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Knitters Dress Up Trees for Public Art

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By JAMES HANNAH

Associated Press Writer

YELLOW SPRINGS, Ohio (AP) - No, that's not a hallucination. That pear tree is wearing a sweater.

Wrapped around the trunk is a colorful, crazy-quilt skin made up of panels of yarn knitted individually by residents and visitors alike. Good-luck charms cling to the yarn. Family photos, poems and jokes peek out of knitted pockets.

The art project in this southwest Ohio village, already known for its offbeat art, has become a conversation piece and even a photo op.

"What takes this to a different level is it is a community thing," said Corrine Bayraktaroglu, an artist who helped start the "knitknot tree" project. "People are really, really enjoying it. They're coming from towns to have their photograph taken with the tree. They're adding stuff to the pockets."

Knitters around the U.S. are dressing trees, street signs, benches, door handles and other objects.

Last month, residents of Columbus, Ind., knitted cozies for 33 ornamental pear trees that line the city's main street. One tree, called the People Hugger, has knitted arms.

Knitted coverings are showing up on trees and doorknobs in Charleston, W.Va. In Houston, knitters have dressed up park benches, car antennas, telephone poles and beer bottles.

"It's fascinating what's going on in the knitting world," Bayraktaroglu said. "Graffiti street art is going to a whole different realm. It's gone beyond just painting on sides of buildings."

Artist Carol Hummel is among the pioneers. She crocheted a cozy for a tree in front of City Hall in Cleveland Heights several years ago. It took her 500 hours and the use of a hydraulic lift to dress the upper branches.

The cozy has survived several winters and even a swarm of cicadas, which left their molted skins clinging to the material.

"There are a lot of copycats now," Hummel said. "A lot of people are getting into putting things on the trees. That's

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cool."

In Yellow Springs, the first knitted panel - a gold piece with the words "Knitknot Tree" and a smiley face - went up in October. It wasn't until early February that more panels began to be added.

"Then it just took off like crazy," Bayraktaroglu said. "People were coming from out of town and adding their own knitting."

Artist Nancy Mellon said people love to come up and touch the tree, and children like to check out what's in the pockets.

"There was a man - while I was working on the tree - who walked by, and all he said was 'Thank you,'" Mellon said.

Other residents in this village about 15 miles east of Dayton also seem to like the dressed-up tree.

"It looks like Yellow Springs; it's unique, it's colorful, unpredictable," said Lynda Sirk. "It makes me smile. That's what I like."

The tree is vulnerable to the raised legs of passing pooches. Because of that, the panels of yarn don't extend all the way to ground level.

As the panels spread up the trunk, the knitters had to follow, first standing on a chair, then a three-step ladder, a 6-foot ladder and finally an 8-foot ladder. They finally decided they had gone high enough after someone suggested scaffolding and village officials began to worry about someone falling.

"The fear factor has kicked in," Mellon said.

The artists who started the project tentatively plan to remove the knitting on Arbor Day at the end of April and give away the pieces of yarn.

But Bayraktaroglu has some reservations about that.

"People get very attached," she said, "and I think they'll be mad at us if we cut it down."

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