

Master kiltmaker Robert McBain lays out tartan cloth. Photo by Nancy Groce © Smithsonian Institution

James Wylie puts the final touches on a curling stone at Kays of Scotland. Photo by Nancy Groce © Smithsonian Institution

## Traditional Crafts in Contemporary Scotland

LOUISE BUTLER

Scotland, a land of rich contrasts, stretches four hundred miles from its border with England to its most northerly point, where the mainland drops from cliffs onto white sand beaches and out into the cold North Sea. From here, you can almost touch the Orkney Islands, but it is a further five hours' sea travel to the remote Shetland Islands. In the rolling hills, famous salmon rivers, and lush valleys of the Borders and southwest Scotland, farming exists alongside a textile industry that still produces the world's finest cashmere and tartan cloth. North and west is Glasgow, which, after losing its shipbuilding industry, has re-emerged as a young,



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hip city with loft apartments, a vibrant arts scene, flagship stores, and international corporate headquarters. To the east is Edinburgh, Scotland's capital and since 1999 home to the Scottish Parliament. The smaller sister cities of Stirling, Perth, and Dundee mark the gateway to the Highlands—a patchwork of sea, lochs, mountains, and craggy and heather-covered moorlands, sparsely populated save for the northern cities of Aberdeen and Inverness. Fishing ports mark Scotland's east coast, and across in the west, the Inner and Outer Hebrides dot the Irish Sea. Scotland's unique identity sets it apart from anywhere else in Britain.

Each culture has its own craft traditions, representing skills and trades originally acquired and practiced out of functional necessity. Scotland retains a wide range of distinctive crafts that have their roots in its social, crofting (small farming), and industrial past. These indigenous crafts are part of a continuing tradition, using materials and techniques transmitted from person to person across generations. Many of the skills



have a direct connection with working the land, fishing the sea, and other modes of community subsistence in a particular place. Goods are produced individually by hand or in limited numbers on small-scale machinery. Today, few crafts are commercially viable, and many are practiced only to fulfill immediate needs for income or pieced together with other work, as always in rural life. Tourism plays its part in keeping traditions alive, and output is often stepped up seasonally, as in the Shetland Islands, where local patterned knitting sells well to summer visitors. Many craftspeople are self-employed and live in isolated, rural locations for reasons connected with their craft. For instance, spinners, weavers, and knitters may rear small flocks of rare-breed sheep to provide wool; basket makers may live in an area suitable for growing the willow they use.

Shetland is now the only place in Scotland that retains formal teaching of a traditional craft—knitting—in the school curriculum. Throughout Scotland, craft associations and guilds provide informal support for exchanging skills and sharing information through newsletters, exhibitions, workshops, and demonstrations. The annual Royal Highland Show—a huge agricultural show that is held, ironically, on the outskirts of Edinburgh—includes a major handcraft competition, and craftspeople from all over Scotland send work to be judged. This might include woven Harris Tweed from the Hebrides, oat-straw “kishie” baskets from Shetland, hooded Orkney chairs, fine Ayrshire whitework embroidery, handspun wools colored with natural plant dyes, shepherd’s crooks, and sticks of hazel wood topped with finely carved and polished ram’s horn. Other items still manufactured in Scotland’s traditional yet evolving styles are golf clubs, granite curling stones, tartans and kilts,

Fair Isle boatmaker Ian Best crafts a Ness Yoal during a demonstration at the National Museums of Scotland, Edinburgh. Photo courtesy Ian Best

## SCOTLAND RETAINS

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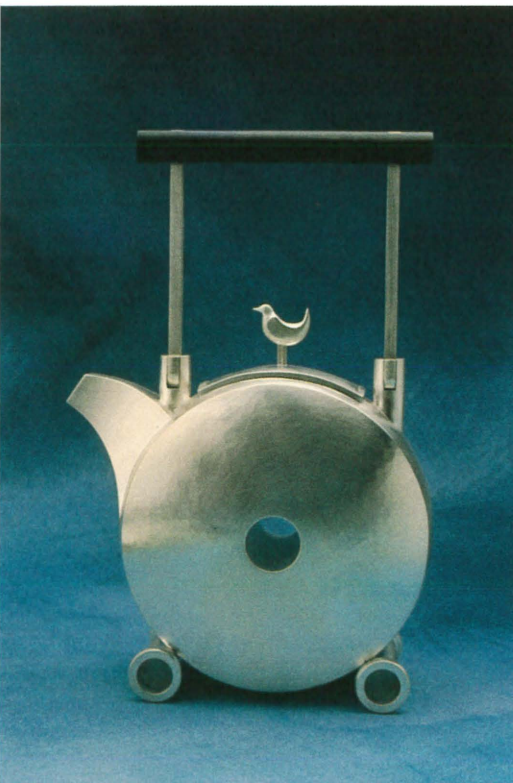






Contemporary-style sporrans made by Marcus Eagleton, Perthshire. Photo by Nancy Groce © Smithsonian Institution

A teapot by Dunblane silversmith Graham Stewart beautifully combines traditional Scottish silversmithing skills with innovative design. Photo courtesy Graham Stewart



handknit goods in a range of knitting styles, gossamer fine knitted lace, boats, musical instruments (fiddle and Celtic harp or *clarsach*, Lowland and Highland pipes), staved wooden buckets, and ceremonial drinking vessels (the Orkney “bride’s cog” and *quaichs*).

