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TRANSMUTATIONS OF THE TARTAN: ATTRIBUTED MEANINGS TO TARTAN DESIGN

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We all associate meaning with textile designs. If we can see the principles of Revolutionary zeal and the sanction of family life and work in one textile design, we can perceive the explicit Modernism of another and realize that in the complex decisions that comprise the creation of a textile, we have fashioned our world and its values. Perhaps the textile is small, but its condensed values and meaning may be a more clarified perception about the world than most others. For many, such as Roland Barthes, textiles and clothing can thereby be described as a sign system offering a language by which we have non-verbal communication in the world. The effectiveness of such a sign system as Barthes proposes depends upon the sharp denotation and appropriate connotations of the visual sign that inheres within the textile. That is, we would have to know, or at least agree upon, its meaning. If language with uncertain meanings become a tower of Babel, textiles without explicit meaning can be for Barthes only stammering stuff, not objects that speak with eloquence and directness. But I ask if we seek rhetoric in our objects, or rather, if we not hear a stronger voice in the stillness of complexity, conversation, and consideration.

I want to address one textile example, tartan, and to offer the possibility that Barthes' metaphor of a sign system in textiles and dress is inaccurate and insufficient. I shall not argue for the lack of meaning in non-verbal communication, specifically in the messages of textiles, but rather of their shifting interpretive potential, something that may even surpass language as a supreme act of human relations and human achievements. To be sure, one of the most banal vulgarizations of Barthes' idea of the discourse of dress is Alison Lurie's sophomoric The Language of Clothes in which she claims, "Most distinctive of all [among plaids and checks] is the tartan of the Scottish Highlanders. ... these plaids have an ancient political significance. ... even today the display of clan tartans is often a political act. It is also highly informative: since each clan has a distinctive pattern or patterns, a knowledgeable person can identify the owner of a shawl or kilt as a descendant of one of well over a hundred ancient families." Lurie goes on to lament the extension of tartans to umbrellas, outfits for Scottie dogs, and the like insisting that there is a connection to clan and a logical association with hard work and serious effort.

Everything that Lurie claims is spurious; though I dislike tartan for Scottie dogs, I do love the thermos bottle; her assertion about history is wrong and can be demonstrated to be perniciously wrong; her assumption regarding our interpretation of textiles is, I believe, also wrong and must be rejected. Textiles are not a simple language to be translated into words and made into equivalents; they

believe, also wrong and must be rejected. Textiles are not a simple language to be translated into words and made into equivalents; they are subtle, ever changing visual display, prismatic in their complexity, always elusive and all-important in their meanings. Henry James spoke in the preface to The Spoils of Poynton of "the fatal futility of fact." From James' simple trope of the fiction that enables and enlivens all that we might know, we learn that attributed meaning may be as substantive and perhaps even as intrinsic as any primary fact in design.

As some of you know, my thoughts this morning are stirred by the forthcoming exhibition Tartan to open October 25 at the Fashion Institute of Technology. The theoretical issues of textile's interpretation are especially vexing in terms of museum display. How does one represent the fact of the object, the history of a succession of objects, and concomitantly demonstrate the interpretive connection among objects? I know that the problem I pose is not an unusual one in museum practice or studies and clearly not an isolated instance within textile study. In fact, the Fashion Institute of Technology exhibition will follow more or less a chronological sequence, beginning with early military uses of the tartan continuing through the 19th century to the creative uses of tartan in the twentieth century. We will, however, offer as a fulcrum of the exhibition a library devoted to the historiography of tartan. By this means, we seek to invest the exhibition with an especially contemplative and considered aspect, stressing that the remarkable and colorful display of tartan is the beauty of an idea that is subject, again and again, to transmutation.

