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Putting the Art in SmartWool

A partnership with the estate of iconic nature illustrator Charley Harper was years in the making, but VP Anne Wiper says it was worth it

BY Doug Gelbert

It all began with Dolly, a nearly four-foot high sheep with wisdom in her eyes that lets you know she knows more about you than you do. Anne Wiper, Vice-President and General Merchandising Manager of Colorado-based outdoor products manufacturer SmartWool, first met Molly, who is rendered in oil, gold-leaf, enamel and chalkboard paint, in a downtown Boulder gallery. It was seeing Dolly that convinced Wiper that art should be brought to products. And as a design director at SmartWool, Wiper was uniquely situated to make that happen.

"With product design we are always thinking about how we can differentiate ourselves and bring our brand to life. How can we do things that are truly unique to our brand?" explains Wiper. Soon Dolly was hanging in the SmartWool offices and the artist, Julie Maren, was working with Wiper's design team to bring art to the company's line of socks and apparel woven from the specially treated fine wool fibers of New Zealand merino sheep.

THE GALLERY COLLECTION SUCCEEDS AND EXPANDS

That was in 2008 and kickstarted the introduction of SmartWool's Gallery Collection. The program ran through 2013 and bred collaboration with ten local artists in the Boulder area. "We found that working with these artists raised the level internally with our product design team so much that it became hard to tell the difference between the SmartWool products and the gallery works," says Wiper. "It truly provided inspiration to our team."

With the early success of the Gallery Collection program SmartWool, started by ski instructors Peter and Patty Duke in Steamboat Springs, Colo. in 1994, began looking for other ways to infuse art into its line of outdoor performance products. SmartWool sought artists whose work melded with the manufacturer's outdoors-based ethos in emitting a joyfulness in colors and patterns.

CONNECTING WITH THE ART OF CHARLEY HARPER

In 2010, Wiper began communication with the estate of celebrated minimalist nature illustrator Charley Harper. Harper's whimsical modernist creations had been a staple of mid-20th century America



Julie Maren's Dolly painting hangs in the SmartWool offices

in book collections, magazines and posters for the National Park System. Harper had just passed away at the age of 84 in 2007 after a lifetime of influencing artists and designers.

"We found a magic fit between SmartWool and Charley Harper," says Wiper. "His artwork is a fantastic match with our brand. His entire focus is on nature. He takes a complex subject and brings it down to the most basic elements." SmartWool's challenge was then to showcase Harper's work in its products to best effect, to bring the art to life in the product and develop a collection to capture the artist's expression at the online and retail levels.

But the Harper estate, primarily his wife Edie McKee and his son Brett, were not ready to start working with commercial brands. "If a connection exists between a brand and an artist the business transaction is easy," recounts Wiper. "But a relationship needs to develop over time and become personal." It would take five years before SmartWool's

first Charley Harper collection was ready to market.

THE ROLL OUT

SmartWool's merchandising strategy was to release the Charley Harper collection to only selected retailers. "Our goal was to find retailers who would properly showcase the collection in the right way," explains Wiper. "We limited distribution to customers who could tell the story of Charley Harper's art and commit to a special presentation." SmartWool also limited its first Charley Harper line to its signature merino wool socks.

Bringing such works as "Furrier Feathers" and "Once There Was A Field" to active sportswear has captured the attention of consumers. After several stores reported selling out of the Charley Harper Collection after the January '15 buy-in, SmartWool has planned to introduce sweaters for the Fall 2015 collection and outdoor performance products for the Spring 2016 lines. Distribution will also be expanded for the Summer 2016 buying season for those retailers eager to join in the launch and bring the unique vision of this celebrated artist to their customers.

KEEPING CORE CUSTOMERS EXCITED

SmartWool hopes the Charley Harper collections will bring new customers to the brand but never looks past its core consumers. "We are always looking to surprise and delight our customers," laughs Wiper. "Not everyone has heard of Charley Harper. But once you find out who he is you start to see his work everywhere. And you start to think, 'Wow, this is a big deal.'" She continues by noting the universal appeal



To support the launch, a promotional glass is offered when two or more socks are bought

that Harper's work has had for all ages for more than fifty years.

As Anne Wiper tells it, bringing art to basic product design does not always make financial sense. But when the proper synergy exists the benefits spread across the organization, bringing energy and inspiration to the product design team and the sales force. "It is more than a design transaction," relates Wiper, who established SmartWool's design center in Boulder. "It brings out the magic."



The collection requires careful merchandising

• • • Smartwool Charley Harper Fall '15 Highlights • • •

Cool Cardinal Crew



Isle Royale National Park



Corn Snake Pulling Off Its Old Skin



Wrented

