

Arrow-Shaped Knitting Tools

Susan Webster, 2026

An article on arrow brooches, which appeared in *At Your Fingertips*, the journal of the Dorset Thimble Society, piqued my interest, as I have a few arrows in my own collection of needlework tools. My five silver items shown here are all French or Germanic, are all at least .800 silver, and were all created in the mid-to-late 19th century.

But after examining my knitting tools, we can take the story of these arrows a bit further, thanks to research published by Thimble Collectors International (TCI) in the early 1990s and a fortuitous episode of the *Antiques Roadshow*.



Figure 1 – Knitter's chatelaines, left, with a waistband clip and yarn hook, and right, with a chain only, to be slipped along the tie or strings of an apron. Note the smaller hook on each chain to pull the chain tight when the needles were inserted.

Figure 1 shows two holders for double pointed knitting needles, used when the needlewoman was not knitting, often with the live knitting dangling down from one needle. In the 19th century knitting in the UK did not have the social cachet as other needlecrafts like crochet or tatting, so few such precious metal tools as these arrows exist in England. On the Continent, knitting was as well regarded as other needle arts; and society and middle-class ladies happily knitted in social settings, showing off their elegant tools, as they did for other needlework.

Ingraban Simon in his 2002 book *Symbols of Fertility and Love - The Erotic Needle from A to Z* characterised the arrow as a symbol of masculinity. Certainly many Germanic tools including needlework tools are carved or created in the shape of an arrow – most appropriate for needles which must “pierce” the fabric like an arrow.

Both of these arrows in Figure 1 pull apart in the middle for insertion of the needles, and the small hook can be pulled up to tighten the chain and hold the needle or needles snugly between the two ends. The clip with its yarn hook on the left of Figure 1 indicates that it was affixed to the waistband as most chatelaines were. The right arrow in Figure 1 has no waistband clip, so the chain was slipped over the apron strings. I am confident both these items originated in the Germanic countries, as they are made of fairly thin plate and have no makers or hall marks. There are many Dutch knitter’s chatelaines, but these usually have hall marks.



Figure 2 – a tabletop archery bow with the arrow completed by the knitting needle inserted between the arrow point on the left and the fletching on the right.

Figure 2 is a French tabletop arrow, made of much heavier metal; and it holds a needle of about 7 or 8 inches in length. The user would pull the two halves apart in the centre, insert the ends of the knitting needle, push the two halves back together, and then leave the holder resting on the table. A needle too short or too long in length could not be accommodated in this device. The “bow” to which the arrowhead and the fletching are attached makes this item an archery set.

The arrow-shaped point protectors in Figure 3 are also German silver; but without the knitting needles inserted in them, they would make a very small package for storage or transport. Close examination shows where the flat pieces were cut from a sheet of silver and then moulded into a circular shape and brazed together.



Figure 3 - a pair of point protectors or "tip guards" in the shape of arrows, connected by a chain which can be tightened by a small hook pulled up and inserted in a link of the chain.

Figure 4 is very similar to arrow described in the *At Your Fingertips* article as a shawl or hat pin – and, I must confess, when I bought this item in 2011, I too puzzled over its exact usage. The German seller described it as a stitch holder, and I finally went along with this – to hold those knitting stitches one sometimes sets aside to pick up later for a pocket or to bind off the shoulder via short rows.



Figure 4 – claimed to be a German or Russian stitch holder (or, perhaps, a shawl pin ??)

A few years later, I added a similar arrow, also sold as a stitch holder, but questions remained. Perhaps, when you are a knitter, you see everything through a knitter's lens.

Then, upon researching the TCI *Bulletin* archives recently, I found evidence that this slender arrow had also challenged earlier collectors. A snippet in the September 1991 TCI *Bulletin* touched on my puzzle (Figure 5).

In 1991, the TCI folk considered this item a crochet hook with the hook missing – and a husband was willing to make good the loss. There is also a reference to a similar debate in a 1976 issue of *Antiques* magazine. So we have been scratching our heads about this these slender arrows for around 50 years !!

