



Alpacas as the new diamond? Fur Coat?

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We all know the difference between a house and a home. It goes without saying. We all know that diamonds are forever. The gift of a diamond is a symbol of an enduring relationship; rarity, luxury, elegance, readily given financial sacrifice. And this long-held custom is ingrained in world culture. Alpacas are like that too. How so? There is a very active initiative taking place on small farms and even in larger suburban backyards all over America; one that has been slowly but steadily gaining ground and acceptance for over twenty years now. It is an enterprise that, like diamonds, implies rarity, luxury, elegance. But the similarities stop there. Where diamonds are cold and dead, a alpaca is warm extremely gentle and huggable. Where diamonds fund wars, slavery and bring misery to many, alpacas are socially, economically, politically and ecologically correct. It takes sixty female minks to produce one mink coat. The helpless animals are either gassed or injected with poison and then tanned.

Enter the alpaca – Fashion with a Conscience

The alpaca breeder's goal is to repopulate North America with a former indigenous species and take advantage of the gift of its rare and elegant wool. Similar to the American bison, which was almost eradicated from our western plains in the nineteenth century, an effort is underway to return alpaca herds to North America. Its bones are often found by archeologists as they dig deeply into our American past. Centuries ago, the ancestors of the alpaca, know as camelids, migrated northward across a now defunct land bridge between Alaska and Russia, eventually settling in western Asia, where they became the camel, ship of the desert. Others headed south and became the alpaca, the Vicuna (its closest cousin) and the llama. These are among the earliest of domesticated herd animals. And just as the North American bison herd is growing through focused mentoring and becoming a more familiar sight on our western plains, our alpaca herd, at about 175,000 strong to date, can also be spotted on North American soil. In all 50 states.

Valued like a home as opposed to a house, like a diamond as symbol of enduring love and not as simply a rare flashy but brittle stone, the alpaca has returned home. She is an animal that walks lightly on the earth, as Green as Green can be, while bearing still other gifts. She annually grows one of the most luxurious, bright, durable and natural wool coats in the world. In a time where cotton is being somewhat frowned upon as clothing because of the significant amount of pesticides and herbicides sprayed on growing cotton crops to maximize yield, polluting our land and water, alpaca fiber needs no such corrosive and often poisonous chemical aid. As we run out of fossil fuel, while finding ourselves dangerously dependent upon oil products, the alpaca offers us clothing that is natural, containing no petroleum products. She offers her wool (known as fiber) in 16 natural colors, unlike nylon and other petroleum based textiles which must be chemically dyed for color. Unlike wool, which contains lanolin, a chemical which many are allergic to--causing those red skin rashes and itching, alpaca fiber contains no lanolin. Alpaca, next to your skin, is pure elegance. You can even spin unwashed alpaca – her fiber is that pure.

In recent years, diamonds, like mink coats, have lost much of their allure primarily due to new social, economic and environmental awareness. Whereas the mink coat requires the skinning and tanning of many minks, the purchase of diamonds also has some negative implications. If you have heard the term 'blood' diamonds or 'conflict' diamonds, you are well aware that this symbol of enduring love has a dark side some do not want to think about and a growing number do not want to contribute to. Diamonds, in Africa, have been mined by long suffering slave labor for decades. Profits from sales finance wars and death. Like mink coats, there is ever mounting social pressure to curtail the use of these cultural icons due to the pain and suffering our purchases indirectly cause.

So, deprived of your luxurious and warm mink coat and that sparkly rock on your finger on your ears or at your neck, what's a girl to do to when she wants to look her best and still be socially correct? Cashmere? It's soft, for sure, but not warm nor durable. What's the solution?

Wear alpaca. Alpaca fiber is a socially, economic, environmental and politically conscious solution appearing, or rather reappearing on the American scene. The ultra-rare alpaca, bringing the gift of luxurious wool (technically referred to as fiber) has slowly been introduced into pastures and paddocks over the last twenty years. Originally imported primarily from Peru, Bolivia and Chile, she is popping up on farms, and even small acreage backyards all over America. American breeders are slowly cultivating a national herd, repopulating this cute (some call them a cross between a llama and a teddy bear) and gentle animal onto its native soil.

