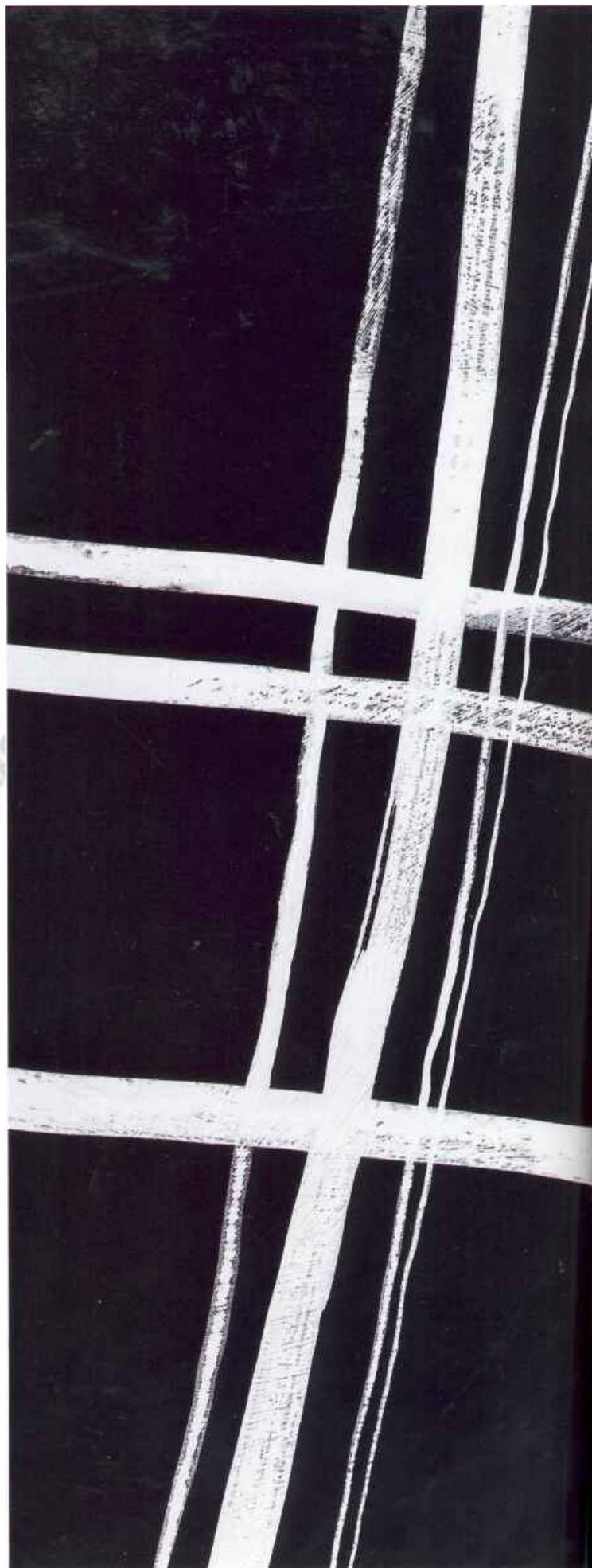


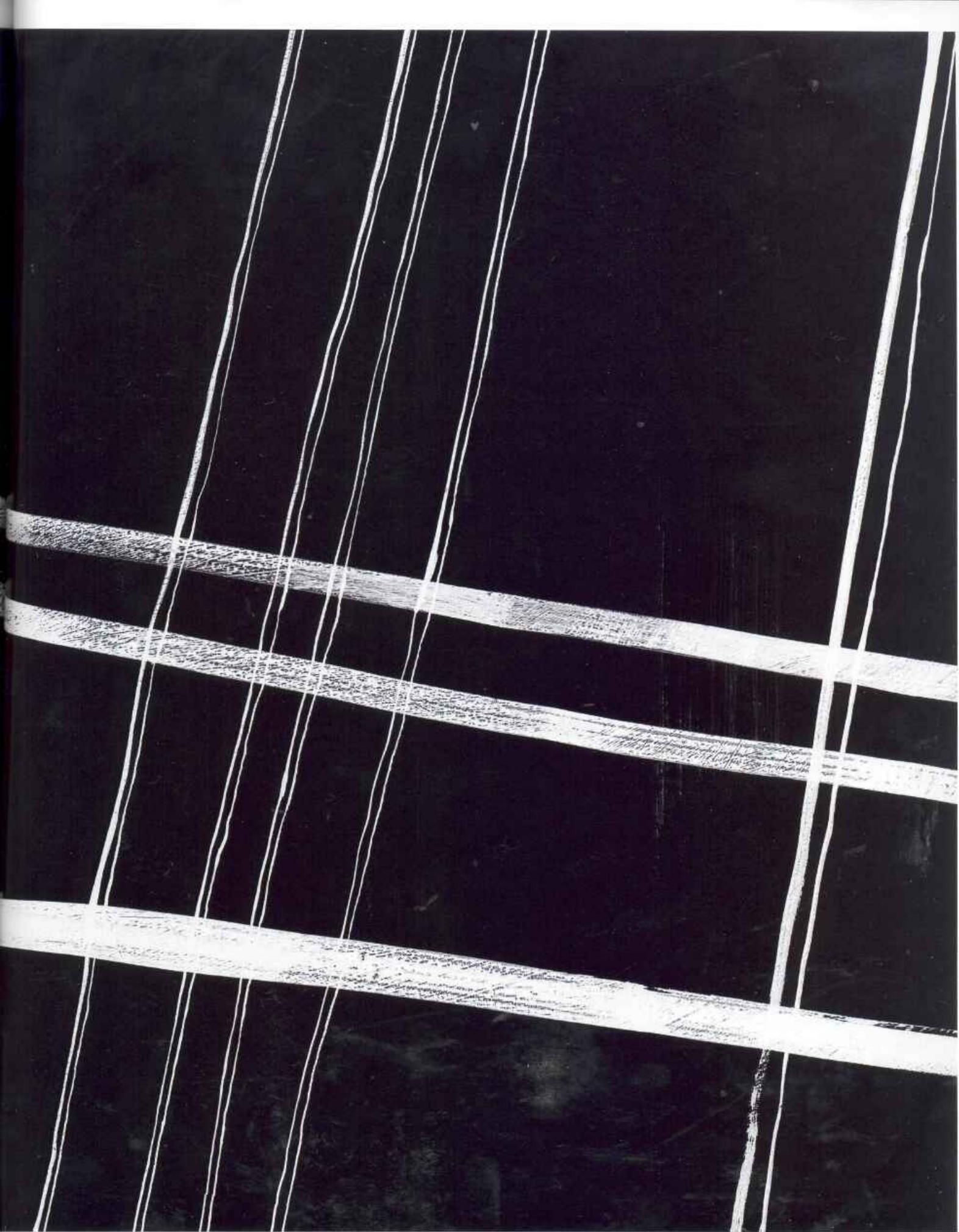
Mad for Plaid

Scotland is enjoying a newfound national pride that's evident in its fervor for applying tartan to anything and everything. Even vegetarian haggis samosas aren't safe.

By Elizabeth Gold

Photographs by **Brad Dickson**
Artwork by **Ted McGrath**





When I married a Brit last year and he whisked me away from New York City, there were a few things I noticed about Scotland, my new home. Gray skies. Hills. A countryside of sheep and wild coastlines, cities of old stone buildings, and even a castle or two. But most of all, *plaid*. Lots and lots of plaid. Tartan is everywhere—in the tourist shops, of course, where it adorns souvenir kilts, ties, mugs, tea towels, hats, shot glasses, calendars, and tins of shortbread. Tartan is also for special occasions—funerals, graduations, and weddings. Grooms marry in tartan kilts; the wedding party can then dine on cake trimmed with tartan icing, and the happy couple can be driven to their hotel in a tartan limousine.

