

# SCOTTISH TARTANS MUSEUM

## FACT SHEET

### TARTAN COLOR TERMS

Tartan terminology is not very self-explanatory, and often times counter-intuitive. We must begin with the terms *modern* and *ancient*. Contrary to what anyone might assume, *ancient* tartans are not older than *modern* tartans.

A better term for *modern* would actually be *standard* – the standard colors of that particular tartan. *Ancient* refers to the same tartan produced in lighter tones, meant to reflect what that tartan might look like after many years of fading. It is very much like the idea of stone washed blue jeans; purchased new, already looking old. The idea is that older, vegetable dyed tartans would not be as colorfast as modern chemical dyed cloth, therefore fading would happen more quickly over time. This has led to a misconception that all old vegetable dyed tartans were very light in color. This is not true. Traditional vegetable dyes are quite capable of producing darker shades.

Because the lighter colors were meant to represent what an old, faded tartan might look like, the manufacturers decided to call them *ancient*, and the standard colors came to be called *modern* by default.

This idea of producing tartans in lighter shades dates to between the World Wars. The story is that a man was seen at a Highland Games wearing an old kilt that was quite faded, the tartan appearing lighter on the exposed portion of the pleats, while retaining the original darker colors inside the pleats. This was the supposed inspiration for the *ancient* color scheme.

Another common tartan color term is *weathered*. This is an even more dramatic fading of the tartan, usually reducing the colors to browns, greys, and muted shades of red. Inspired by the colors of tartan cloth unearthed after being buried in the soil for centuries, this color scheme was introduced by weavers D. C. Dalgleish in Selkirk, Scotland, after WWII. They called these washed out colors *reproduction*. Other woolen mills would produce similar colored tartans under the now more common name *weathered*.

These are not the only names one will encounter. Others include *muted* and *antique*. But the idea is the same – in all cases these terms refer to the same tartan produced in differing shades of the same general colors. This is possible because the specific shade of color is not essential in defining the tartan. A tartan is defined by the particular pattern and the basic colors used (i.e. red, green, blue, etc.) The specific hue of color (i.e. dark red, or light green, or navy blue) is a matter of preference.

Other terms refer to different tartans entirely, however. The most common of these would be *hunting* and *dress*. Again, these names give rise to much confusion. The person hearing them for the first time might assume that one went hunting in a “hunting tartan” and that “dress tartans” are for formal occasions. Such is not the case.

Generally speaking, a hunting tartan is simply a tartan that is based more in greens and blues, and often browns. The term *hunting* here refers to the fact that these tartans use more earth-tone colors, and has nothing to do with the actual usage of the tartan. And there is no reason at all why one could not wear a kilt in a hunting tartan to a formal occasion. What makes a Highland outfit formal or casual are the various accessories worn with the kilt – not the tartan of which the kilt is made.

Which leads to the subject of *dress* tartans. Again, generally speaking, a dress tartan is a tartan using white as a major color. There are exceptions to this rule. The Dress MacLeod tartan, for example, is yellow. The inspiration for dress tartans goes back to eighteenth century women's fashion. It was typical at that time for women to wear an *earasaid* (a large wrap) made from a white or cream based tartan. Many dress tartans today are simply versions of the standard clan tartan with a main color changed to white, or extra white added to the pattern.

These are some of the terms that one encounters most frequently when discussing tartan. And as tartan is very much a subjective art form, there will be exceptions to these rules. Hopefully this little lexicon will help to clear up some confusion among the ranks!



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