Like diamonds, alpacas, and in turn their fiber, are rare. Alpacas do not litter and their gestation period averages 11.5 months. There are less than 4,000,000 alpacas in the entire world, and only about 175,000 or so in America. The real gift they bring to us is their yearly harvest of fleece – called 'The Fiber of the Gods' and 'The Golden Fleece' for good reason. Alpaca was once worn exclusively by Inca royalty in the past – both for its rarity and its luxurious feel, softness and brightness. Think cashmere. Think durable cashmere. Alpacas are shorn in the spring and sent off to graze again with a new and much shorter hair style, perfect for the coming hot summer months. And a closer analogy between diamonds and alpaca fiber can be drawn.

Diamonds are durable, diamonds are rare. Diamonds are rated for their individual value by four factors – known as the 4 Cees.

1. **Cut** – diamonds can be cut into various shapes. Some of the more popular cuts are oval, emerald, round, heart, marquise, triangle, and pear shaped.
2. **Clarity** – a white diamond with no flaws within its body will only reflect white light, that familiar sparkle of brilliance we see when light reflects from the diamond to our eye.
3. **Carat** – the weight of a diamond figures into the cost. But quantity is no excuse for quality; small, flawless diamonds can easily cost tenfold what a larger, flawed diamond can cost.
4. **Color** – flawless white diamonds demand the most desire. But diamonds come in many colors, the most popular after white are yellow, brown, blue, green, and red (very rare).

In corner number 2 – The Alpaca

- Cut.

There are six grades of alpaca fiber to choose from, just like there several cuts of diamonds to choose from. The grades go from relatively thick to ultra-fine. So fine they are measured in microns. There are numerous types of alpaca fiber, suited for varied clothing applications. You can choose alpaca fiber for cool and downright cold weather outerwear - a sweater, for example, but one that will wick moisture, not smell like wool (lanolin) and itch less (note: reliable sources with hands one experience tell me there is no such thing as 'no itch, no static, no pilling,' but alpaca clothing, depending on the quality of fiber, offers significantly less of these fashion no-nos. You can choose alpaca fiber for high fashion indoor wear, garments which can be crafted to be ultra soft, bright and lightweight, designed for close to the body wear – the softest natural fiber on earth. And with alpaca offering six grades of fiber, you have your choice of socks, sweaters and coats suitable for climbing Mount Everest, to a Green Mink coat – as in rare, luxurious, natural, no kill products, environmentally friendly, carbon neutral, and, oh yes, warmer than mink. Or how about a remarkably lightweight, warm and luxuriously soft sweater worn close to the skin. Can do with alpaca. And do it naturally

- Color.

Alpaca fiber comes in 22 natural colors, (lots more choices than with diamonds) from white (the most common) to grey (the rarest) and to black. No dyes, no detergents, no harsh chemicals needed. No pollution. Just alpaca.

- Clarity.

Meaning free from defects - and therefore able to reflect the most sunlight and produce that familiar diamond sparkle and brilliance we all know and desire. Alpaca fiber is known for its brilliance and stands well above other natural fibers. Alpaca products exhibit an almost internal luminous radiance, as if it were alive. Through its unique durable fiber structure, a maximum amount of available light is beamed from each strand, making the wearer of an alpaca product seem to glow and shimmer.

- Carat.

(or weight) Alpaca fiber can be made into bulky sweaters. The remarkable loft of certain grades of fiber traps air, like a thermal window, insulating the wearer from cold and damp air and cutting winds. Alpaca fiber can also be fashioned into the lightest of fabrics, making form fitting garments which are almost weightless and soft as silk possible. Yet, known for its extreme durability, these exquisite garments can stand up to rough usage and can even be handed down from one generation to another. Try that with wool or even cashmere. (And alpaca can blend with almost any other fiber to produce exquisite clothing).

In these changing times, where terms like eco-friendly or carbon neutral seem to pop up daily into our vocabulary and national consciousness, alpaca fiber begins to outshine even diamonds. Other than industrial uses for its great hardness, a diamond's only value rests in its rarity and the well-funded marketing campaigns to promote and sell diamonds as fashion. And alpaca is much cozier to wear than mink. So what are we to do about some of our long standing traditions which suddenly seem to be in conflict with our new social, economic and environmental conscience? Alpaca fiber may be *THE* special gift worth giving. An alpaca garment is Green, it's socially aware, it's politically correct, it's luxurious, and more and more it is becoming American-made. For you, it may be 'seeing is believing,' or 'Show Me.' Well, American alpaca products are rare (we herd builders are working diligently on that). But just once, get your hands on a quality alpaca product. But beware: touch the new Green mink coat – one made from alpaca fiber. Prepare to be amazed. Welcome home, alpacas!

Consider wearing and promoting alpaca fiber – **Fashion with a Conscience.**

Content provided by **Jim Tomaszek**
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