Dressed in Luxury

Doris Jirsa
Iowa State College
with Cashmere

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by Doris Jirsa

Technical Journalism Sophomore

A PERFECT CHRISTMAS gift bears the name vicuna or Cashmere, for these revered wools, in plain or jeweled sweaters, coats or shawls mean richness, softness, warmth—in all, luxury.

From high in the perpetually snow-covered Himalayan mountains comes Cashmere, the fleece of rare beauty. And from the near-inaccessible regions of the Andes of Peru comes vicuna, hair for the most exquisite of fabrics.

For you to wear a single Cashmere-fleece sweater requires the complete yearly yield of four to six Cashmere goats. Forty to 50 goats are needed for an overcoat of medium size.

The two fleeces, vicuna and Cashmere, are similar. Vicuna, however, is superior in tensile strength, luster and silken texture, and is the costliest of all fabrics, $75 to $100 a yard.

Cashmere is the more familiar fiber. Its story as a usable textile fiber begins with the Cashmere goat, bred in the rugged, isolated areas of the Kashmir district of India. And from there it gets its name. This aristocratic animal, whose origin is unknown, is relatively small and hardy. His outer coat is of a coarse “yarre” hair, beneath which lies a lustrous down, a fleece called pashm. It is this undercoating that, due to its structure of interlacing sections, has such warmth-retaining qualities.

Cashmere Goat

The semi-wild goat is never sheared. The natives comb the wool during the spring shedding season, spending days of patient effort. Long hairs unavoidably entangled in the fleece must be separated by hand, an additional tedious task. The small number of darker hairs that do escape removal add a textured characteristic to the yarn and contribute to its beauty.

Unlike the Cashmere goat, the vicuna, one of the wildest of all creatures, cannot be approached by humans and must be killed if its hair is to be gathered. Rigid conservation laws are enforced in Peru for vicuna protection.

The male Cashmere goat produces yearly almost four ounces of fleece; the female, two ounces. The fleece often is gathered bit by bit from the bushes which the animal rubs against. This feathery down was once supposed by the natives to be a species of silk or cotton, a product of the vegetation.

The merchant inhabitants of Kashmir bale the accumulations of fibers and transport them by camel over the Caravan route. At the seacoast they are transferred to cargo ships sailing principally to England.

The bulk wool is made into yarn ranging from an extreme white to a grayish hue or brown-gray tone. Neither fleece needs dyeing to enhance its beauty. Vicuna resists absorption of dyes unless 50 per cent of the natural oil is removed. Methods have been developed for achieving various colors without destroying the original beauty.

In this world of modern methods, why do the herdsmen and tradesmen cope with such distant locations and the precarious journey from mountain to manufacturer? They have found that domesticating the goat sacrifices quality of fiber, and poor results marks the attempts of Westerners to breed large herds in European countries. Therefore, the animal is rare; the fleece is limited; the processes of production are expensive.

Purity

The purity of Cashmere woven garments often has been challenged. It is falsely claimed that a 100 per cent Cashmere yarn does not exist and that only a Cashmere staple is used in the body of the fabric. A Cashmere “blend” may contain spun rayon or sheep’s wool, and in it the amount of Cashmere is at times negligible. The term “100 per cent pure Cashmere” on a label means the garment is of genuine Cashmere.

The ancient Romans dressed in Cashmere; the Cashmere shawl on the shoulders of French women was very much the “vogue” many centuries ago. The Cashmere sweater of the woman of 1953 is a beautiful part of her wardrobe and will remain so if given proper care.

Cleaning

Dry cleaning, and washing in lukewarm water and pure, mild soap are both advisable. Care must be taken to gently squeeze suds through the immersed garment, and to avoid rubbing. Repeated rinsings will remove the soap. Shaping is suggested after excess moisture is removed with a turkish towel.

Cashmere and vicuna may be spun, knit or woven. The types of scarves, sweaters, socks, formal wear and sportswear are innumerable in style and color. A vicuna or Cashmere garment is a year-round Christmas in itself. The articles are costly, but with reason. An individual with an eye to the future may see in them long-term clothing investments highly prized and seldom equalled.