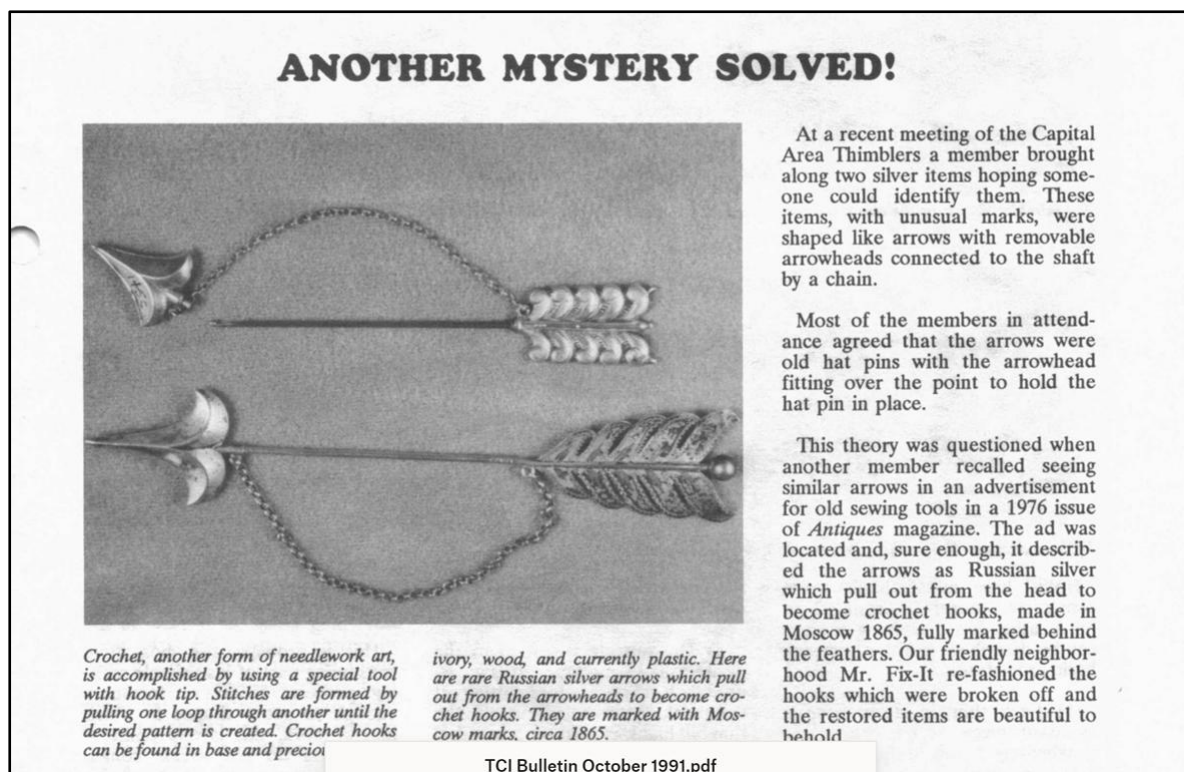


Figure 5 – a small article in the 1991 Bulletin of the Thimble Collectors Society of Australia.

Yet, I was not entirely convinced by this explanation either. A broken shaft can usually be detected by the “torn” edge of the metal. Mine didn’t show this, and the earlier items didn’t seem to either.

Now we have a definitive explanation, thanks to our old favourite, the British *Antiques Roadshow*, and jewellery expert Geoffrey Munn. During an episode shown last year in Australia, host Fiona Bruce brought the then Duchess of Cornwall (now Queen) Camilla to Geoffrey for a quiz on the purpose of several items selected by Geoffrey. Each item was showcased, and possible explanations were discussed (Figure 6).



Figure 6 – The (then) Duchess of Cornwall, Fiona Bruce, and Geoffrey Munn examine “mystery objects” at the Antiques Roadshow.

Pardon the stills in Figures 6 and 7, taken by pausing the TV transmission.

The central puzzle was two arrows, almost exactly like my own. Geoffrey finally explained that these are 18th-century hair ornaments which were inserted in elaborate court wigs that often towered over their wearers' heads in London, Paris, St Petersburg, and other capitals.

Arrows, then as now, were considered symbols of love (Fig. 4).



Figure 7 – The two arrows displayed and explained by Geoffrey Munn as 18th century wig ornaments.

I am delighted now to have a clear explanation of what I have, even though it makes them meaningless for my knitting tool collection.

And, thanks to TCI for the earlier clue that kept me looking.