# *A New Take on Tartan*

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My first encounter with tartan occurred, oddly enough, in Ireland, during a summer visit to my uncle's dairy farm in rural Cork. Though typically we stayed to the countryside, with its endless fields and equally endless herds of cows, today we ventured into Cashel. As we parked our tiny rented Renault at the curb, a busload of American tourists was filing onto the pavement opposite. You could always tell Americans by their very white teeth and uncanny ability to pull a photogenic smile at a moment's notice, but this time one man in particular stood out. He descended the steps from the bus to the pavement beaming, wearing an aran-knit sweater, evidently new, and—inexplicably—a pair of tartan pants, also new, both ostensibly purchased from Blarney Woollen Mills. Looking back on the incident, I suppose this was supposed to be the epitome of Irish dressing. At the time, however, I remember thinking that these were the worst trousers I'd ever seen.

Jacket, $4,800, T-shirt, $375, and kilt, $1,950, by Celine Homme by Hedi Slimane. Underwear and socks, his own. His own boots by Chrome Hearts.

Tartan has a long and subversive history since the days of Charles Edward Stuart, known to posterity as Bonnie Prince Charlie, when the British government banned it outright in the Dress Act of 1746 in an effort to chip away at unity within the Jacobite alliance that sought to bring him to the throne. Over two hundred years later, tartan would take the world of high fashion by storm as Alexander McQueen presented it on his Autumn/Winter 1995 runway, ripped to tatters and spiked with inch-long studs, in an ode to his Scottish heritage. Since then, it has taken on new meaning as an emblem of punk culture—and, somewhat paradoxically—the English royal family, worn by figures as disparate as the platinum-blonde pop-punk sensation Machine Gun Kelly and Kate Middleton, the erstwhile Duchess of Cambridge, now Princess of Wales.

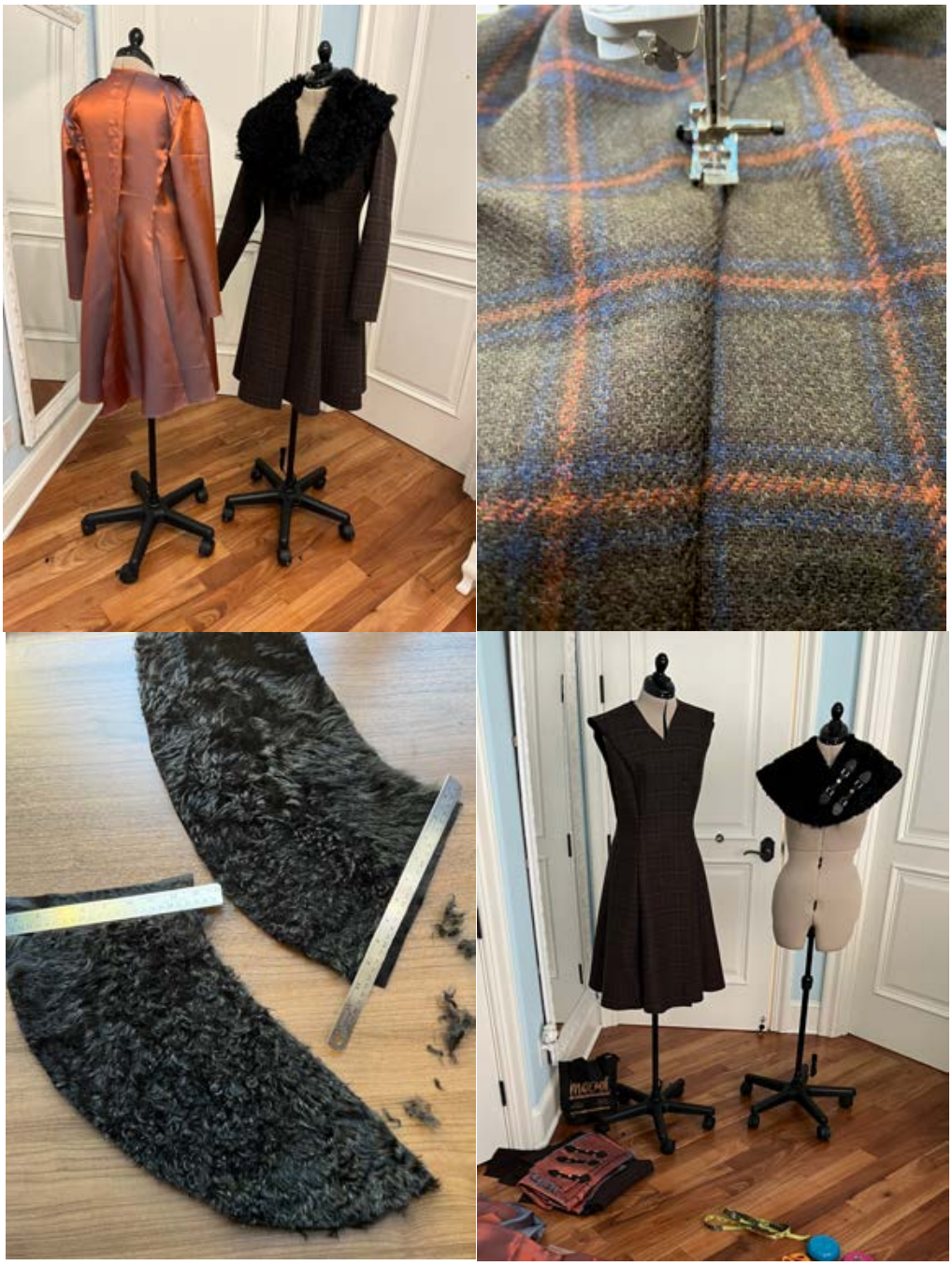
So how has tartan come to take on such a host of contradictory associations? The embodiment of Scottish national identity, it has come to represent Scotland's historical adversary, England, in that most intrinsically English of institutions: the Royal Family, who have worn tartan since King George IV did so on his tour of Scotland, and even have their own exclusive pattern, the Balmoral Tartan, which is listed on the Scottish Register of Tartans (worth noting—Thom Browne has a tartan on the register as well). Tartan is seen both in the uniforms of schoolchildren worldwide and the audacious tour outfits of international pop star Madonna. In Guy Ritchie's 2020 film *The Gentlemen*, Matthew McConaughey's Mickey Pearson, an ambitious Oxford graduate turned head of an underground marijuana empire, stands out among his upper-class peers for his tartan blazers. Never has one textile embodied such contradictions.