Hugh Trevor-Roper has written compellingly in 1983 of "The Invention of Tradition: The Highland Tradition of Scotland" in which he demonstrates that much that we associate with ancient Scotland and with the so-called clan heritage of the tartan is nothing other than a fabrication of the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries at a time when political spirit and the Romantic imagination could be abetted by a sense of Scottish tradition, even a fictitious one. Concepts of clan, kilt, and tartan coalesced around 1822 and became a coded set of signifiers, as we might now describe them, because of the nationalistic and Romantic fervor of the period. We know that the clans of the Scottish Highlanders did not have clan-associated tartans until the last years of the eighteenth century and that the idea was subsequently advanced by wool merchants in order to generate business. Depictions of Scottish Highlanders in battles of the English civil wars of the seventeenth century demonstrate that they wore a miscellany of dress, never groupings of one tartan. Richard Waitt painted portraits of the members of the clan Grant in the early years of the eighteenth century; they wear tartan textiles of election, not of clan association. The various members of the clan wear different tartans, presumably because there was no sense at the time of a clan tartan, but rather of selecting the tartan one liked the most. In some eighteenth-century portraits, the Scots wear more than one tartan pattern, suggesting that mix and match was more important than one tartan alone. None of the clan Grant members in eighteenth-century portraiture wear what would be called a Grant

tartan in the twentieth century. Michael Wright's 1660 portrait of Mungo Murray does not show the twentieth-century Murray tartan.

Of a related history, the kilt as we know it is probably an eighteenth-century invention. Scottish gentlemen wore a basic form of trousers known as trews; peasants, unable to afford breeches or trousers, wore kilts (the name arrived from the Swedish kilta, to swathe or bundle; thus, a copious cloth for loose bundling around the body), a garment especially appropriate for crossing rivers and not getting pants wet and for wrapping oneself in on a night spent outdoors in dewy and brisk Scotland; in the mid-eighteenth-century pre-industrialization of Scotland, Thomas Rawlinson needed a modified dress for the Highland workers in his charcoal and iron foundries that would be less dangerous than the loose kilt with its risky amplitude of material unsuitable for the proto-modern factory. Rawlinson had a tailor modify the copious kilt into a philibeg, or short kilt of two parts, one the plaid over the shoulder and the other the kilt, now pleated. Trevor-Roper provides a terse summary of the invention of the kilt: "the kilt is a purely modern costume, first designed, and first worn, by an English Quaker industrialist, ... bestowed by him on the Highlanders in order not to preserve their traditional way of life but to ease its transformation: to bring them out of the heather and into the factory."

In tartans, "clan" tartans did not exist in 1746 as the kilt was being developed for factory service. But the 1746 Battle of Culloden meant that Scotland was vanquished and the new English orders of suppression by Acts of Parliament of nationality extended to cover the tartan as well as the philibeg, trews, and other elements of Highland dress, however new. The dress bans of 1747 were on civilian dress and the military was specifically exempted by the "Disarming Act" from the tartan ban. What happened from 1747 to 1782 was, then, the great bifurcation in tartan dress. With tartan outlawed to the civilian population, it lost its opprobrium as peasant clothing, the peasants being scared of wearing it. Moreover, the great move to Scottish industrialization that would flower in nineteenth-century Glasgow encouraged the modernization of dress. Concomitantly, the idea of Highland dress was stored in the collective historical attic; when it was revived in the years leading up to 1822, it had been forgotten by some two or three generations in civilian dress and could be remembered, however deceptively, however naively, to have been the ancient dress of the Highlands, not that so recently worn as the standard peasant dress before 1746. The ban on tartan was hugely successful, but so inimical to a natural historical process, that it promoted the violent re-assertion of the tartan, sanctioned by a spurious sense of history, in the next century.

Significantly, the military use of tartan was permitted and ascendant in the same period. Wanting the service of the fierce Highland regiments, the British military encouraged the regiments' self-identification within the British army. Whereas the Scottish clans had been content with badges and heather and other props of identification according to eighteenth century texts, they seized upon regimental tartans for identification in the second half of the

18th century. Hence, the Black Watch created a regimental tartan and other regiments did likewise.

