

NORO

Behind the Scenes



by Cornelia Tuttle Hamilton

A Noro aficionado for more than twenty-five years, designer Cornelia Tuttle Hamilton took the trip of a lifetime, traveling to Japan from her home in Sweden to meet the man behind the yarn.

My relationship with all that is Noro began in the early 1980s. I had just returned from a train trip around Europe that I undertook to find direction in my professional life. The outcome was an ambitious decision to pursue careers in both photography and hand-knit design. As fate would have it, the design part of my decision quickly developed and pushed out the photography—at least for the time being.

Upon my return to Manhattan I took a sales job at Fiberworks, which was probably the most avant-garde yarn shop in New York at the time. Owned by crochet designer Judith Copeland, Fiberworks was more a gallery than a yarn shop, where handcrafted yarns from Noro lit up the shelves and were featured in artfully displayed handknit garments. It was quite clear to me from the start that the yarns produced by Noro were in a category all their own—vibrantly colorful, wonderfully textural and excitingly different from all other yarns on offer. They quickly became my favorites to look at and knit with. And so they have remained ever since.

Noro: An Inside Look

For me, it doesn't get better than designing with Noro yarns. It's a joy to explore the characteristics of each new yarn and figure out ways to showcase their individual personalities. To design in these yarns and not take into account their intrinsic characteristics—what I call the "ego" of each yarn—is to not fully acknowledge the brilliance of their development.

I have come to believe that these yarns are as close to art as we have in the industry. The man behind them is an artist himself, and these yarns are an expression of his spirit rather than just a commercial product. I have learned over the years that there is a purpose behind the characteristics of each specific yarn. If one is rustic and somewhat rough to the touch, with vivid, sometimes clashing colors, well, that's exactly how Eisaku Noro wants it to be. Likewise if a yarn is soft and earth-toned. For the past three decades, Noro has succeeded through his products in mesmerizing his audience more completely than anyone else in the industry.

The Man Behind the Yarns

The only picture I had ever seen of Eisaku Noro was a black-and-white photo taken thirtysomething years ago. I have looked at that portrait many times over the years, searching the features for insight into the mind of the man behind the yarns. To my eye, he hasn't changed much from that photo; he is still trim, handsome and casually elegant. He is a simple, very focused man; a man at ease with himself and with others; a satisfied man still at the peak of his senses. He is humble, gracious, generous and full of humor—a thinker, a doer, an artist.

Now 74, Eisaku Noro stays fit by walking an hour in the morning and again in the evening, through his interest in organic Japanese food and through his continued passion for his work, which is his life. I get the feeling that this is a man who will be working until he takes his last breath.

It is obvious that every new day still brings new discoveries of color and form based largely on an acute observation of nature and its rhythms, seasons, textures and colors. Mr. Noro's calm dignity and humor were evident even though we needed an interpreter to communicate.

The Company

Eisaku Noro was raised in the town of Ichinomiya in Central Japan, a region known for its yarn and textile production. Impatient with school, Noro began working in the yarn industry after his basic education in spinning and dyeing was completed. He quickly learned the ropes. An innovator with an artistic eye even back then, Noro soon became frustrated with the constraints of working for someone else and, at age 30, branched out on his own. He named the line "The World of Nature," and that name is still printed on the label of every ball of yarn. An earnest feeling for the purity in and preservation of nature has been part of the Noro philosophy from the start.



Dyed wool tufts, which are used for creating the renowned Noro colorways

I quickly realized that there has been virtually no deviation from the original spark that led Eisaku Noro to start his own company to actualize his ideas about making yarns. This is all the more remarkable, I now realize, against the backdrop of this conservative and tradition-steeped culture.

From the outset, he incorporated his reverence for nature and his artistic sensibilities into the yarn he was producing, the likes of which had never been seen before. By specially adapting industrial carding and spinning machines, Noro was able to produce yarns that were totally unique and that put much less strain on the environment than is usual in the industry. The yarns were very colorful and ahead of their time. And they were not easy to sell. In fact, they were deemed by many as unsellable. They were simply too different from what people were accustomed to.

The Noro offices, located in the yarn artist's hometown, are humble. There are no private workspaces in the low-slung building; everyone works in the same big, rectangular room. Knitting swatches hang along the walls, and sample garments are piled here and there near house designer Asaku Ishii's work area. Spools, hanks, balls and cones of sample yarn are in another part of the room. This is a workplace full of color and creative disarray. I might have visited too early to witness the beauty of the Japanese cherry blossoms, but the explosion of color that I encountered at the Noro offices was distinctly satisfying.

After visiting the main floor, I climbed a rickety ladder to the second floor, where the color workshop is located. It is a tiny room where the color combinations for which Noro is so famous are born. Shelves stuffed with folders line the walls. The tables are covered with tufts of yarn in every color imaginable. The designers carefully choose from these tufts and arrange them on large sheets of stiff paper. The chosen shades will become the next season's colorways for each different yarn.