But tartan is also for every day. It appears as background on billboards and on food packaging all over the supermarket. There you'll see products such as Granny's Lentil & Bacon soup, in cans emblazoned with a Mondrian-like pattern of dark green, light green, and red; and Marshalls Pasta, in bags decorated with a distinctive *sett* (the name for a particular tartan pattern) of turquoise, white, and black. Even Mrs. Unis Vegetarian Haggis Samosas—a fine example of fusion cooking—are resplendent in their curry-yellow and black tartan wrapping. A little bit of plaid on the package, it seems, tells Scottish consumers they're in for a familiar treat, and if they're buying something foreign, it's not *too* foreign.

But what exactly is Scottish, anyway? Is it to live in Brigadoon, a land evoked by men in kilts and frilly jabots, playing their bagpipes? Or is it to be a lovable underdog, a member, say, of the Tartan Army, the supporters of the national (and often losing) football team, who show their loyalty on match days by wearing T-shirts and tartan kilts? Or is it to be more urbane and forward-looking, a citizen of the world?

Scotland is an old nation that's reinventing itself as a new one. In 1998, following a national referendum, Scotland gained its first parliament since 1707. Last year, the Scottish National Party won the nation's elections. Whether Scotland will win complete independence from the United Kingdom, as Scottish prime minister, Alec Salmond, predicts, is anyone's guess. But what this does mean is that conversation about Scottish identity is in the air.

And tartan is a part of that. Consider, for instance, the logo for the 2014 Commonwealth Games, to be played in Glasgow. Louise Martin, chairman of the Commonwealth Games for Scotland, says the logo's tartan backdrop—an arc composed of loosely crisscrossing bands of teal, dark red, and rusty gold—"reflects the nation in a 'bold and modern' light."

On a summer day, I find myself standing on Princes Street, Edinburgh's main drag, glancing at the stranger next to me. He doesn't exactly reflect the nation in a bold and modern light. Rather, he's got a whole Bravefearf-meets-the-apocalypse look going: long, straggly locks; long, straggly goatee; a makeshift tunic he has constructed by draping yards of tartan wool around his body and pinning it on one shoulder while cinching it with a thick, coarse leather belt around his waist. Leather thongs wrapped around droopy tartan wool leggings. I can't help but wonder what in the world he had in mind when he concocted this getup—Scotland in the golden age, perhaps, before the English arrived and messed everything up with their laws and their money and their fancy ways?

Should I tell him it's all made up?

Bravefearf? Sure, there's a core of truth in it, but most of it is actually an Australian-American fantasy.

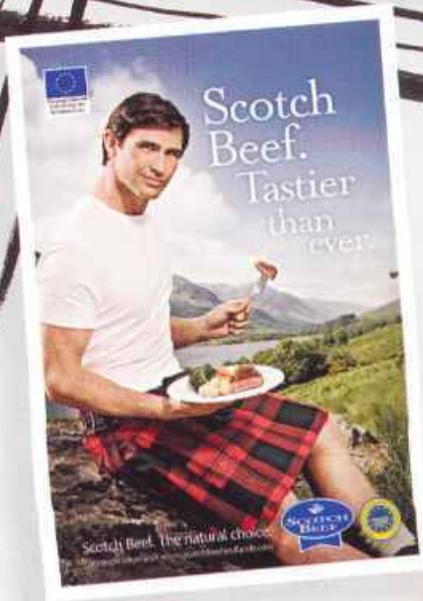
Much of what we think of as ancient



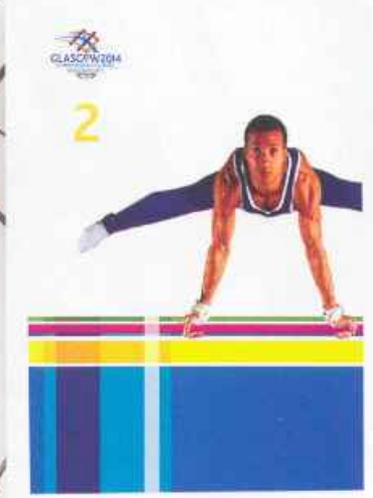
Right: Current print ad for Scotch Beef, featuring a tartan-clad hunk named Glen and part of a popular campaign running since 2001. The 2008 effort involves dispatching

Glen look-alikes to supermarkets across Scotland to direct consumers toward displays of domestic beef products. AGENCY: The Union Advertising Agency, Edinburgh;

ART DIRECTOR: Ben Craig; PHOTOGRAPHER: Evan Myles; WRITER: Michael Hart; CLIENT: Quality Meat Scotland.