In 1782, the House of Commons repealed the prohibition on Highland dress. Anyone could wear tartan and kilt with impunity. The irony is that probably virtually no one had wanted to wear the Highland dress when it was banned; now that it was restored to the possibility of dress, it flourished. Sir Walter Scott and other ardent enthusiasts for the romance of Scotland endorsed wearing tartan as a badge of national honor. The military had begun to establish the tartan and the kilt internationally as a sign of Scotland and its military prowess. In 1820, the Celtic Society of Edinburgh was founded by Colonel David Stewart of Garth and Sir Walter Scott in order to promote the use of "ancient" Highland dress. This society is especially indicative as it extended the concept of the Highlands to all of Scotland; Edinburgh is a Lowland city; Sir Walter Scott was a Lowlander; in the 1820s, the Lowlanders appropriated the Highland ethos as a representation of all Scotland. Historical accounts would indicate that many Lowlanders were chagrined at the time in this transgression of the separations within Scotland, but many others seem to have been enthralled by the proposition that there was such a long and significant heritage that could be identified with Scotland that Lowlanders forgot that they used to scorn the Highlanders as uncouth ruffians and accepted them as, in good Enlightenment terms, noble savages that represented the best of the unadulterated Scottish spirit. In 1822, Stewart published a book Sketches of the Character, Manners, and Present State of the Highlanders of Scotland, that also promoted his unjustified idea that the kilt was an ancient tradition and that tartan was a Highland clan custom.

But a book and a dress-up society were not the big events of 1822 in the history of tartan: George IV came to Edinburgh, the first Hanoverian monarch to visit the capital of Scotland. He was greeted with great ceremony in arrangements made by Sir Walter Scott and Colonel Stewart of Garth; George IV's arrival in Leith (the port of Edinburgh), and his days and nights in Edinburgh were bedecked in tartan. Stewart and Scott saw this occasion as the great flowering of the tartan. Trevor-Roper denounces the entire affair as a farce, but its impact was enormous; it would seem that this visit presages the acts of orchestrated political propaganda that we have come to know very well in the 20th century. The myth of the tartan was operative and the frenzy of tartan that Scott and Stewart promoted was aided by the manufacturers who, having known for some three or four years in advance of the King's trip to Edinburgh, created new pattern books of tartans, often with first clan attributions probably picked entirely out of the air.

William Wilson and Sons of Bannockburn produced a key pattern book in 1819, knowing of the Royal Visit, that ascribed many clan names to tartans they had heretofore been producing just identified by numbers. Even at the time, some people knew that the events around 1822 were overzealous and represented a distortion of history: Lord Macaulay wrote in the 1850s that the tartan and kilt mania of 1822 "reached a point beyond which it was not easy to proceed. That last

British king who held a court in Holyrood thought that he could not give a more striking proof of his respect for the usages which had prevailed in Scotland before the Union, than by disguising himself in what, before the Union, was considered by nine Scotchmen out of ten as the dress of a thief." Macaulay knew that the disparaged dress of peasants before 1746 was in 1822 the dress of national identity. Absurd as an historical reversal, it is instructive to us, in that dress suppression becomes completely transposed in some 75 years, not through revocation, but through the desire to reaffiliate pattern and clothing with some meaning.

In 1842, the Sobieski-Stuart brothers published the epochal Vestiarium Scoticum, a work they had been developing for more than twenty years. It can be seen as a further elaboration of the pedigree of the clan tartan connection, justifying the concept with reference to ancient documents in several forms. The book was printed in a limited edition of fifty copies and was a sumptuous example of the new color printing with color plates of the purported clan tartans. In 1844, the Sobieski-Stuarts published The Costume of the Clans, a more elaborate justification of the clan matrix of the tartan ascribing specific clan identity to 55 sets or designs. This second sumptuous book had a much larger printing and a greater effect. Its assertion that Highland costume was the sole authentic and surviving example of medieval dress continuous in Europe only in the Highlands from the Middle Ages to the nineteenth century was, in itself, highly conjectural and offered with scant support other than enthusiasm. In like manner, the Sobieski-Stuarts accepted without question the clan relations of tartans that had been produced by the Scottish wool merchants in the period of 1819 to 1822, as if the Wilson of Bannockburn clan name certified an affiliation going back two or three centuries. Here, the Sobieski-Stuarts were in real trouble, for anyone looking at the tartan pattern books of 1819 to 1822 would have realized the cacophony of different names for the same thing, the chaos of clan attributions, and the complete capriciousness of that association. But the Sobieski-Stuarts, who had accompanied their vehement publishing with a nearly Royal lifestyle (these beguiling charlatans had assumed the Stuart name of the Scottish royal house as borne by the Old Pretender who was titular James III of the United Kingdom and James VIII of Scotland and the Sobieski name of the Polish princess who married James VIII), were more acutely attacked for the falseness of their own supposed associations with both the Sobieskis and the Stuarts, both of which were spurious; they left Scotland never to return.

