



Photo: Absalon Hansen

# "So much better than burning the skins"

**Faroese designer Malan á Lofti turns multi coloured sheep skins into modern fashion**

*By Veronika Seim Bech, April 2007*

***Old Nordic sheep races need to be used if they are to survive. Malan á Lofti has a vision to do this by supplying fashion conscious modern women with unique jackets utilising the beautiful natural colours of the old Nordic breeds.***



*Malan á Lofti*

## **Faroese traditions**

People in the Faroe Islands pride themselves in keeping alive old craftsmanship related to wool – spinning, knitting, weaving and felting – as seen in the national costumes. But wool is more than ancient traditions. In recent years an exciting environment of people creating new and modern designs has grown and become noticed in the islands. One of these young designers is Malan á Lofti from the Vágur Island. She makes her collections using skin and wool from the Faroe sheep which is crafted in a completely new way. Not least the Lofti jackets have attracted attention far and wide.

## **Childhood**

Malan has grown up with sheep and as long as she remembers she has been

fascinated by the skins. The village kids collected skins and got "deposits" for them in the local shop. For every skin they laid on the back stairs of the shop they were allowed 5 kroner to spend inside. But a few years later all skins left over from the slaughter were just thrown into a big waste container. Malan asked her father where all the beautiful skins were going but never understood the answer she got: *"They are going to be burned at the waste disposal site. Nobody wants them!"*

The family – Malan's father as well as his eight brothers and sisters – has always kept sheep. Thus sheep was an integrated part of Malan's childhood, yet also something very exciting. The family sheep were part of a larger flock that graze two different areas. In one, the animals were driven together in a pen at the end of a road where women and children brought lunch out to the men. Malan enthusiastically describes it: *"We tried to get out there before the men because then we could hide behind the stone fence as quite as mice so we didn't frighten the sheep away when they were driven into the pen."*



Photo: Lofti family

*Malan with her sister Óluva and brother Hávardur out in the hills in the spring 1992. Little Háverdur is deeply fascinated by a multi coloured lam.*

*"While the sheep were sheared and sorted, we kids played around. It was like a party,"* remembers Malan.

Malan was the oldest of three siblings and about the time when she was nine years old she was allowed for the first time to follow her father further away out into the hills to gather sheep. She remembers this as a very special occasion. Father and daughter had to get



*Spring shearing – a joint effort.*

Photo: Lofti family



*Guðrið, Hávardur, Malan and her father in the mountains counting lambs spring 2005.*

Photo: Lofti family

up at five o'clock in the morning and she was allowed to stay away from school. Packed lunches were carried in rucksacks and they walked for a long time. The sheep had to be rounded up, and Malan remembers that she and her father were assigned a route on the highest hills. While they walked up the steep slopes, Malan's father told about sheep and how they live up there, e.g. that all paths in the grounds were made by them. *"I felt very grown up,"* remembers Malan. *"I was given an important job to do and became much wiser. It was exciting to round up the sheep. We had to chase them to make them go down the hills, brake to stop the animals from trying to run wild and throw stones at them to keep the sheep lower down moving. When the sheep were caught, we had to hold on to them no matter what. Being dragged through their shit or getting bruises all over us was part of the job."*

### **Shearing**

Only the adult sheep were sheared so the lambs were let out of the pen before

the shearing. *"I felt sorry for the lambs. They jumped around outside bleating madly and looking for their mothers. They got more and more hungry and sometimes only found their mothers late in the evening. Occasionally some sheep escaped from the pen and was not sheared. The wool on those sheep fell off during the summer, but such loose strands of wool can be dangerous for birds and animals".* Once Malan's father caught a sheep with a leg wrapped up in loose wool. The animal clearly showed difficulties in walking and the wool had cut through the skin leaving an open wound. This made a strong impression on the little girl.

### **Slaughter**

Autumn brought the day when wool was used to bind together the feet of the sheep before the slaughter took place. To make sure each farmer got his fair share all animals were first weighed and placed in groups. Children now had to place a knife on each animal to indicate the owner. *"That way we children got a very responsible job."* The slaughter itself took place in

a cellar. On hearing the word *"We're shooting"*, the children ran outside but were soon back in. *"We stirred the blood and helped pulling the bowels and entrails out of the animals. For us, the slaughter was just a natural part of sheep keeping. We thought it was fun. We competed who would first get the bowels out. Also it was important for us to get hold of the bladders – preferably big ones from the rams. We blew them up and they hang in the kitchen until New Year when we were allowed to trample on them"*.

