

Tartans

A “tartan” is simply what we (in America) would call a “plaid.” However, in Scotland and England (and among those of Scottish ancestry), it is much, much more. Modern-day Scots have adopted the tartan as a part of their heritage and national identity.

First, some history: Historically, there is nothing unique to Scotland about tartans. There is evidence of woven plaids from possibly 8th-9th century BC in areas of central Europe and China. What distinguishes the tartan as unique to Scotland (and the Highlands in particular), is actually the piece of clothing that came to be associated with the tartan, that is, the kilt, specifically the great kilt.

The great kilt appeared some time in the 16th century. The Celtic word “plaid” simply means a large piece of cloth or a blanket, and this is what a great kilt consisted of. It was a piece of woven woolen cloth “two loom-widths” wide sewn together, for a width of about 60 inches, and 5-7 yards long. The Scottish men wore a knee-length tunic of a light material or leather, and gathered one end of the blanket around their waist and held it in place with a wide belt. The remainder would be worn over the shoulder, and could be used as a hood in the rain, or removed completely and used for a blanket at night. The men prided themselves of always going bare-legged in any type of weather.

The blankets were woven by the women using whatever materials were at hand — sheep’s-wool was whatever natural color the sheep were, usually an tan or yellowish color. They had very small dye-pots and only natural plant-based dyes, so very small amounts of the wool were dyed. This was woven into the blanket to add a little variety and keep some interest on the weaver’s part, usually in small stripes in a symmetric pattern of warp and weft.

England and Scotland did not always get along very well, to say the least. The history of their monarchical successions is an internecine mess, fluctuating between English and Scottish family lines. In 1688, James II (of Scottish origin) was overthrown and his daughters, first Mary and later Anne, were installed as monarchs. Anne managed to unify the countries of Scotland and England as “Great Britain” in 1707 by the Act of Union. However, she died without an heir, and the throne passed to a distant relative, George I, who was very German. The Scots did not appreciate their new king, and a series of revolts by the supporters of James’ heir (the Jacobites) ensued. In an effort to quell the revolts, George II passed the “Dress Act” in 1746, which banned the wearing of all manner of “Highland dress,” specifically the great kilt and the tartan/plaid. This was followed by Highland Clearance, wherein many villages in Scotland were simply razed by the English and given over to sheep farming. The villagers were massacred or left to die without shelter, or emigrate elsewhere. These acts and several military actions were effective in quelling the revolt.

By 1782, George III (having recently lost the American colonies) rescinded the Dress Act, and tartans and Highland dress gradually re-emerged in Scotland, as a part of

national and clan pride. However, at this time, there was no strict association of any particular tartan pattern with any region or clan, it was still merely a matter of what natural dyes and colors of sheep were available locally. Many of the weavers had emigrated to Spain, taking their patterns with them.

Forty years after the ban was lifted, and encouraged by Sir Walter Scott and others, King George IV (a generally unpopular monarch) made a visit to Scotland. Scott devised a plan to have all the regional clans to gather for the visit wearing their traditional garb. They greeted the king's carriage and ran alongside it for several miles as it entered Edinburgh. As the crowds cheered wildly, George assumed they were cheering for him, and he became an instant fan of Scotland and Highland dress. He later began wearing kilts himself, thereby beginning the popularity of the tartan in England.

Queen Victoria was primarily responsible for the modern tartan craze. In 1848, she and Prince Albert purchased the estate of Balmoral in Scotland to use as a summer retreat, and subsequently fell in love with Scotland. Albert decorated it with tartans everywhere; carpets, drapes, upholstery. They began frequently wearing tartans to dinner parties, and dressing their children in kilts. As they went, so went the country. This coincided with the development of modern chemical dyes, and new tartan colors and patterns were developed. Beginning in 1815, several registries were started to codify patterns associated with regions and clans, however, the strict association of a tartan pattern with a clan or family or region can be described as an "invented tradition."

Today, there are between 3-7000 registered tartans, depending on how many variations of the same are counted (i.e. hunting tartan, mourning tartan, dress tartan). There are registered tartans for families, regions, counties, provinces, military units, companies (e.g. Burberry), cities, states, and organizations. The official registry for Scotland is the Scottish Registry of Tartans, and anyone can look up a particular tartan and see the sett. Anyone can also register a new tartan, within certain guidelines. Some of the most popular are the Royal Stewart, the Black Watch, and the Northumbria/Northumberland/Shepherds Check. A subset of tartans are the tweeds, which are usually just two or three colors in an even plaid, sometimes also referred to as a "check."

Weaving Tartans

The pattern for a tartan is traditionally called a sett. (Traditionalists would say that the EPI of a weave is a set.) The weave structure is almost always a 2/2 twill, and the warp and weft are patterned identically. Traditionally, a tartan is woven from wool, but any type of thread can be used.

I have found that when weaving with wool, you need to beat very gently. The goal is to make perfect squares between the warp and weft. With cotton, you generally need to beat much firmer. It is essential that your rear tension be uniform, otherwise, your stripes will wander and your squares will be uneven. You must also be very precise with your colors — a stripe may be only two or four threads wide, but the narrow stripes are

usually of the bright colors, so it really shows if you don't get it right! Warping your loom from back to front greatly eases the process of counting your threads to get the perfect pattern. When weaving, you really have to count your throws precisely. You will need several shuttles and bobbins to accommodate all the different colors, unless you want to be changing your bobbins frequently. I leave the ends of each color to hang off the edge (rather than trying to weave back in), and just cut them off after wet-finishing. I will carry a thread over if the following repeat is 4 throws or less.

(Samples)