

Shear Perfection

One designer hopes to revive a once-profitable Dutch wool industry by drawing on local inspiration.

By Tamy Cozier-Charles



Roland Pieter Smit

About four miles off the coast of North Holland sits Texel. It's the first and largest of the Frisian Islands and the most unusual. This Dutch archipelago is characterized by quaint villages, white sandy beaches, and picturesque pine forests set among rugged dunes. Its rolling green pastures are dotted with *schapenboeten*, or sheep sheds, that hark back to a time when wool production was lucrative—but that is no longer the case.

“Wool from New Zealand and Australia is much cheaper than our wool,” says Dutch industrial designer Roland Pieter Smit. After China, the South Pacific exports the bulk of raw and manufactured wool products. Meanwhile, competition from alternative fibers based on synthetic and plant materials, which mimic the look and feel of wool, is among the factors contributing to market-share loss globally. But Smit hopes his project, *Wolwaeren*—a collection of locally sourced textiles from the wool of Texel sheep—will help revive the island’s waning fleece industry.

Smit’s interest in wool from the Netherlands stemmed from his graduate thesis project at Design Academy Eindhoven (DAE). “Historically, we had

Opposite: A resident of Maartenhuis weaves custom-made yarn on a specialized loom, both designed by Smit.

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are very high and big, much larger than the ones we have, so you have to work with another person.” Over the course of a year, Smit traveled back and forth to Texel almost every week collaborating with Dros-Kortenhoeven and her activity group to refine his threads and weaving frames.

Five years after the project began, Smit, who launched his company Studio Ro-Smit after graduating from DAE, ran into some major issues when the spinning mill he used to process his custom wool went out of business. “The yarns I developed are very hard to make,” he says. Following a six-month search, “we finally found a new factory that was capable, but it could only manufacture in very large volumes.” That wasn’t financially feasible for Smit, so last November he launched his Kickstarter project Wolwaeren, a collection of seven blankets produced by Studio Ro-Smit but based on the original woolen textiles by Maartenhuis residents. “I wanted the project to be as local as possible, from raw materials to the end product,” he says. So Smit set a goal of raising a little over \$16,000 to manufacture the special yarns.

Wool from the Texel sheep doesn’t have the same name recognition as the coveted fleece from the merino breed. But its quality is on par, if not better. “It insulates very well,” says Tom Witte, co-owner of duvet distributor Texel Export and a native of the island. “It’s a very bouncy wool that breathes a lot better than other types.” Texel wool itself is a by-product of commercial sheep farming, where lean meat from the local breed is highly sought-after. “Shepherding is absolutely still an important part of income for quite a lot of farmers on the island,” says Witte. “And if you have a good ram that can



produce a lot of offspring, it can sometimes go for \$160,000.” Like Smit, Witte is in the business of promoting the quality of the raw fiber and locally manufactured textiles beyond Dutch shores.

“It’s hard for the industry here in Europe at the moment,” says Smit. “We are trying to give it a push and to give its beautiful craftsmanship a platform again.” While his Kickstarter didn’t hit its target, his efforts weren’t for naught—an unexpected international sale helped secure funding and make Wolwaeren a reality. “We received a big order from a company in London that really loved the project.” Now the designer is able to continue working with Maartenhuis, to the delight of its residents. “All the people from here love him,” says Dros-Kortenhoeven. “They’re happy to know he’s coming back.” ■

a very big wool industry in Holland, especially for interior fabrics,” he says. “Nowadays, there’s not much left. So I started thinking of ways to add some value to Dutch wool.” In 2010, his research brought him to Texel, where he began working with Maartenhuis, a small community of people with special needs. Here, art programs are an important part of daily life within the socially therapeutic environment, based on the Camphill movement created by Austrian pediatrician Dr. Karl König in 1939. He believed the lives of people with special needs could be greatly improved in communal settings of mutual respect where they’d be able to contribute and do meaningful work like farming and arts and crafts. Naturally, Maartenhuis’s textile workshop caught the attention of Smit, who noticed that residents with particular mental and physical impairments had different working styles and results. “People with autism, for example, were very detailed, while those with

Down syndrome worked really well and very quickly, but the quality of work wasn’t great,” says Smit.

Drawing on his observations, Smit developed specially made yarns and looms to accommodate Maartenhuis residents’ cognitive abilities and motor skills. “For people with Down syndrome, I created very thick yarns up to an inch wide,” says Smit. “But we weren’t able to weave with them on the normal looms in the workshop, so I started to design and develop my own.” He says this reinvented system of oversize threads and giant looms makes the weaving process much simpler and yields a higher-quality product. “By blowing up every detail, the residents are able to see their own mistakes and also solve them.”

“They see the changes right before their eyes, which is great,” says Louise Dros-Kortenhoeven, an art therapist who administers the textile program at Maartenhuis. Beyond the instant gratification, she says Smit’s looms are also socially engaging. “They

Above: The various-size threads in the Wolwaeren collection cater to the mental and physical capabilities of the makers from Maartenhuis.

Opposite top: Texel has a 1:1 ratio of sheep to people. Some sheep barns, which are mostly in the island’s countryside, have been converted to homes, but many have been landmarked. Below: Maartenhuis’s textile program is one of dozens of art initiatives the community offers. Here, residents proudly display their work.

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