Their alleged scholarship was thoroughly discredited, as it should have been. They made up their purported facts; they made reference to ancient texts that probably never existed; they were creating a fantasied civilization that might have anticipated a Scottish Disneyworld with national adventure embodied in tartan design. But, Baudrillard reminds us that Disneyland is the perfect model of simulations in the real world. If you walk the Royal Mile in Edinburgh in 1988, it is a kilt-and-tartan touristic Disneyworld. "Disneyland," says Baudrillard, "is presented as imaginary in order to make us believe that the rest is real, when in fact all of Los

Angeles and the America surrounding it are no longer real, but of the order of the hyperreal and of simulation." For the French philosopher of our time, we need to know the illusion as a kind of reality in order to understand fully the reality of contemporary civilization. I would like to excuse the prevarications of the Sobieski-Stuart brothers with a nod to Baudrillard; they lied and they cheated, but they did something quite extraordinary in ascribing a meaning to textile design that has more or less stuck: false as it is, the Sobieski-Stuarts fostered a myth of textile identification and implication that has served a continuing and compelling social need for well over a hundred years. They may have been factually wrong, but culturally very right.

Intellectually discredited and with the authors exiled, the Sobieski Stuarts' books of 1842 and 1844 had an impact in ideas transmitted to other authors. In 1845 and 1847, James Logan published a two-volume quarto edition The Clans of the Scottish Highlands with illustrations by R. R. McLan. A one-volume reprint edition of this book is now almost always available on the remainder market. Lady Antonia Fraser, in her introduction, makes a noble effort to give the book authority without granting it veracity; she says, " 'The heather grew in his heart' wrote a contemporary of McLan. 'And there was no music he loved so well as the bagpipe on the wild hill-side.' It is to be hoped that this reissue of McLan's finest composite work will recapture this spirit of high Victorian romance. It will also demonstrate that ardent and loving approach to Scottish history which animated both Logan and McLan." To see this book today as a Victorian vision of the past and of the potency of garments and of one textile concept, the tartan, to command dress is, I think, of considerable importance. We would be misled to see this book as authoritative in the sense of objective history, but perhaps we are coming to realize late in the twentieth century that history is not objective. History is informed by our needs and desires; perhaps history is even constituted not in its elements, but in the dynamic interchange between the objects and events of the past and our contemporary explanations and requirements; "the pattern we call history is not in the past, but in ourselves," said Anthony Burgess.

Moreover, history has its own bizarre systems of connections that afford the most extraordinary juxtapositions. If there is a deconstructionist view that, in its baldest form, history is a suite of fictions, then tartan in the 1840s is the most elaborate novel of junctions and serendipities, rather like a Dickens novel of the period. Color printing in textiles and in book publication provided a new standard and a new zeal for publications demonstrating the chemical dyes of the time. Tartan was undergoing the shift from the combed, hard tartan cloth and the natural dyes that had been its matrix to the thinner, softer fabrics given color through vivid aniline dyes. To compare the so-called ancient tartans to the modern is to see a dramatic shift in color, one which would probably prohibit an easy transference at any other time. But, inasmuch as tartans were receiving their first presentation in book printing form in the 1840s, the abridgement of history that their Sobieski-Stuart justification required was also present in their printed form in the

bright colors of new printing that rationalized and corroborated the shift to aniline dyes. Thus, the books of the 1840s used Mauchlin printing on shiny paper: the bright colors corresponded to the bright colors of the aniline dyes of the "new" tartans and the "ancient" tartans were quickly modified into their more modern forms. By such method, a textile chemistry and a printing technology conspired to make brightly-illuminated and resplendent fools of all of us.