### **"Could I be a designer?"**

Malan's father runs a creative and innovative market garden. *"He was my role model,"* says Malan. *"There was nothing he couldn't do. In his younger days he wanted to become a tailor, but his father talked him out of it. Tailoring was not a proper man's job."* It was Malan's father though, who taught her to darn socks and to stitch up buttonholes. *"But there was never a sewing machine in the house. So I stitched dresses for my doll by hand, and later I modified clothes I inherited. I liked to have clothes nobody else wore,"* explains Malan.

In her childhood years Malan dreamed about being a market gardener and also considered being a vet or interpreter. It was always in the cards that the children should have a good education. Once in her teenage years Malan asked her mother: *"Could I be a designer? Is it possible to find a designer job in the Faroe Islands? What happens if I cannot find employment?"* Her mother answered that at present there were no designer jobs in the is-

lands, but this could change in the future. This answer and the support from her family were deciding factors in Malan's choice. Having finished high school she was accepted at the largest Scandinavian centre for clothes and fashion – TEKO in Herning, Denmark.

### **Beyond the best**

While at TEKO Malan á Lofti discovered the possibility for crafting designs from sheep skin. Each student had to cooperate with a company and design something appropriate to their concept



Photo: Lofti-Design

*Natural Nordic colours. Malan's designs are all about turning the products of the rugged island hills into modern fashion for the bustling big city life.*



Photo: Polfoto

and target group. Under the headline "Finding your roots" Malan worked with Faroese "Sirri" that produces woollen clothes. *"It was natural for me to extend the concept of roots beyond my personal background,"* explains Malan. *"Sirri is a 'green company' that aims at using everything from the sheep. So did the Vikings, and I also like the idea that there are no left overs."* Malan's first collection was inspired by fabric made up of rectangular pieces as used by the Vikings. But her work did not just recreate the past. The idea for the Lofti-jackets soon developed. The basic concept was a jacket from raw cut skins with the wool still on. Her teachers awarded Malan a clear cut "13" for her efforts. This grade is unique to the Danish educational system and is given only in extremely rare cases to indicate that the student has produced something "beyond the best".

What started as a school project continued and the Faroese sheep are still the basis of the Lofti jackets and coats. *"Every time I walk the hills back home in the islands it still strikes me how many colour variations there are in the Faroese flocks. Not two skins are exactly the same. I am absolutely spellbound when I stand by the pens in the spring and watch the sheep gathered for the shearing. When you see them all together the differences are really emphasised. Of course I didn't use artificial colours. There is no need to change anything. In fact it would be a pity to try to add anything to the play of colours created by nature. Working with natural colours is a challenge, but exciting, and makes each Lofti-design a unique creation. The designs are strong and uncompromising. They are my roots."*



*Malan á Lofti address their Royal highnesses crown princess Mary and crown prince Frederik in the Faroe Islands 23 June 2005.*

and we are both young girls that have moved to Denmark from two different "sheep countries". I took special care to select the colours for the skin used for the princess jacket." Malan also designed a woollen jacket for the crown prince and was very proud when chosen to present the jackets herself.

### **Old races, modern women**

9 June 2006 Malan á Lofti was invited to Nordatlantens Brygge in Copenhagen to present a broad spectre of designs based on the old Nordic sheep races. "In later years I have also worked with colours from the Swedish gute sheep which has more deer like faint colours. This creates more opportunities for me. I have also used Old Norwegian spælsau and skin from Iceland though they are not very different from the Faroe skins.

