

Go On, Be A Soft Touch

by Maddy Cranley

If there is one word that seems predominant in descriptions of this season's fashion trends, it is "soft". Shapes are simple and minimalist. It is texture that is getting all the attention. Fabrics of cashmere, mohair, felted wool, chenille, angora, alpaca, boucle and faux fur abound. The fuzzier, the better. "Going soft" is also very evident in what's popular in hand knitting yarns although it does come at a price. It seems the softer the yarn, the more expensive the cost. It can't be coincidence that at a time of a booming economy, these luxury yarns are enjoying such favor. A few years ago, one enthusiastic market watcher, drew up a graph spanning several decades which correlated the rise and fall in the stock market with the rise and fall of women's hemlines. Maybe we can look at luxury yarn sales as another bellwether of prosperity. Have the new-found riches in our economy made us feel coddled and secure? Have we translated that new wealth into a desire for "soft" cuddly clothes?

Cashmere appears to be leading the pack in the luxury yarn market. Some merchants will tell you that the best cashmere comes from Inner Mongolia, where the goats are combed (not shorn) for the soft under hairs on their tummies. The finest cashmere has a long staple, which is the non-continuous fiber spun into the yarn but has a prized small denier, which is the weight-per-unit length measurement. The increase in popularity of knitting with cashmere is likely driven by ready-to-wear fashion heavyweights such as Ralph Lauren and Donna Karan who have recently produced cashmere turtlenecks, blazers and blanket-like skirts. The ready-to-wear market's interest in cashmere may even be explained as a simple economic equation. Due to a downturn in the Japanese economy, there has been a decided drop in the purchase of raw cashmere by the huge Japanese textile industry. Therefore with more cashmere to go around, the price on the world market has decreased.

Mohair is another old softie that seems to be enjoying a rise in popularity. This fiber has always managed to keep a fashion foot forward by appearing in blends or novelty yarns and therefore remains a constant in knitters' hearts. It's the hair of the kid goat that makes mohair so special and it is prized far more than that of the Mom and Dad. The Angora rabbit sheds its hair which is combed into one of the softest of the soft yarns. It is always first in my memory for a very soft and very expensive yarn. My mother and aunt still call angora, "bunny yarn". Another volunteer from the animal kingdom which shares its warmth, is the alpaca. On its own or blended with sheep's wool, it is hard to beat for warmth, softness and wearability.

Still want something cozy but not quite as warm - try some chenille. Chenilles can look rounded or flat depending on how the pile is structured around the diameter of the yarn. Chenilles, which can be spun from cotton, rayon or viscose blends, have a wonderful silky and substantial feel and don't require a lot of pattern or textured knitting to make them look their best. Boucles which often appear as faux furs with wavy long hairs and a glamorous look may seem too much for a sweater but a simple scarf in one of these yarns can add a touch of style to that cloth coat while keeping your political correctness intact.

Whatever your choice, treat yourself to a little softness this winter. Don't be afraid to let others discover that you are a "soft touch".

Maddy Cranley is a professional knitwear designer, who has created exclusive designs for knitting and craft magazines, authored and published three books on the subject of creating felt garments and projects from handknitting, and produces an ever-growing line of maddy laine handknitting patterns. For additional information, see <http://www.maddycraft.com>

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