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PLAID MADRAS

COTTON PLAID MADRAS CLOTHING

The History and Making of Plaid Madras

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There are just a handful of hand-woven fabrics left in the world of textiles. Plaid madras is one of them. According the U.S. Federal Trade Commission, it **MUST** come from the city of Madras (which is now called Chennai) in southeastern India. It has been the epicenter for the hand-weaving of cloth in India since cloth has been woven. In case you're wondering, the city came first, then the fabric.

In the beginning... Fabric historians claim that the earliest cloth woven in Madras was made of yarn which had been spun from the tip-skin of ancient trees. Sometime during the 1200's, not yet adorned with stripes, was exported to Africa and the Middle East to be made into head-wraps. And, in the 1500's, a more refined Madras cotton was first block-printed by hand with floral or temple designs, and became the traditional garb of Madras villagers until plaids came into style in the 1800's. They were then oftentimes called Madrasi checks. Legend says that the patterns were copied from the tartan plaids of the Scottish regiments that occupied southern India in the 1800's.

With the exception of a few years in the mid 1900s, it is made the same way today as it was in the beginning. In the 1950's and 60's "bleeding" madras was popular. This was a cloth that used dyes that were not colorfast in a typically plaid design, resulting in bleeding and fading colors that yielded a new look to the fabric each time it was laundered.

So how it it made? The cotton used to make the yarn it a short stapled cotton fiber, which is soft and quite fragile. Since it IS so delicate, it can't be combed – only carded. Since it isn't combed before being spun into yarn, the resulting bumps give Madras its

uniquely charming slubs, little thickenings in the yarn that give Madras its texture. But I'm getting ahead of myself...

Once the cotton has been spun into yard, it is then hand-dyed. Nowadays, they may use more permanent dyes than the vegetable dyes of days past. But it's still dyed the in the same tradition: by hand while it is still just yarn. The hank of yarn is dipped into a container filled with boiling spring water, to which has been added soda, salt, stabilizers and the dye until it "takes" the dye.

Next the bamboo frame is warped by hand in the morning time, to avoid the hot sun that can fade the warp threads. It is attached to the frame one strand at a time. Once completed, the frayed yarns are replaced, and broken yarns were tied with weaver's knots. Next, starch sizing is applied with brushes, and then burnished with bamboo sticks, to give them a smooth, even finish for weaving. Then the warpers tie off the yarns by colors, roll then up on the beam, and carry it to the master weaver (who is often in another cottage somewhere in the village. Warping can be an arduous, painstaking task.

Then finally, the cloth is woven and finished by hand in almost 200 little villages in the (formerly) Madras area of India. A typical loom can be 12' x 8' x 8'. The yarns can be wet down to make them more pliable. The process of weaving is no different than any other hand-weaving loom. It's just that you don't see much of that anymore! Foot pedals raise and lower the warp yarns, while the weaver sends the shuttle back and forth through them. There's a reed stick to pack the yarns.

Many of these artisans have had their respective skills passed down to them through many generations over hundreds of years. In fact, craft of producing the unique textile is so revered, it is actually protected by the government of India!

After it has been woven, the fabric is sent to be washed in fresh spring water in a dry river bed. 25-foot lengths of the cloths are spread in the water to soak, then it is work back and forth with the washers' hands and bare feet. Then after the cloth was washed, it was spread out to dry on the river bank and then stretched out to dry in the hot sun.