The luminosity we associate with tartan is a product of that mid-nineteenth-century transformation of dyes abetted by the printing processes of the period perhaps similarly to the manner in which our color sensations and sensibility were altered a century later when Technicolor changed a spectrum of film images and post-War color plates changed not only reproductions, but our expectations, regarding works of art. Walter Benjamin's epochal article "The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction" first published in Zeitschrift fur Sozialforschung in 1936 argues that a mode of existence, for works of art and for human beings, can be changed by means of reproduction in what he calls "the adjustment of reality to the masses and of the masses to reality." Benjamin was thinking primarily of the sequence of mechanical reproduction from lithography to photography, but his principle applies to color work as well. His conclusion that "mechanical reproduction emancipates the work of art from its parasitical dependence on ritual" likewise speaks of what happened to tartan in the 1840s--the same decade of photography's emergence, also largely in the fertile soil of Scotland--as the sanction of a ritualized past became transmogrified into the documents of a modernist process of reproduction. Not only did the specific documents of tartan history shift by this printing process, but also the extended reach of the tartan phenomenon. Mauchlinware in book coverings, accessories in decorating, home furnishings, jewelry, and other forms became a colorful and popular phenomenon by the late 1840s and 1850s. this extended form of the tartan took the textile concept into another form calibrated not to tartan history, but to the new palette of aniline dyes and the new "hand" of the fabric, now soft and luxurious rather than corded and hard. Rightly, in the 1840s, tartan could be said to represent luxury in a way once again triumphant for the Sobieski-Stuart pretensions and far-removed from the true peasant history of tartan.

If concepts and images seemed to converge in the 1840s around tartan, the lightning rod of the 1840s tartan revival was Queen Victoria who came to the Scottish Highlands in 1842. Prince Albert wore Scottish dress with great style and with enthusiasm. His role in the history of dress anticipates in some measure the galvanic role of the Duke of Windsor in men's attire of our century. Albert's adoption of Highland dress gave sanction and like mind to many other men who would have previously left Highland dress to the festivals of the Scots. His influence in his own lifetime was considerable as a living option for Highland dress. John Philip portrayed Albert in Highland dress in a portrait of 1858 commissioned by the Aberdeen Town Council. An oil sketch of the painting is at Balmoral. Upon the Prince Consort's death in December 1861, his influence on tartan became even more pronounced. Victoria commissioned a statue of Prince Albert in tartan

kilt by the sculptor William Theed which was eventually placed at Balmoral. By the 1860's, tartan was as popular in London as it was in Scotland. A tartan society had been created in London to codify and authorize tartans.

Albert's ardor for the Scottish countryside, reminding him of Germany, was matched by Victoria's. Mingling her sense of that place with her memorial recollection of her husband, she advocated Scottish style with a vengeance. Much of what we associate with Scotland comes from and/or with the impress of the Victorian era, whether it is golf, butterscotch, heathery romance, or tartan. There were unquestionable excesses and bad taste in "tartanitis," but there was also a genuine exuberance. That Victoria's children were frequently dressed in tartan has led to a tradition of more than a century that children often wear tartan wools and cottons. The most important iconography of Victorian tartan is a suite of watercolor drawings by Kenneth MacLeay published in lithographic form in 1870 with the title Portraits Illustrative of the Principal Clans and Followings, and the Retainers of the Royal Household at Balmoral, in the Reign of Her Majesty Queen Victoria. The publication was a sensation in 1870 in part as a kind of peek behind the scenes at Balmoral, though without the smarmy intrigues of Donald Regan and Nancy Reagan. MacLeay's drawings compare to McLan's florid and romanticized figures as being markedly stolid and bourgeois; real people. Indeed, the MacLeay drawings instruct the costume historian in the proper Victorian way of wearing the tartan; details are provided so that one can virtually dress a mannequin in the manner of a MacLeay drawing. Furthermore, the MacLeay drawings are influential in that they promoted a correct, codified dress with full apparatus and removed tartan from its blustery nonchalance to an ordered set of adornments. John Brown also plays a significant role as a model for male dress, most often represented wearing Highland dress.