So naturally, when I saw this beautiful deadstock tartan from Thom Browne on Mood Fabrics, I knew I had to make something with it. Usually, if I'm not buying a fabric in person, I order a swatch to be sure I'm happy with it, but this time I acted on an impulse and ordered eight yards outright. As soon as I opened the box, I knew I'd made the right decision. The glorious wool blend had a crisp drape and a solid weight; it practically screamed to be tailored, and I was happy to oblige.

Tartan—both this specific textile and the broader cultural history—formed the inspiration for this project. What better way to represent the contradictory nature of this long-disputed fabric than to shape it into a garment that unites both of these opposing principles of punk and elegance? The silhouette of this coat was influenced by English riding outfits, which I see as the epitome of elegance, instantly recognizable for their long, sleek lines of tailoring and close-cut fit (think *Downton Abbey*). However, I didn't simply regurgitate this silhouette, but put my own twist on it. I enlarged and exaggerated the shoulders with a pair of one-inch-thick shoulder pads, creating a sharper and more commanding shape than that characteristic of traditional women's riding wear. I furthered this distortion of the figure with an oversized collar made from a soft black lambskin (also excess material, this time from Theory) with a luxurious pile thick enough to bury my fingers in.

Moreover, I diverged from the straight-figured silhouette implicit in most riding wear by instead creating a flared hem subtly reminiscent of the pleated fall of a Scottish kilt. I finished with exaggerated lambskin cuffs to match the collar and a pair of distressed leather clasps more evocative of the hardware of a horse's reins than of the traditional rows of double-breasted buttons worn by the rider themselves. Finally, I styled this coat with my favorite fashion accessory of all time: My knee-high, lace-up Alexander McQueen boots, with silver hardware and a thick tread sole certainly *not* indicative of traditional elegance.

There's something inexplicably thrilling about feeling the weight of a proper wool blend as you unroll it from the bolt, or lining up each panel of a garment so that the pattern of the fabric matches perfectly at each seam. The same is true of the inception of the design, from hasty scribbles executed in the margins of the *New York Times* to more detailed drawings indicating specifics like material and fit. Perhaps this is unique to me; to be sure, I've never met anybody else who spends their weekends avidly analyzing the placement of darts. Nevertheless, this passion imbues each step of the process with an exactness and an enthusiasm that makes this piece both an example of beautiful tailoring and a meticulously thought-out creative expression.



Tartan has meant many things to many people over the course of history—from a sign of political rebellion in eighteenth-century England to an emblem of sophistication and elegance in the aristocratic circles of modern-day Britain. Certainly, however, it has never been presented quite this way, or with quite this intent. This garment encompasses the many contradictions of tartan as a textile and a cultural artefact. In its exaggerated shoulders and oversized lambskin collar, it evokes the subversiveness of the tartan seen on Alexander McQueen's runways; in its graceful drape and meticulous fit, it reflects the refinement of iterations worn by figures like Kate Middleton. Each design choice was deliberate. It's both a unity of opposites and a sharpening of the singular aesthetic that endures as the result of tartan's complicated history. It's a blend of elegance and punk that will make you think—or at least do a double-take.

No doubt you've seen tartan before—but equally doubtless you've never seen it like this.

*Image Sources:*
*Machine Gun Kelly: https://www.gq.com/story/machine-gun-kelly-wesley-lowery-high-school-reunion*
*Kate Middleton: https://www.vogue.com/article/kate-middleton-holiday-tartan-style?redirectURL=%2Farticle%2Fkate-middleton-holiday-tartan-style*