### **Royal presents**

During the summer 2005 crown princess Mary visited the Faroe Islands for the first time and was presented with a "people's present" which was chosen to be a Lofti skin jacket. In all its design the jacket was closely related to the Faroe Islands, yet still modern and unique. "Mary is protector for design,

*Norwegian designer Bine Melby and Malan á Lofti discusses ideas, experiences and challenges in using skins from old Nordic breeds.*



The newspaper Politiken aptly chose the headline "the sheep decide the colours" when describing the collection based exclusively on natural coloured skins. All jacket and coats were based on a number of basic cuts, but thanks to the colours each is a unique creation. *"Now it is all about making people realise that it is absolutely hopeless to walk around looking like the rest in completely identical pieces of clothing,"* comments Malan.

In October 2006 Nordic Council and Nordic Genbank invited Malan á Lofti to participate in their arrangement for the Copenhagen Culture Night under the headline "Diversity". Here she exhibited her work together with Norwegian designer Bine Melby who makes her designs from cow skins. The story and ideas behind the design were strongly emphasized through a picture show. Visitors got a vivid impression of how the colour variations in old Nordic domestic animal races can be turned into attrac-

tive designs for modern women. Malan states that *"so much would be lost if modern sheep-breeding result in sheep being only white"*.

### **In harmony with the environment**

When the EU Eco-label was celebrated after being in existence for 10 years, Malan á Lofti was one of ten designers who participated in an exhibition that live up to the condition set down by the label. *"My designs carry with them a message, an attitude,"* says Malan. *"I believe in using natural materials and using them fully – not only the best parts. We have long traditions for this in the Faroe Islands and use the meat, bones, blood, intestines, skin, wool, horns and so on. This is a very environmental friendly starting point. And for me, it feels good to work with products from animals that have had a good life. Faroe sheep roam free in the hills. They are not bred just for the skin's sake as is the case with many other skins used to produce fashion."*



Photo: Absalon Hansen

*My skins are a by-product of the Faroe sheep breeding, and if I had not used them they would have been burned. My jackets are an animal friendly alternative to most skin and fur coats”.*

Skins are only available when the sheep are slaughtered. It is necessary to take great care not to damage the skin during the slaughter. Then they are salted for 6 weeks. After that they are place 21 days in quarantine and when a vet has confirmed they do not carry any diseases, they can be sent to be tanned. So far Malan has used tanneries in Norway and Sweden. Only when skins leave the tannery are they ready to be used for Lofti-designs. All in all this is a lengthy and expensive process.



Photo: Lofti-Design

### **Italian Lofti-design**

Parallel with her line of skin jackets, Malan has develop a series of Italian inspired designs based on wool from Nordic sheep. Wool is more flexible than skin. Processing wool is less complicated than handling skins and it is a more common industry. Malan uses both woollen fabric and yarn. *“What I find exiting about these designs is combining the elegant Italian styles with the rugged Faroese impressions of my childhood and youth. The style is a little antique and baroque, and I love to contrast the raw natural material with laces, silk and brocades,”* explains Malan.

### **Future plans for Lofti-design**

Ideas and plans are not lacking in Malan’s design office, but at present realising her dreams present problems. Along with crafting her own clothes, Malan is working as a chief designer for a major Danish textile company. Initial capital to make it possible to concentrate fully on her design is needed. *“My designs are unique and marketing is extremely important. If a fashion-conscious customer in Geneva or Paris has cast her eyes on one of my designs she should leave the shop knowing for certain that what she has got is something unique, something personal from the North Atlantic, from the Faroe Islands. But so far marketing is too expensive for me.”*

*Malan Faroe Islands heritage is also evident in her Italian inspired Lofti-designs.*



Malan plans to continue both lines of collections in the future. The Italian designs will change a little with the current fashions and new collections will come out several times each year. *"At the same time I want to work with my skin collections. The skins are closer to my heart. Here is it a case of the sheep deciding the fashion. I hope to develop them as a series of select timeless creations with a new design added from time to time."* Malan's Italian clothes are in fact sewn in Italy, but her skin creations are so different that each and every piece goes through her hands although in the fu-

ture she will need to get some help to the sewing itself.

