Knitting is full of surprises and so is Marta McCall. I happened to sit next to Marta during a four-day couture knitting workshop in Seattle, Washington. I wanted to learn advanced finishing techniques; she was there for the designer interaction. I soon found, as an intermediate knitter, that my skills lagged far behind those of the published designers and master knitters there.

I struggled with every exercise and began to despair. Fortunately, Marta intervened. With a ringing laugh and gentle persuasion, she facilitated a Helen Keller/Ann Sullivan–type insight for me that changed my view of perfection. She introduced me to the notion that knitting could be joyful, not stressful. She reframed my blunders and unintended surprises as “design opportunities.” Marta showed me the path to happy knitting. Out of gratitude, I will name my first sweater Marta.

As the swatch assignments got tougher, Marta entertained me with knitting stories. At six years old in Switzerland, she learned to knit from Frau Huber, the family housekeeper. Once begun, Marta has knitted constantly, during family outings, at college, and during a career in Hollywood years before knitting was in vogue. As a script editor, Marta knitted on virtually every studio lot during the production of major award-winning films. As chief of staff for various show business luminaries, she knitted while juggling round-the-clock demands and worldwide itineraries. Exuding competence, Marta can knit quickly, talk knowledgeably, and multitask with ease.

Later we met for lunch, and I was curious to learn what prompted her to create a new company, www.tinkknit.com. I learned that Marta has had twenty-five patterns published in magazines since 2005, and yet she’s still flooded with design ideas that take form as entire collections. However, a design collection does not fit with designing one item at a time for a magazine or yarn company. Marta explained, “I needed to express a train of thought, a line of thinking, with pieces that expressly reflected my point of view about the art of knitting.”

After years of technical knitting, Marta prefers to knit as artistic expression, especially painting with felt. The Wildflower Cushion pattern is a graphic wool painting in eighteen colors. Marta sees a trend: “These days, we don’t knit because we have to, or because it’s cheaper to knit than to buy a sweater. No, we yearn to touch, to smell, to see the glorious colors, and to derive comfort in the rhythm of knitting.”

Marta describes herself as more of an innovator than a knitting purist. She strives “to design outside the skein,” which means inventing new techniques and combining nontraditional materials and methods. Marta will consider “anything and everything that makes knitting look interesting, artistic, and different.”

She finds that felting enhances the art of the knitting experience. “First, felting is fun, satisfying, and slightly nerve-wrack-
ing because you never quite know what’s going to come out of the wash. Second, felting gives you a sturdy fabric with far less stretch than knitting, and it can be cut without raveling. Third, by knitting in the curves and then felting, the piece can be molded like clay so that sewing may be unnecessary. Fourth, by adding wool embroidery and colorful intarsia before felting, you can ‘paint in wool,’ so the final result looks as if the design was knitted in from the beginning.”

She began experimenting with shibori felting in 2005. The idea is to juxtapose felted and nonfelted areas using inserted objects. At first, she used wooden beads, then pipe insulation, metal, and various forms of plastic. She prefers items that are easy to find and inexpensive. In search of new materials, she trolls the aisles of hardware and toy departments as well as sewing, craft, and yarn stores.

Recent patterns include pennies, polished river stones, shells, and beads. She uses embroidery, needle-felting, beading, and jewelry techniques in her designs. She selects quality hardware for the professional finish it adds to handbags. With leather or fabric, she amends the inner construction and shape of a bag.

Famous Penny Bag. Yes, they’re real pennies! Simply sew ordinary pennies to a felted bag. This particular bag is knitted in the round, but Marta’s knitted creation makes crisp welts resulting in a structured bag.

Currently she’s fascinated with the interplay between knitting and nonknitted spaces. For her next bag, she has invented Flower Market Bag, is a smaller version of the Weekend Getaway Satchel (page 30). Tightly packed florals are easier to accomplish than you may think. Large blocks of color are knitted, the multicolor detail is embroidered on after knitting, and then the bag pieces are felted.

Needle-Felted Bucket Bag. Needle-felt wool yarn onto the already felted bag using Marta’s stencil. a technique for applying gold leaf after felting for a metallic shimmer effect. Her summer collection includes oversize floral and splashy graphic designs. Her outdoor living collection features projects knit with wire.

Marta McCall offers knitters colorful, sophisticated designs and makes successful knitting accessible to everyone.

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