



# The Making of Printed Socks

*Our mission to bring printed Merino wool socks to life.*

We believe that joy starts at your feet. Your feet, after all, determine how you'll spend your day. With 25 years of expertise in Merino knitted socks, we constantly strive to bring fresh ideas and new innovations. Now, we're taking a step outside the knitting needle to deliver fun printed patterns to the comfort and performance properties you love about Merino wool. Whether you're catching up with an old friend over beers or hiking in the woods with Fido, why not do it in printed socks with personality?

Traditionally, all of our Merino wool socks have been knit with pre-dyed yarns. We've been able to create a wide array of patterns with knit, but the technology can only go so far. Naturally, we wanted to go farther to create Merino socks with designs that are bolder and brighter. With printed wool socks, the sky is the limit. Print yields a wonderful aesthetic and offers complete freedom with colors and patterns that are just not possible with knit.

"Knit has always presented challenges in what we can execute from a design standpoint. And, for 25 years, we've become experts at maximizing the machine to create the designs that our consumers have come to love us for!

Now, with the addition of print, the world is our canvas where we can paint, draw and see our vision come to life without the restraint of knit pattern. While we're continuously innovating on knit patterns to see what we can design, there are things you just can't execute. Print delivers the best comfort possible while opening up a world of possibilities for artwork."

– Sue Jesch, Smartwool Director of Design

The idea of creating printed Merino wool socks has been floating around at Smartwool for more than a decade, but it wasn't until a couple years ago that the technology was available to print on socks in the U.S.A.

Socks made in the U.S.A. using the finest Merino from around the world are the heart and soul of Smartwool. As one of our core values, we are steadfast on this commitment.

"Remaining in the U.S. was really important to us," shares John Ramsey, Smartwool Director of Sock Development. "We didn't have the means to develop the technology ourselves, but we kept looking at print manufacturing companies to see if anything could be modified to print on a sock. We were always looking, always keeping our eyes open for a solution."

We partner with a family-owned mill in North Carolina known for its skilled craftsmanship. When we discovered the right machine to print on wool socks, we jumped on the opportunity and placed the order. The machine arrived at the factory with a twist, the instructions to operate it were in Chinese.

"Unfortunately, the technician who was set to arrive for installation and training could not make it to the United States. This presented its own set of challenges," shares John. "We basically had to translate the manual and put many hands on deck to figure out how to run the machine. But by going through these steps we have a much deeper knowledge on print, specifically on Merino."

As you might expect, there aren't many similarities between knitting and printing. We faced a massive learning curve with print, but dove right in. It was a brand-new world waiting to be explored.

"It's been tricky. We knew wool would be a challenge, it's a very labor intense process. We had to play and tweak our formula to get the vibrancy and crispness we wanted."

– John Ramsey, Smartwool Director of Sock Development

Those first iterations were full of trial and error. Socks were coming out looking like your science class tie-dye experiment. Colors were bleeding and fading quickly after washing. Our team was absolutely not willing to compromise on quality, so we kept pushing forward, trying new things to create a one-of-a-kind, superior product.

"When I went to the factory, they were still learning how to work the machine. At one point, 15 people were standing around the machine constantly changing settings and working together to figure it out. These mills have never printed before, since for generations they have been exclusively knit experts. So, it was like Christmas when that first sock came out great!"

– Laura Heins, Smartwool Textile and Knit Designer

Once all the variables were dialed in, the color and definition were spot on. The socks are printed on a circular mandrel, instead of a flat print. This means the print goes all the way around the sock producing a clean, seamless, 360-degree pattern. The artwork, all original designs, come from the minds of our Smartwool product design team in our Boulder, CO office.

Print has remarkable potential. During the testing phase, a team member took a selfie and printed it on a sock. It came out looking just like the real deal. Printed wool socks allow us to remain at the top of trends and respond to the changing needs and tastes of consumers. There is incredible versatility in what we can bring in the future.

"Like all product we create, we have an industry leading standard that we're not willing to compromise on, the foundation of which is comfort, fit and durability.

We've ensured with the execution of print, the design you see online or in the store is what you see on your foot—it's not stretched or distorted once you pull it on."

– Pete Kearns, Smartwool Socks Merchandise Director

"We think these are the highest quality printed socks on the market," shares Sue. "They are a great casual sock, but will also perform through all your everyday activities. I think these socks will surprise and delight our customers. They are used to seeing knit and outdoor patterns, and we'll continue to do that. But, we are also now able to bring amazing artwork to life in a different way."

Smartwool's printed socks are inspired by the places we play, and speak to the emotions of how we dress in the morning. How are you feeling today? Let your feet make a statement.



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