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Great Scot!

A look at the Scottish textile industry's historic past and innovative future on Traditional Home's whirlwind tour of the alluring locale.

By Ronda Carman

Scotland possesses a fascinating history and culture. Its customs, whisky, music and traditional dress—think tartans, kilts and tweeds—are known the world over. Of course tartan, a much beloved textile, has evolved into one of the world's favorite fabrics. From Vivienne Westwood and Alexander McQueen to Ralph Lauren and Burberry, countless designers have crafted their own creations using the iconic plaid. And while the humble cloth is now a global symbol, Scotland has more to offer lovers of fine textiles than the customary plaid. Harris tweed, cashmere, leather and lace are also creative players in the country's long line of artisanal textiles.

For years, numerous fashion houses have worked with traditional mills throughout Scotland. Though many in the apparel industry know full well the exceptional quality of Scottish fabrics, interior designers have yet to wholly utilize Scotland's finest offerings. To increase awareness and bridge the gap, Textiles Scotland, Scottish Development International and Traditional Home recently presented five interior designers and me the opportunity to travel the country and learn more. Together with Anne Maxwell Foster of Tilton Fenwick, Gideon Mendelson, Philip Gorrivan, Tobi Fairley and Patrik Lönn, I spent four eye-opening days visiting mills, country homes, and even a whisky distillery.

Our hosts arranged an extraordinary whirlwind itinerary that took our group from Glasgow to Elgin to Edinburgh to Perth and back again to Glasgow. Our days alternated between viewing beautiful lace at Morton

This page, clockwise from top: A combination of tweed and leather at Cameron House, with textiles from Macnaughton and Calzeat; the Johnstons of Elgin mill built in 1797; a stunning high-back chair in tartan; Timorous Beasties' London toile design; Anta's hand-woven rug; classic Harris Tweed tartan.





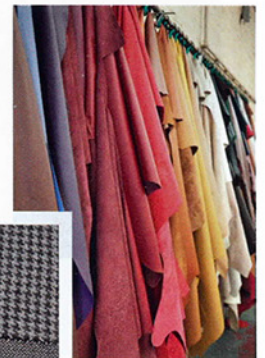
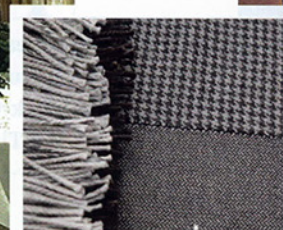
Young and Borland to witnessing master tapestry weavers bring to life commissions for interior designers, museum curators and private collectors at Dovecot Studios. Experiencing time-honored traditions firsthand always deepens appreciation of a skilled craft. "In our world of cheap knock-offs, beautifully crafted textiles made from the finest raw materials seems to be an ever-growing rarity. The Scots have an extraordinary commodity to offer to the world—textiles of the highest tradition, quality and design," notes Anne Maxwell Foster.

Certainly this was true of our visits to Begg and Johnstons of Elgin. To see soft, highly adaptable cashmere wool spun into yarn was both a visual and tactile feast. But perhaps what impressed us most were the options for versatility and quality control. The Scottish mills and the industry reputation rely on fantastic hand-skills, with teams of women inspecting every inch of fabric and rectifying any problems. "We witnessed a real commitment to quality," says Philip Gorrivan. "It's a unique blend of proprietorship and pride. And the mills can offer great flexibility; their minimum quantities and custom colors make it easy for interior designers."

"I was personally thrilled to see the color in textile options, including leather," adds Tobi Fairley. "I am a color lover, and to see that traditional tartans could be re-imagined in bright shades—even neon—was exhilarating. I didn't expect to see so many fresh, cutting-edge designs. Yes, tartan can be cutting edge!"

Scotland is also renowned for its wry humor laced with irony. And, for a small country, Scotland seems to have more than its fair share of eccentrics. In terms of design, no one more fully embraces Scottish eccentricity than Alistair McAuley and Paul Simmons, founders of the design studio Timorous Beasties. McAuley and Simmons met while studying textile design at Glasgow School of Art and founded their Glasgow-based company in 1990. Noted for its surreal and provoking textiles and wallpapers, Timorous Beasties has been described as "William Morris on acid." Naturalistic images—insects, plants, flowers—and stylized pastoral toiles are common themes, often interpreted in highly original and sometimes bizarre ways. We saw their designs in action at the wonderful 21212 restaurant in Edinburgh.

This page, clockwise from top: Cashmere weaving at Begg; the unlimited palette at Dovecot's tapestry studio; amazing color selection from the Scottish Leather Group; the Sloane Square Collection; 21212 restaurant Edinburgh, featuring rugs and fabrics by Timorous Beasties; Levers-style lace on loom at MYB.



From left: Traditional Home's Jill Esterman, Ronda Carman, Gideon Mendelson, Anne Maxwell Foster, Patrik Lönn, Tobi Fairley, Traditional Home's Beth Brenner and Philip Gorrivan

"I was taken with the Scots' genuine passion for the products of their country. The excitement that stems from such rich traditions is contagious. Seeing and understanding the history of Scottish textiles gave each product a life larger than itself."

—Anne Maxwell Foster

"There are many things to love about the textiles of Scotland," acknowledges Gideon Mendelson. "One of my favorite discoveries is the new Linen Ikat Collection from Holland & Sherry. All of the colorways are stunning, plus it's printed on versatile, sturdy linen. It would be perfect for draperies or custom lamp shades."

Our day trips were rivaled only by stunning overnight accommodations ranging from a baronial mansion to a contemporary hotel in Glasgow's city center. Cameron House on the lovely lake of Loch Lomond was a clear favorite. The sumptuous mansion is a perfect example of traditional Scottish aesthetic and modern luxury. Rooms boast exquisite fabrics from Anta, using woolen yarn and tweeds sourced in the Western Isles and woven in the Scottish Borders, and beautiful textiles from Macnaughton, known in the U.S. under their Isle Mill label, and founded 200 years ago by the same family that runs it today. "Macnaughtons' fabrics are extraordinary," says Patrik Lönn. "I love their modern take on archival patterns, especially the Sloane Square Collection, and can't wait to use it in a project."

Ronda Carman is a Glasgow-based lifestyle writer. See more of her design insights at AllTheBestBlog.co.uk.

Discover Scotland's textiles, trends and design innovations at TextileScotland.co.uk.