The World of Nature

In recent years, the yarn industry has been actively promoting awareness of ecological sustainability, but this concept has been part of the Noro philosophy from the beginning. Noro yarns have always been at the forefront of the green movement, providing us with eco-friendly options since almost before the term eco-friendly was coined.

The preservation of nature is such an important part of his business that Mr. Noro leaves nothing to chance, personally overseeing every aspect of production from sheep to yarn ball, including all machinery, labeling, yarn bags, boxes and even the garbage that the company produces. There are restrictions in the dyeing process to keep things environmentally friendly. For example, deep colors and black are often created by blending different colored fibers. To quote Mr. Noro, "Eco certification should not be bought. It should be an integral part of every business."

All the animal fibers used in the yarns are organic. The farms they come from are certified, and the fibers are stringently checked for authenticity at all stages of their journey from the animal to Japan. Most of the wool fibers come from a special breed of sheep called Polwarth, which is raised especially for Noro on a farm in Australia. There is no mulesing (a controversial practice to prevent fly infestation), no unnecessary medicines are administered, and the sheep have their own drinking ponds. Noro checks the water and soil on the farm, the sheep's food and the chemicals used in washing the wool. Raw materials come from other sources as well, including wool from the Falkland Islands and kid mohair from South Africa. All fiber sources are carefully researched, vetted and certified. The fibers are then freighted to Japan and checked again before being turned into the wonderful yarns that bear the Noro name.

The Production Process

Noro is also a great innovator in the field of yarn production, the process of which has been shortened through unique changes to machinery by Eisaku Noro himself. These developments are not only beneficial from an environmental standpoint but are also responsible for giving Noro yarns their unique handcrafted qualities. Says Mr. Noro, "Friction, rubbing and heat during processing weaken the fibers in direct proportion to the length

of time they are processed. By dramatically shortening this process, we are preventing damage to the enzymes in the fibers and simultaneously profiting the environment."

Environmental considerations are also at the forefront of the dyeing process, each step of which is carefully controlled. The natural fibers are dyed using reactive and acid dyes at cool temperatures and with a pH balance that is compatible with the fibers. Nylon is colored with acid dyes and partially reactive dyes. The first area we entered had a big, heavy blower and bags of vibrantly dyed, semi-matted fiber tufts, some wool, others wool and silk or wool and nylon. These tufts are moistened and then hand-fed into the blower, which separates, loosens and mixes the fibers to facilitate the carding process. The fibers are blown into a panelled room and then are gathered into large bags, which are carried to the carding area.

The main part of the plant is dimly lit. There is a serenity here, but also a sense of purpose. The feeling of urgency common to industrial production is absent. There is no question that the production going on here is actually a form of handcrafting.

We climbed atop the carding machine. (Carding produces a strand of yarn that is not yet twisted.) Normally machines of this sort have three big rollers, but Noro uses only one, which shortens the carding process and lends more variation to the final thickness of the yarn. The fibers are weighed and



Fibers being spun

the colors are arranged by hand according to designated specifications. The fibers are then aligned and slowly fed into the carding machine. The machine works at a deliberate pace, and the gauzy strands that are produced are slowly rolled onto big spools. These beautiful spools are stored on racks until the yarn is ready to be spun.

Next to the carding machine is a long spinning machine called a mule. It runs smoothly, the strands gently twisting back onto themselves on wooden pins. The rhythm of the spinning machine is mesmerizing, almost hypnotic. The bed of the machine has been shortened to create less twist in the oneply yarns. It is old and boasts the beautiful oiled patina that wood acquires after many years of careful use.

The yarns are then transported to another plant close by, where they are steamed to set the twist, put up into skeins or hanks, and carefully labeled and bagged. Noro's modifications to the blowing, carding and spinning processes reap a total energy savings of 46 percent as compared to typical yarn industry standards. Because of these adjustments to the process, the plant is less dusty, less noisy and has less chemical smell than is usually found in a yarn manufacturing plant. No waste is generated.

Years ago I came to regard each skein of Noro yarn as an individual. Now I can really understand why. Having seen how the yarns are produced has only deepened my respect for Noro yarns.

The Future of Noro

Though Mr. Noro is still very much in charge, it is clear that his goal is to keep the business prospering when he passes the reins to his son, Takuo, who has been working in the Noro company as operations manager for more than a decade. This seems as natural to him as the environmental sustainability of the products and the endurance of the philosophy and work ethic he has created. There is a tangible pride among the Noro employees and a respect for their workplace and purpose. Undeniably the manifestation of one man's spirit, the company has sprouted from the old but not broken with it, providing instead a sense of continuity between what has been and what will be in the ongoing evolution of Japanese culture.

Cornelia Tuttle Hamilton, founder of Hamilton Yarns (www.hamiltonyarns.com), is the author of six pattern books featuring Noro yarns. A version of this excerpt was originally published in her 2009 book Noro: Meet the Man Behind the Legendary Yarn. Text has been edited for length and currency. Reprinted with kind permission from Sixth&Spring Books.