A few of the crafts can stand as uniquely Scottish icons. The kilt, for instance, is considered Scotland’s national dress and is widely worn by men for ceremonial occasions, at *ceilidhs* (parties), and as wedding attire, and it is increasingly popular for less formal events. Kilts in various forms have been worn in the

Highlands of Scotland since well before the Jacobite uprising of 1745. Originally a single piece of cloth wrapped around the body and gathered at the waist with the loose end thrown over the shoulder, today’s kilt is more styled, but it continues to be made from a single 8-foot long piece of tartan cloth. Making the garment demands significant tailoring skill. Clients look to master kilt makers who hand-build their kilts by calculating pleats to the individual customer’s height and girth, matching and manipulating the check pattern on the tartan, and then hand-stitching and finishing each kilt to precise measurements. To maintain these skills and enhance economic opportunities, the first-ever kilt-making school was opened in Keith, Morayshire, in 1994. It now trains a dozen students each year to become master kilt makers.

Textile skills have played a huge part in the Scottish economy over the centuries. Until industrialization, spinning, dyeing, and weaving were done by hand. There were tens of thousand of hand-weavers across Scotland, and they used only natural plant dyes along with imported cochineal and indigo for coloring yarns until chemical dyes were introduced in 1856. Naturally dyed and handwoven cloth has special qualities that may not be appreciated today when most textile production is mechanized and fabric is factory made. However, within a network of enthusiastic guild and society members across Scotland, there are still a good number of individuals who are carrying out all these processes on a small scale and sometimes generating a healthy living from their craft.

During the mid-19th century, landowners on the Isle of Harris encouraged their tenant crofters to expand the home industry of weaving beyond domestic use to sell cloth on the mainland. The Orb and Cross Certification Mark for Harris Tweed was registered in 1905, for use in authenticating the origin and quality of the cloth. Today, the production of Harris Tweed is managed by three large tweed mills on the adjoining island of Lewis, but the cloth continues to be woven on crofts throughout the islands, in accordance with local regulations. Tourists to the Western Isles





(Outer Hebrides) can still visit small weaving sheds, meet the weavers, and purchase tweed cloth at the farm gate.

Several unique regional knitting stitches and patterns are still used in Scotland. The craft of knitting, acquired in childhood through example, has been mostly held in women's hands. It is a portable craft, needing little more work space than that between eye, hands, and knee. The seamless fisherman's sweater of Eriskay in the Outer Hebrides is knitted with motifs reflecting the island's fishing industry: starfish, anchor, harbor steps. A cooperative of knitters on the island produces a small number of hand-knitted garments every few weeks. The village of Sanquhar in southwest Scotland is still home to several masters of a distinctive, black-and-white, intricately patterned knitting—the major product being gloves, with the wearer's initials worked into the cuff. Shetland knitting is recognized for its vibrant, multicolored patterns and fine, single-ply knitted lace, mostly worked from graphs recorded and passed down through families. The Shetland College of Textiles now offers training in the latest technology, ensuring a continuation of skills and an interesting fusion of design.

Essentially farming communities, Orkney, Shetland, and Fair Isle grow a particular type of black oats, the straw from which is cropped, cleaned, and made into stitched baskets or "kishies." The kishie was originally used to carry peat fuel, seaweed, or crops. Crops were often measured in kishie-fills; as one kishie maker remembers, "The summer of 1947 was exceptionally good, and we had a tally of 416 kishies of tatties (potatoes) that year." The same stitched-straw technique is used to create chair backs in Orkney and the other northern isles. These islands are mostly barren of trees, so chair makers have always relied on scavenged driftwood or imported timber for the joinery in their chairs.

This element of resourcefulness underlies all indigenous crafts. Although producing goods in small numbers by hand methods has generally ceased to be profitable in economic terms, nothing can beat the satisfaction of creating something from very little, the pleasure of being part of a long tradition, and the exceptional qualities that an individually created craft product has to offer. ■



Newly knitted and washed Fair Isle patterned jumpers (sweaters) drying on "wooly horses" against a dry-stane wall on Shetland. Photo by Paul Tomkins © VisitScotland/Scottish Viewpoint

Shop in Tarbert, South Harris, sells garments made of locally produced Harris tweed. Photo © VisitScotland/Scottish Viewpoint