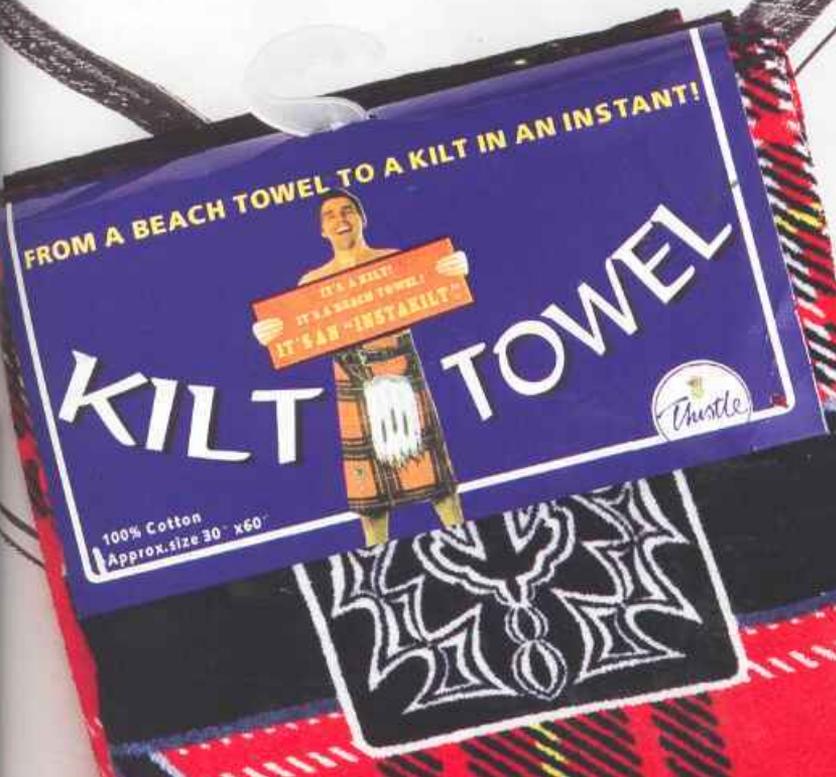




tartan tradition is actually only a few hundred years old. Before then, patterns did not represent families but the areas in which they were made. The kilt (as opposed to the plaid), historian Hugh Trevor-Roper argues, was invented sometime in the 18th century, and by an Englishman, yet. The bright colors of many common tartans stem from Victorian enthusiasm for the newly invented chemical dyes. Even tartan itself, while recognizably Scottish, is not *only* Scottish. Examples of ancient tartan patterns have been found in Egypt, China, and Peru.

Tartan acquired its status as Brand Scotland around the 1740s, when Bonnie Prince Charlie, the grandson of the deposed Scottish-born king, James VII, tried to take back the throne. Supporters showed their allegiance by wearing tartan. When the prince was defeated in 1746, the British government passed a law making the wearing of tartan illegal. There's nothing like the lure of the forbidden: By the time the law was repealed in 1782, tartan—and the Highlanders it was associated with—had acquired considerable romance. In an increasingly industrial age, tartan symbolized all that was wild and free. And when Queen Victoria visited Scotland in the 1840s and remodeled her highland retreat, Balmoral, with bedroom floors covered in tartan carpets, that romance took over a nation. The invention of cheap chemical dyes around 1860 meant that middle-class English homes were soon crammed with tartan dresses, shawls, waistcoats, carpets, wallpaper, sewing kits, picture frames, and so on.

