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First lady smiles on Swans Island Blankets

By Ethan Andrews
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NORTHPORT (March 25): By the time Bill Laurita of Swans Island Blankets got the call, he'd mostly forgotten about the swatch of woven merino wool he'd given to Chris Harkins of Capitol Gifts two months earlier.

Advertisement

Laurita knew the company supplied the White House with protocol gifts for the president and first lady to bestow on visiting dignitaries, and he knew his samples had made the first cut.

Still, he was surprised when Harkins called with the news that first lady Michelle Obama wanted to give the visiting delegation from Ireland a Swans Island Blanket on St. Patrick's Day.

Laurita was thrilled, actually, but there was one catch. It was a Wednesday and Harkins needed it at the White House by Friday.



This Swans Island Blanket is like the one made for first lady Michelle Obama. (Photo by Tina Shute)

A 50-by-70-inch throw from Swans Island Blankets starts at \$395 — and a good portion of the cost comes down to top-shelf materials, from the organic wools, to the hand-dyeing process using natural pigments, to the handlooms that must be worked by a weaver, one row at a time.

But just as much of the cost has to do with the labor that goes into each blanket.

From the time the wool is ordered to the application of the silk hem and five-rectangle over weave logo that finish each piece, a blanket can easily take two weeks to complete.

Fortunately for Laurita, there was a green throw on the loom when he got the call on behalf of the first lady. Fortunately, it was the right color green. And fortunately, it was almost complete. Workers cut it off the loom, finished it and sent it out the next day.

"We can make the very best blankets," Laurita said, "but there aren't a lot of shortcuts to take to do what we do."

Possibly the best illustration of the care that goes into each blanket can be seen in the sun-filled top floor of a building behind the company's Northport Avenue showroom.

There, on a large table, each blanket is laid flat while a worker uses surgical tweezers to pick out bits of chaff that have escaped the scouring process. This work alone can take up to five hours for a single blanket.

Laurita mostly leaves this tedious work to employees but on this day, he stood over a large white blanket with a pair of tweezers in one hand; the other hand was wrapped in masking tape, sticky side out.

With the exception of a few flecks here and there, the blanket was immaculate. Still Laurita wasn't satisfied.

"You can't sell a blanket that looks like that," he said, setting to work, extricating a tiny sliver of hay from the fine weave to demonstrate the process.



Bill Laurita prepares to remove individual bits of chaff from a finished blanket, using surgical tweezers. The process can take up to five hours. (Photo by Tina Shute)



Bill Laurita shows a handful of weld flower, which produces a yellow dye. Swans Island Blankets combined weld flower and indigo in the green blanket made for the first lady. (Photo by Tina Shute)



Skeins of wool soak in Osage, a yellow pigment made from wood pulp. (Photo by Tina Shute)



Heather Bryant, who wove the Michelle Obama blanket, beads on a large handloom. The blanket is dyed with kamala root, a product of the lotus tree. (Photo by Tina Shute)

Industrial spinneries typically remove these bits of chaff using a bath of sulfuric acid. The problem, Laurita said, is that this scouring process removes all the lanolin from the wool fibers. Stripped bare, wool lives up to its reputation for being

unbearably itchy.

Swans Island blankets are scoured with organic soap and the results are noticeably different. A fair amount of lanolin remains on the fibers, leaving them soft enough to go against bare skin.

The dyes are all natural too, each with a long history beginning centuries before the advent of chemical dyes.

Cochineal, for example — literally the bodies of insects — was once exclusive to the prickly pear cacti of Mexico. The brilliant red became as lucrative to the Spanish Conquistadors as the silver taken from the same region. Today it's less expensive — around \$35 a pound. According to Laurita, a little goes a long way.

Other once-coveted hues, like indigo, have since been replicated with chemical dyes, rendering the plant-based versions once again a luxury; the province of purists like Laurita.

"[Chemical dyes] can give you any color you want," he said, "but that color has no life to it. No depth to it."



The Northport showroom of Swans Island Blankets. (Photo by Tina Shute)



Bill Laurita crushes shells of cochineal, a parasite found on prickly pear cacti. The beetles have long been a source of red pigment. (Photo by Tina Shute)

The number of pigments used in Swans Island blankets could be counted on both hands but combining the colors allows Laurita an exponentially wider palette from which to choose.

Diluted cochineal produces a mellow pink. Alternated with indigo, the yarn becomes a warm purple. The spring green used in the Michelle Obama blanket was made by separate baths of weld flower and indigo.



Bill Laurita of Swans Island Blankets holds a throw like the one recently made for first lady Michelle Obama. (Photo by Tina Shute)



Jody McKenzie winds skeins of wool on a machine designed with the help of Doak's Machine Shop in Belfast. (Photo by Tina Shute)

Other plant-based dyes are staples at Swans Island Blankets. Kamala root and Osage are used for yellows, madder root for oranges and reds. A tint of brown comes from cutch, a resin extracted from the acacia tree.

Wools that are naturally brown and black round out the stock. These "rare" wools are so called because the sheep are anomalies in any given herd. Think of the proverbial black sheep.



Skeins of yarn are dyed to the color specifications of a California designer. (Photo by Tina Shute)

Visitors to Swans Island Blankets' Northport showroom may see several sheep wandering the grounds but none are shorn for blankets. The company boards the sheep for friends, getting a measure of ambiance in return.

Laurita said most of the Merino and Corriedale wool comes from sheep on Nash Island or from a grower in Starks.

To the extent possible, Swans Island Blankets uses local suppliers, from Jagger Bros. spinnery in Springvale, to Camden Custom Embroidery, maker of the "Custom Made for Michelle Obama" tag. The blankets are woven on American-made handlooms by Maine weavers in the company's 17th century farmhouse headquarters on Route 1.



'Custom Made for Michelle Obama' (Photo by Tina Shute)

Orders for Michelle Obama blankets have not come pouring in yet but Laurita holds out hope for making something of the special commission. "I'd like to capitalize on it more," he said, "but I don't know how to."

Unlike Aretha Franklin's appearance at the inauguration that nearly sank Detroit milliner Luke Song, the presentation of the Swans Island Blanket was not televised. In fact, Laurita is still hoping to see a photograph, if one exists.

Meanwhile, Swans Island Blankets is working on another deal in Washington, D.C., this one with the U.S. Senate Store. On the heels of a commission from the first lady, Laurita could be forgiven for being eager, but the managing partner of Swans Island Blankets seemed unfazed.

"Lots of things come up as possibilities in a business like this," he said. "Who knows if it'll work or not, or if they're going to go for it."

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