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The Provenance of Craft: Natural Materials and Their Cultural Roots

WLLW traces the deep roots of natural materials used in artisanal crafts and their role in healthy and sustainable design.

WORDS Elissa Rose

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MATERIALS WELLNESS SUSTAINABILITY

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Crafts often incorporate materials that have deep cultural and environmental significance. From textiles to ceramics, these materials carry stories of heritage, sustainability and craftsmanship passed down through generations.

Craftspeople today are increasingly mindful of the environmental impact of their materials, and many turn to natural, renewable resources to create products meant to last a lifetime. By using locally sourced and sustainably harvested materials, artisans not only reduce their carbon footprint but also contribute to the preservation of traditional techniques. This conscious approach to material sourcing reflects a broader movement toward responsible, ethical craftsmanship, where quality and sustainability go hand in hand.



Teixidors was founded in Terrassa, Spain and works with farmers' associations striving to



Tile Throw crafted from merino and yak wool by Teixidor in collaboration with John Pawson. Photo courtesy of Teixidors

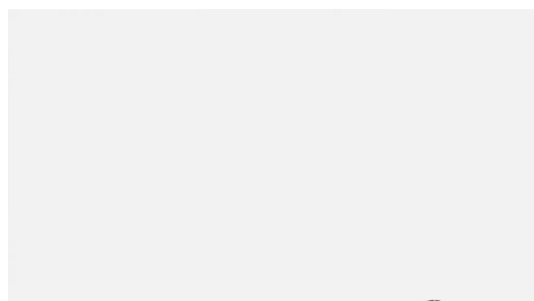


Oyuna Uno Throw in slate grey & taupe woven from Mongolian cashmere. Photo courtesy of Oyuna

Linen and Wool

One key textile used in craft is linen, made from flax, a plant known for its resilience and sustainability. Historically, linen was revered in ancient Egypt, where it symbolized purity and wealth. Today, linen is prized for its natural texture and durability, often used in clothing, upholstery and decorative pieces. The finest quality linen originates from Europe, particularly in France, Belgium and Lithuania, where centuries of expertise meet ideal flax-growing conditions. These regions are known for producing exceptional fibers, thanks to their rich tradition and climates, which are perfect for cultivating flax.

Another popular textile is wool, commonly used in rugs, tapestries and garments. Wool is especially associated with areas like Peru and New Zealand, where sheep farming is a central part of rural life. Peruvian artisans use alpaca wool, which is softer and warmer than traditional sheep wool, to create intricate textiles. In Andean communities, the art of weaving with alpaca wool has been passed down for thousands of years, with each pattern and color representing different regions, stories and traditions. Similarly, Scottish and English wool have deep cultural significance, with the Scottish Highlands famous for their tartan patterns, woven from local wool, symbolizing clan identities and heritage. English wool, historically known as the 'golden fleece', was a cornerstone of the medieval wool trade and remains a treasured material for its durability and warmth. Today, wool is also being embraced for sustainable design, with artisans crafting sustainable home furnishings and insulation materials that promote both comfort and environmental responsibility.





Ceramics by Robynn Storgaard. Photo courtesy of Robynn Storgaard



Amphores mouth-blown glass by Kate Hume. Photo courtesy of Kate Hume

Ceramics

Clay is a foundational material in ceramics, derived from the earth and fired at high temperatures to create durable, lasting pieces. What makes ceramics so compelling is their geographical uniqueness: different regions are known for particular types of clay, each with its own distinctive properties. For instance, porcelain, known for its delicate, almost translucent appearance, originated in China over 2,000 years ago. Chinese artisans discovered how to create fine porcelain from kaolin clay, a pure, white mineral, and feldspar, a mineral that aids in the melting process during firing, leading to the production of exquisite pieces that became highly sought after worldwide after samples of kaolin were sent to Europe by a French Jesuit missionary in around 1700. This sparked a new era of porcelain production in the West, with European potters eager to replicate the prized Chinese ceramics.

In Japan, raku pottery has a history closely tied to the Zen Buddhist tea ceremony. Raku is prized for its simplicity and irregularity, with each piece being shaped by hand and quickly removed from the kiln while still red-hot, resulting in a unique and unpredictable finish. This method has been practiced for centuries and is still embraced by Japanese artisans who appreciate the philosophy of imperfection and mindfulness embedded in the craft.

Ceramicists today are pushing the boundaries of traditional clay work by experimenting with new techniques, sustainable practices, and innovative glazes. Many are focusing on locally sourced and reclaimed clay to reduce environmental impact, while others are exploring contemporary forms of firing, such as soda or wood firing, to achieve unique textures and finishes. Artists are also blending age-old traditions with modern aesthetics, using clay as a medium for social commentary or artistic expression, making ceramics both functional and an evolving art form.

Glass

Hand-blown glass is used for everything from vases and sculptures to windows and lighting. The island of Murano, Italy, is a place which is synonymous with glassmaking, where artisans have been perfecting the craft for over 700 years. Murano glass is renowned for its vibrant colors and unique forms, with techniques such as 'lattimo' (milk glass) and 'aventurine' (sparkling glass) setting it apart from other glassmakers. Each piece of Murano glass is made by hand, and many families have been involved in this craft for generations, ensuring that traditional methods continue to thrive alongside modern innovations. Another country famous for glass is Sweden, which boasts the renowned 'Glasriket', or Glass Country, home to numerous glassblowing studios. The craft thrived here due to the region's natural abundance of resources: dense forests providing fuel for the furnaces and lakes supplying sand. Glassmaking in Småland dates back to at least 1742, with the tradition continuing to flourish today, as artisans experiment with sustainable techniques and innovative designs, creating everything from bespoke lighting fixtures to intricate art installations.