The middle of the nineteenth century also bears a great importance for popularizing women's dress in tartan. While tartan had been used in the Highlands as peasant dress for women, and some women's garments in tartan from the 1820s testify to the Scottish and French enthusiasm at or after the visit of George IV, it was not until the middle of the century that we find many instances of women wearing tartan dresses, tartan bodices, and tartan shawls and sashes. Following in this last instance the frequent usage of Victoria, the women of the era employed the newly bright colors of tartans as striking notes of color in their dress. What had been preeminently a matter of menswear became in the 1850s and 1860s a preferred textile for women's clothing.

The curious Victorian perversity that could transfer tartan from one gender to another could also offer a mid-Victorian justification for Highland dress for men as a matter of good health. McIntyre North raised the almost inevitable joke of tartan wearing in his 1881 Book of True Highlanders when he extolled the wearing of the kilt as a natural garment in promise of good health. Dress and health reform invested the kilt with special potency, as it were. North wrote:

The kilt, leaving the legs free, the wearer has the advantage of the air bath, which is so invigorating to the human frame, the friction of the lower part of the kilt maintains the warmth in the

cold weather; and the upper part fitting closely round the waist, supports and protects the loins in a manner especially beneficial in warm climates; the want of which support in the Lowland dress frequently rendering the use of cholera belts, etc. necessary; in wet weather, the rain being immediately shaken off, the wretched and dangerous effects arising from standing or walking about in sodden bags (which chill the system and necessitate the use of stimulants) is entirely avoided.

So, the Victorian era gave images to men wearing tartan and even gave reason to the kilt. Victorian tartan embraced women for the first time in the modern period with the consequence that tartan could be conceived of as high fashion. Another Victorian concept of substance and sequence was the use of tartan in interiors. The Queen's bedroom at Balmoral and other rooms were decorated in tartan, never with the obsessive--and repulsive--tartan fixation that some designers have later used, but with a keen respect for the design to cross not only gender, not only from Highlands to Lowlands and beyond, but now to progress from the body to the environment.

Tartans have a checkered history, or should I say a tartanized history, one that depends on variant interpretations of the same design. In the twentieth century, the tartan has undergone even more dramatic transformations in meaning. It was in the 1970s and 1980s a standard of punk fashion, its deliberate subversion of the Anglo-Saxon tradition being for such designers as Vivienne Westwood and Stephen Sprouse an opportunity to reinvest a textile design, once banned, with its insurrectionist potential. Westwood included tartan in her "seditionaries" collection of 1977 in a juxtaposition that can only recall the seditious aspect of the 18th-century tartan. Yet, there are other designers of our century who have used the tartan in manifest allegiance to the Establishment and specifically to the conservative Anglo-Saxon tradition. No savage warrior stands behind Laura Ashley's use of tartan or Ralph Lauren's, but indisputably these designers associate the tartan not necessarily with clan but with the traditional grace and style of the United Kingdom.

Significantly, the ligature between tartan and the Anglo-Saxon past that has been its most fervent impulse has also been its reason for re-examination in the 1980s. I venture to say that the deeply revered, Establishment-imbued view of the United Kingdom that has been revived in the 1980s is, in large measure, a product of the international conservatism represented by Ronald Reagan in this country and Margaret Thatcher in England. Little wonder, then, that designers such as Westwood and Sprouse are seeking to seize the very fabric of the Establishment in order to reverse its meaning and perhaps to challenge society's design. Moreover, there are those who preserve and burnish the tartan past. The Tartan Society in Comrie in Perthshire seeks to authenticate tartan research; the Lord Lyon must validate and authorize any new tartan such as that designed earlier in this decade for the United States Military Academy at West Point. Patently, West Point seeks the military heritage of a tartan connection.