The logistics in Malan plans are quite mind-boggling. *"So far my father has done a great job of collecting and salting skins for me. But a proper production cannot be based on voluntary work. The sheep farmers should be paid for their skins and the work involved in collecting, salting and sending them,"* emphasises Malan. The tanning is expensive, and Malan has certain special demands to the process. Add to this that skins are quite heavy and consequently expensive to transport and that they need to be stored. *"Today you'll see piles of skins in most rooms in my flat and in the long run that'll have to change."*

*"I hope my production could sustain a tannery in the Faroe Islands. We used*

*A Lofti ram back in 1983, the future designer standing awe-struck in the background. When choosing his rams over the last 25 years, Malan's father has been very conscious of preserving the genetic variations in the family flock. Today the resulting diversity is an important element in the Lofti designs. This ram has the gene pair AaAg for colour.*

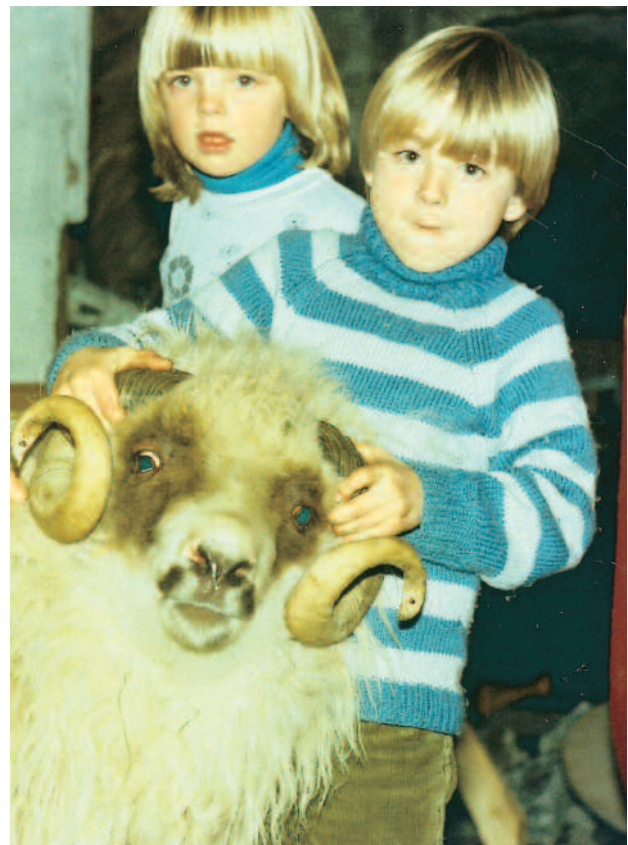


Photo: Lofti family



Photo: Lofti family

*Sheep in one of the Lofti family pens in the Faroe Islands. Skins from the coloured Nordic sheep need to have a commercial purpose if the sheep are to survive in the long run.*

*to have one, but the financial foundations were not there for it any longer. It would be wonderful if we could keep alive the craftsmanship involved in the tanning and create more jobs. If the skins could be finished and made ready to use in the Faroe Islands it would much better fit my ideas about environment and origins. And just think if the designs of skin and wool could generate more income for the sheep farmer and help keep alive our old Nordic sheep races!"*

Genetically the Faroe sheep belongs to the same groups as sheep from Shetland, Iceland, Greenland and the Norwegian West Country. Malan is looking for contacts to other designers working with the natural colours of the old Nordic sheep. "Why not," suggests Malan á Lofti, "let each country contribute its best and present to the world our

*'North Atlantic Island Designs'? It would be so much better – make so much more sense – than just burning the skins!"*

### **What must be done?**

Malan á Lofti has drawn up a list of things that need to be done to establish a production of her North Atlantic inspired designs:

- Travel to get more knowledge, inspiration and contacts.
- Make arrangements with sheep farmers to deliver salted skins.
- Study processes to establish what constitute the best shearing, tannin etc.
- Make arrangements with a tannery.
- Plan the logistics.
- Rent premises for storing and sewing.
- Hire production staff for sewing etc.
- Plan the marketing.

### **Cool cash**

The number of sheep and lam skin suitable for fashion design is 50 – 60,000 each year. The value of these after tannin but before further cutting and sewing is 12 to 15 million Danish kroner. If Lofti-designs at present is used to as yardstick the value of the skins as final jackets, coats etc. would be 30 – 40 million Danish kroner when leaving the factory, or 75 – 100 million if retail prices is used.



*Tindhólmur winter sky.*