Ironically, even as the Queen was raving about her "dear, dear" Highlands, the Highlanders themselves were being expelled from it. During the era of the "Highland Clearances," the landowners evicted thousands of tenant farmers from their traditional domains. The exiles were forced onto strips



Above: Logo for the 2014 Commonwealth Games in Glasgow, shown alone and in a print ad. LOGO: Glasgow 2014/Tayburn, Edinburgh; PRINT AD: Glasgow 2014/Navyblue Design Group, Edinburgh

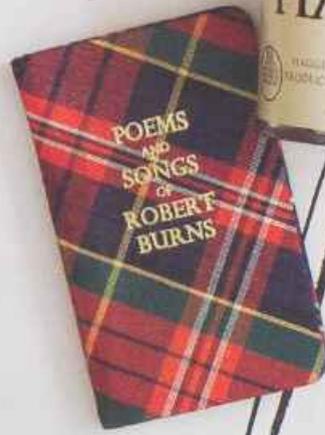
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of less fertile land, into the overcrowded cities, or onto boats heading toward Canada, the United States, and Australia. Meanwhile, the landowners turned over their estates to sheep, to hunting and fishing, and to friends and relatives who enjoyed nothing so much as dressing up in elaborate Highland costumes. These "traditional" Highland costumes end up being a kind of Indian headdress, a way of co-opting the romance of a people while erasing the people themselves.

Like a national flag, tartan is a signifier, a unit of visual meaning that expresses ideas the way words can. But what idea is it expressing?

More than one, it turns out. For designers Jill Blackwood and Annie Stewart, the power of tartan is that in a world in which the quirks of particular styles have been smoothed out to suit the global market, tartan is different. "Tartan," says Stewart, cofounder of the Edinburgh-based interiors and architecture firm ANTA, "is not Ikea."

Being "not Ikea" involves straddling several different signifiers. Tartan, as Brand Scotland, has universal appeal but also belongs to a specific place. It is traditional, but with its startling color combinations, and the jazz of its geometries, modern. James Clerk Maxwell, a British scientist, took the first color photograph, of a tartan ribbon, in 1861. Its pattern of magenta, teal, black, and white still looks new.

Perhaps that is because tartan can be "read" for more than what it says about clan and kin connections, says Paul Stickley, head of the department of visual communication at the Glasgow School of Art. He cites the color theories of Goethe, the psychologist Max Luscher, and the artist-designer Josef Albers to explain that the combination of hues creates deep meaning. The oldest

tartans, in particular, use the color language of heraldry—red for war, for instance. The newer ones often have a more complicated, even contradictory message. Liischer has suggested that black denotes confidence, red sexual desire, brown insecurity, and yellow psychosis. A kilt declares your identity through the semiotics of color. This should certainly make one think twice before shopping for tartan wallpaper. Who wants to tell the world—even subliminally—that this is the home of a sex-hungry, insecure psychotic?

But there is still another way to read tartan. And that is to actually *read* it. Textile artist Malcolm Cruickshank, for instance, has experimented with making "art" kilts out of discarded materials like paper bags, plastic bags (from Ikea, of all places), and nightclub flyers. His "Clubber's Kilt" is made out of 150 flyers that he collected during one night out on the town, which were then cut up, woven together, and printed. The words are submerged into the pattern but are still present. "I had the idea of utilizing the ephemeral images that the industry uses to tempt people inside," says Cruickshank. The "Clubber's Kilt" looks fresh without being heavy-handed, and comments on the disposable nature of so much of our current physical culture.

The passion for traditional uses of tartan shows no sign of ebbing. But Scotland is more than an old-fashioned, rural place these days. It is an increasingly diverse, sophisticated one, with 21st-century possibilities, and 21st-century problems, too. The work of Scottish artists such as Cruickshank—smart, young, urban, Scottish, yet not nostalgic about it—reflects that. "Color cannot be seen in isolation," says Stickley. Neither, it turns out, can tartan.