In France, Jean Paul Gaultier and Yves Saint Laurent and, in Italy, Giorgio Armani and Gianfranco Ferre have demonstrated a keen attraction

for tartan. Tartan has long been popular, as a function of Victorian development of childhood, as a motif of children's clothing. Tartans have often been associated with the out of doors, used in the lining of outercoats for rough and inclement weather. (I caution you, however, that the Burberry check is a district check and not a tartan.)

Thus, the tartan can be said to cross from the civilian to the military and back to the civilian again. Likewise, it passes from the Establishment to the Disestablishment. Of course, the tartan's popularity and role have been influenced by the British Royal Family. Queen Victoria adored Scotland and established residence at Balmoral, using tartan in her furnishings for the castle and authorizing the special Balmoral tartan which can only be produced by Royal warrant and for the Royal family; most recently, Prince Charles has demonstrated an abiding love of Scotland and specifically of Balmoral. He accompanies this love of the place with an ardor for its dress.

Certainly the kilt is nostalgic or historicist dress for the latter years of the 20th century. It is not odd in the sense that in our time we are searching history for ideas that will lead us to and through the millennium that is a scant dozen years ahead. But a suite of images of tartans and a brief inquiry into their history perhaps requires us to think deeply even of that model of history and historical investigation that we bring to a work of art, whether it is a painting or textile. When we use historical evidence with respect to a painting, we may be looking at something that is tantamount to a wholly considered, wholly verbalized act of art. When we consider textiles, we are describing the raw matter from which visualizations are made, whether they are real people in clothing or the depiction of people in clothing. The historical explanation, conventionally perceived, of tartan is so filled with contradiction as to be impossible to follow. We cannot construct a correct succession of perceptions about tartan, because the design idea has never been completely exposed. More importantly, the design idea of tartan has, I think, never been complete nor will it ever be complete. The meaning of tartan is ever changing and evolving. Its ascriptions to clans, national, or family, or Establishment values are all disputable and uncertain at best. Michael Baxandall, in his recent book Patterns of Intention: On the Historical Explanation of Pictures says of the historical examination of a painting, "the painter's complex problem of good picture-making becomes a serial and continually self-redefining operation, permanent problem-reformulation ..."

I am in agreement with Baxandall on the manner in which the artist is engaged in the permanent problem-reformulation of her or his work of art. I am further in agreement that we, as historians of textiles and art, are engaged in the permanent problem-reformulation of works of art, even the concept of the tartan. Is there endemic, sure meaning to the tartan? I think not. The meaning or interpretation resides not in the textile design, but in all ever-needful return to the design that reinvests it with meaning, that gives tartan its meaning that is never tangible, never certifiable, and consequently ever ceaseless in our imagination. If we knew and could define and secure its meaning, would this pattern be unremitting to the imagination and infinite in its design history? In this, I am not speaking to endorse ignorance. Instead, I speak on behalf

of the tartan's presence beyond history and specific knowledge. No meaning is proved for the tartan. But in having no objectified meaning, tartan has the property of being a vessel or container of meaning, a design form that exists not only in history but through history, not merely of the place of Scotland, not of the Sobieski Stuarts, not just of MacGregors or MacDonalds, but of the permanent problem reformulation that is design's supreme expression beyond Scotland and the nineteenth century, in fact beyond all place and all time. *

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- * A partial and early version of this essay was first presented as a paper "From Clan to Punk: Imputed Meanings of the Tartan" at the Sixth Annual Conference on Textiles, North Dakota State University, Fargo, North Dakota, on 25 June 1988. The first version was subsequently accepted for publication in Ars Textrina. The present essay, modified and considerably expanded, seeks to add historical information and to substantiate the theoretical questions of the earlier version. This essay is prompted, in large part, by the forthcoming exhibition Tartan to be presented 25 October 1988 - 4 February 1989 at the Fashion Institute of Technology. I am, as always, indebted to my co-curators Harold Koda and Laura Sinderbrand for their insights and friendship. In addition, I am most grateful for the copious knowledge and generous kindness of Hugh Cheape of the Royal Scottish Museum, Edinburgh.