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Wool is now a yarn for all seasons



Cool Wool knitwear in Jonathan Saunders' autumn/winter 2014 show

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Spring is approaching but wool, it seems, is fast becoming a yarn for all seasons – a fact embraced by men for whom frequent business travel presents the challenge of keeping cool and comfortable in different climates, often in one day.



“Wool’s properties have evolved over thousands of years,” says Nicolas Guilbaud, sales executive at cloth merchants Holland & Sherry, which has been supplying Savile Row for almost two centuries. “Many people think of it as only a cold weather fabric but it regulates temperature better than any other material, Merino sheep originate from Spain while virtually all the world’s merino wool production comes from Australia. These animals have evolved to be comfortable in predominantly hot, but variable, climates.”

Cool Wool is in the vanguard of multiseasonal natural fibres. It’s a high-twist lightweight merino cloth that was seen at the recent menswear shows of Christopher Raeburn, Jonathan Saunders, Richard Nicoll, Lou Dalton and Paul Smith and is also a favourite among Savile Row tailors.

From left: E. Tautz coat; Christopher Raeburn top



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Cool Wool is a trademark of the Woolmark Company, which is owned by Australian Wool Innovation, a not-for-profit organisation that invests in marketing, and research and development to support Australia's wool industry. First introduced in the 1980s, Cool Wool was refined for a relaunch in 2012, challenging the prevailing notion that wool is only for the depths of winter.

Designers and tailors who use it know that men are becoming increasingly knowledgeable about fabrics. Take Ed Buxton, who specialises in international property development at Crown Capital Partners in London. He says: "I spend a lot of time travelling to and from the Middle East so lightweight worsted suits are a must. I've recently started wearing Cool Wool because it travels much better. It refuses to crease, even on long journeys and handles the transition from a hot environments to air-conditioned ones."

Guilbaud says: "The weave is plainer and tighter in Cool Wool, because of the high twist of the yarns, and this accentuates the wool's natural properties, such as breathability and thermoregulation." Cool Wool typically weighs less than 190g per sq metre, with fibres no greater than 22.5 microns (approximately three times finer than the average human hair). While that is some way off the 14.5 microns of a Super 180s worsted wool, which is one of the finest available, it is the high twist that sets it apart. "Although Cool Wool is lighter, that doesn't mean garments don't hang and retain their shape as well as a classic, slightly weightier merino," says Savile Row tailor Richard James, who used Cool Wool throughout his spring/summer collection.

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Explain Cool Wool to an Italian tailor, however, and he or she will probably roll their eyes and make a pained gesture with their hands, believing that, trademark aside, they got there first. "When it comes to tailoring lightweight fabrics, the Italians are the best," says Guilbaud. "They've been working with delicate cloths since Venice became a major point of business on the Silk Route."

Ironically, the Chinese – once the source of the world's silk – are now beginning to produce fine merino cloths themselves, and at considerably less cost than in the historic milling towns of Biella in Italy and Huddersfield in England.

However, it would take a big shift in consumer attitudes before Italian or English labels had the woollen rug pulled from under their feet. Within China, the demand for cloth with luxury provenance is so great that, in September, Gieves & Hawkes signed up to the Woolmark Gold scheme, a seal of approval granted by the Woolmark Company for the Chinese region. The scheme guarantees a fibre thickness of no more than 19.5 microns and the wool must have been worked on by one of a group of 12 British and European Woolmark Gold-accredited weavers and spinners.

Nevertheless, the number of mills that have gone out of business in the past decade proves the industry can't afford to rest on its laurels. Italian fashion house Zegna has long focused on honing [technical fabrics](#). Chief executive Gildo Zegna says: "In recent years we have developed Cool Effect, which is the first pure-wool fabric that helps protect against the heat of direct sunlight," while last year it unveiled Techmerino, which Zegna describes as: "Pure merino wool that has been treated with special finishing techniques to create a highly breathable fabric. It facilitates the evaporation of watery vapour and provides perfect thermoregulation against cold and heat."

Savile Row's James says: "Suits on the whole are becoming lighter so there is a genuine demand from our customers for Cool Wool and not just in the warmer months. The one thing we hear from our customers more than anything else is just how comfortable it is to wear."

Fabric of our times: “Versatility allows for creativity”

This Friday in Milan, the fashion world will pause for a minute from perusing the catwalks at fashion week and turn its attention to the finals of the [International Woolmark Prize](#), writes **Melanie Abrams**.

This award, which launched the careers of Yves Saint Laurent and Karl Lagerfeld, is widely seen as a harbinger of great things to come, and this year attracted entries from 48 designers in 20 countries, including.

Wool, that most traditional of fibres, is not only having something of a renaissance but may, counter-intuitively, be the most avant-garde fabric of all. Designers explain why wool is chic.

Alexander Wang, who has his own label as well as being Balenciaga’s creative director, says: “The versatility of the fibre allows for more creativity. We’ve used wool in shrink wrap techniques, mixed it with plastic, nylon and rubber and bound or glued it with other things. Mixing it with newer textiles has made wool more sporty.”

Susanne Botschen, co-founder of luxury online retailer Mytheresa.com, says: “Designers such as Stella [McCartney], Givenchy, Burberry and Balenciaga have found new ways of mixing wool up and using it to create structured looks that can’t be achieved with other materials like cashmere, because it’s too soft.”



A design by Joseph Altuzarra

Peter Pilotto and **Christopher De Vos**, the designers behind the Peter Pilotto label, say: “Historically, it’s been hard to print on wool, but lately [for autumn 2013] we found white wools, so our [floral] print came out nicely for the first time. The wool made us design our artwork more subtly, with classical colours like grey, which enhanced the print, making the wool more dynamic. The fabric created a charming irregularity for the print.”

Joseph Altuzarra, who is in the running for the prize: “Wool hasn’t been considered a sexy fabric, but feminising this traditionally masculine fabric with techniques like corseting and lace appliqués makes wool seem very different.”

And **Colleen Sherin**, senior fashion director of luxury department store Saks Fifth Avenue, points out: “Today, many people don’t even know a piece is wool until they read the label.”

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