated conversation.

Ladies, if you ever run out of things to do, talk about, or 'canvas' to paint, I know of a 4-floor Victorian in South Dakota...

This is the first in THE KNITTING UNIVERSE series, a feature that takes in a world view. In upcoming issues: "Knitting in Australia;" profiles of yarn companies; and designers—from A to Z; from Annabel Fox to Fancy feet author Anna Zilboorg.



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## A BRITISH TRAVELOGUE FROM CLASSIC ELITE YARNS

A JOURNEY TO GREAT BRITAIN - CLASSIC ELITE'S 1995 HANDKNIT COLLECTION AND NATURAL FIBER YARNS - AVAILABLE AT NORTH AMERICA'S FINEST YARN STORES. CHOOSE FROM LA GRAN MOHAIR, TAPESTRY WOOL/MOHAIR, APPLAUSE SILK/MOHAIR, MONTERA LLAMA/WOOL, AND OUR NEW FALL YARNS MACKENZIE SILK/WOOL, LACE MOHAIR, AND KILIMANJARO WOOL. FOR HANDKNITTING INSTRUCTIONS, SEND \$4, FOR EACH PATTERN ORDERED, AND LSASE TO CLASSIC ELITE YARNS, DEPT. VF95, 12 PERKINS ST, LOWELL, MA 01854. IN CANADA: S.R. KERTZER, 105A WINGOES RD, WOODBRIDGE, ONTARIO L4L 6C2