Hemlock Nook rug by Armadillo. Photo courtesy of Armadillo



Baskets handmade by Studio Amos. Photo courtesy Petr Krejci

Jute and Hemp

Jute, often referred to as the 'golden fiber', is primarily grown in the Ganges Delta, a region shared by India and Bangladesh. It's a versatile material used in rugs, bags and upholstery, appreciated for its strength and biodegradable nature. Artisans hand-spin and dye jute fibers, creating intricate designs that showcase its rustic, natural beauty.

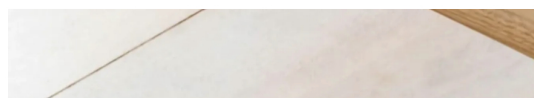
Hemp, known for its durability and environmental benefits, is another fiber deeply rooted in history. Originating in Asia, it has been used for thousands of years, from ancient Chinese rope-making to ship sails in the early maritime era, while in Japan, hemp was woven into clothing and ceremonial items. Today hemp is grown around the world, as it can flourish in a variety of climates, yet most of our hemp is grown in China, the birthplace of the plant.

Willow, Raffia and Sisal

Willow has long been used in basket weaving, particularly in Europe. In regions like England and Ireland, willow weaving has been practiced for centuries, creating everything from functional baskets to intricate decorative items. Willow's flexibility and strength make it ideal for weaving, and it remains a symbol of rural tradition and craftsmanship in these regions.

Similarly, raffia, a fiber derived from the raffia palm, is commonly used in basket weaving across Africa, particularly in Madagascar. Raffia is valued for its pliability and durability, and has been traditionally used to create baskets, mats and hats. In many African cultures, raffia weaving continues to be a communal activity, with each piece often carrying symbolic patterns that reflect local customs and heritage.

Sisal, another popular basket-weaving fiber, is predominantly grown in East Africa, particularly in Tanzania. It is prized for its coarse, hardy texture and has been used for centuries in making rope, mats and baskets. The cultural significance of sisal is deeply rooted in local economies, where it has long been a staple of rural livelihoods, supporting both artisans and farmers alike.





The Box: Leather in Terracotta by August Sandgren handcrafted in Portugal from OEKO-TEX certified leather. Photo courtesy of August Sandgren



The Paper-bin by August Sandgren handcrafted in Portugal from OEKO-TEX certified leather. Photo courtesy of August Sandgren

Leather

Leather, when sourced ethically, remains a popular material in handmade furniture and decorative items. Vegetable-tanned leather, which uses tannins derived from tree bark, is prized for its natural finish and durability. This method of tanning leather dates back to ancient civilizations and leathercraft has a long and storied history, especially in regions such as North Africa, where Moroccan artisans produce intricate leather goods through traditional processes. In the famed souks of Marrakech, the craft of leather tanning and dyeing has been passed down for generations. Today most leather originates from China and Brazil, where it is a byproduct of the meat industry.

Silk

Silk has been associated with luxury crafts for millennia, with its origins tracing back to ancient China. The story of silk's discovery is linked to the Chinese empress Leizu, who is said to have discovered the silk-making process in 2,700 BCE when a cocoon fell into her tea and was softened by the liquid. Artisans around the world have since refined the craft of silk weaving, with places like India and Japan becoming renowned for their silk textiles. In India, silk is often handwoven into intricate saris, and in Japan, the production of silk kimonos remains an art form that represents the pinnacle of craftsmanship. Today, silk is also commonly used in homewares, such as cushions, curtains and bedding, adding a touch of elegance and luxury.



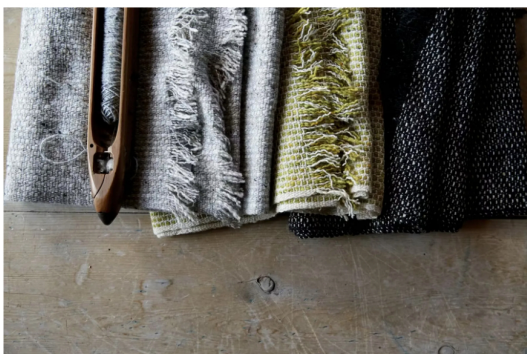


Alpacas in the highlands of Peru. Photo courtesy of Blacksaw

Craftsmanship not only celebrates the skill of the maker but also the stories and materials behind each creation. Whether it's linen from Belgium, silk from India or glass from Murano, these materials are imbued with rich cultural histories and geographical significance. By choosing handmade items crafted from natural materials, consumers support these traditions and help preserve the stories that continue to inspire artisans around the world.



Mourne Textiles located in the Mourne Mountains in the south-east of Northern Ireland. Photo courtesy of Mourne Textiles



Textiles woven by Mourne Textiles. Photo courtesy of Mourne Textiles



The quality of the flax being assessed following the scutching process of separating the woody stems from the stem. Photo courtesy of Libeco





Leather hides. Photo courtesy of Bill Amberg Studio



Spindles of yarn. Photo courtesy of Mourne Textiles



Annemarie O'Sullivan founder of Studio Amos weaving baskets. Photo courtesy Petr Krejci

Photography: International Fibre Organization, Teixidors, Oyuna, Robynn Storgaard, Kate Hume, Armadillo, Studio Amos by Petr Krejci, August Sandgren, Blacksaw, Mourne Textiles, Bill Amberg Studio

FURTHER INFO

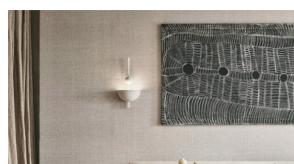
[Alliance for Flax-Linen and Hemp](#)

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[The American Ceramics Society](#)

[History and Cultural Impact of Leather](#)

[The Silk Museum](#)





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