

## Exhibitions

### Fabric of India Victoria & Albert Museum, London 3 October 2015 - 10 January 2016

The V&A brings us the first major exhibition celebrating the rich world of handmade textiles from India. And what a feast for the eyes it is! Set in a large gallery space, it features fragments dating back to 300 BCE all the way to contemporary fashion and textiles, with plenty included in between.

Divided into six main areas, there are around 200 objects, two-thirds of which are sourced from the V&A collections with other items loaned from around the world. To bring them together and provide a narrative about the history, creation and social implications of textiles in India is a huge task, but one which is carried off effortlessly.



Upon entering, you are assaulted with a riot of colour from the immense wall-hung floor covering, juxtaposed with two contemporary fashion pieces from designers Abraham and Thakore and Manish Arora (whose fabulous butterfly dress is amazing in its wonderful colour and detail). This sets you up perfectly for the journey you are about to embark on.

The first part of the exhibition deals with the raw materials of textiles, from descriptions of cotton and silk origins, the many different locally-sourced dyes (red from the Lac beetle and indigo blue), to the sumptuous embellishments and embroidery that characterise the fabric coming out of India. You see beautiful pieces, such as the muslin embroidered with wing cases of 'jewel beetles' (below) and the beautiful, intricate Bandhani tie-dyeing, where tiny pinches of cloth are tightly stitched to create a resist for dyeing and create incredibly detailed patterns. A video of Ari embroidery shows clothes embellished by stitching with a tiny tambour needle; another shows a wood block being carved. The videos from the whole exhibition have been posted by the V&A onto Vimeo and can be viewed here <https://vimeo.com/vamuseum>.



You move into rooms which represent different aspects of the culture and heritage of Indian Textiles. 'Sacred' explores how textiles have been used to promote the different religions of India through the depiction of religious stories or iconography. There is a 500 year Talismanic Shirt, onto which the entire text of the Qur'an has been inscribed. In 'Splendid' you see some of the sumptuous courtly clothing and wall hangings, and Tipu's Tent. The tent was used by Tipu Sultan as a moveable palace and has printed chinz panels. You are able to move freely underneath and admire it and the rest of the room



From this, you reach the section dealing with India's global trade and beyond. This focuses on more recent times; of trade, the struggle for independence and the present day, where new fashion designers are taking the traditional - sometimes turning it on its head - to move forward. The real 'meat' of the exhibition is in this section, as you learn about how India became master of the trade globally by understanding the requirements of their customers. This was threatened by the advent of the Industrial Revolution in Britain, which flooded the Indian market with machine-made cloth and led to the creation of the Swadeshi movement ('own country'), where the nation was urged to boycott foreign goods and support Indian industry. Mahatma Gandhi urged that textiles (Khadi cloth) be adopted as a symbol of resistance and mass spinning demonstrations were organised. This part of the exhibition is fascinating.

This moves us into the contemporary section and on display were high-end fashion pieces that were embroidered at the Les Ateliers 2M studio in Mumbai by designers that cross the line between art and fashion, subverting some traditional techniques to create edgier designs and approaches. A wedding ensemble, designed by Sabyasachi Mukherjee, is displayed and has to be seen to be believed - so heavily embroidered in a multitude of different techniques and fabrics. Rajesh Pratap Singh, one of India's best known contemporary fashion designers, created this jacket (right) based on the Ajrakh printing method but used digital printing and new technology. Textile Art and Fashion are also coming to the fore, with some fabulous pieces on display. 'She II' is a huge wall-hung quilt created by Swati Kalsi in collaboration with a group of Bihari women, silk stitched with red and metal-wrapped thread. The technique was traditional but it was applied by the group in a much freer and expressive way.



The final part of the exhibition looked at the traditional form of the sari with a modern aesthetic, from modern printing designs to stitched pleats and zips. Other incredibly beautiful and fashion forward saris are on display here as you can see below.



Fabric of India is a completely fabulous exhibition, which would require another visit to absorb everything that it has to offer. There are so many aspects of Indian textiles presented that it opens up so many more considerations of the subject. The layout and design by Gita Geschwendtner is marvellously contemporary and spaced, so that you can step back and look at pieces (crowds permitting) and marvel at the workmanship.

All photos © Victoria and Albert Museum London

## Liberty in Fashion 9 October 2015 – 28 February 2016 The Fashion and Textile Museum, London

Liberty in Fashion is currently on at the Fashion and Textile Museum, which explores fashion as a focus of the Liberty legacy throughout the Twentieth Century. The last major exhibition was at the V&A in 1975, so this is a fantastic opportunity to celebrate the prints and fashion produced by Liberty, right up to the present day. This image (right) used to promote the show is Art Nouveau Fashion using 'Constantia' 1961 © Liberty London.



The garments on show are mostly from a private collection, loaned by Cleo and Mark Butterfield, and feature Liberty-produced, professional designers' work and home-made garments. This combination of professional and amateur dressmaking sits well with the aim of Arthur Liberty, who strove to make beautiful goods accessible, whether through the purchase of clothing, the Liberty fabrics or even embroidery patterns, which were also sold at one time. Arranged in time periods or a theme, such as the 'A Dialogue with the East', 'Aesthetic Movement' or 'Smocking', you are able to view different garments alongside each other. It is striking how approaches to fashion changed but the prints and dedication to style have a timeless quality that allows them to bridge wildly different fashion approaches and interpretations by different designers. These photos below show fashion, mainly from the 1940s, with some beautifully tailored dresses.



You learn about the history of the company, from its early incarnation as a warehouse distributing imported Japanese goods. With the opening of the Costume Department in 1885, the in-house embroidery departments were set up, which laid the foundations for the stitched detailing that would follow (below left, Burnous from c.1910. Satin with embroidered collar; below right, a silk blouse with embroidered cuff detail from c.1920s).



Clothes on display from the 'Aesthetic Movement' show embroidery patterning on a range of striking garments. The rich, opulent cloaks and printed lamé dresses, post-World War I, give way to smocking and the legendary prints in more muted palettes, post-World War II. Following on, the 'Lotus Collection' (see photos below) from the late 1950s/early 1960s give way to a wild and colourful selection of clothes, inspired by the Art Nouveau designs, which were reworked and adopted by famous designers of the time, such as Mary Quant and Jean Muir.



There are some fabulous pieces on display here that mark the revival of fashion in the 1960s and 1970s. There are also contemporary fashions from Vivienne Westwood, Jimmy Choo and Philip Treacy. From the 1960s, there was a shift to the 'celebrity' designer which features so heavily in our lives today and it is interesting to see how these are on an equal footing with the Liberty brand, which is unusual for a fabric designer to command.

Part of the exhibition is 'The Art of Pattern' which documents the partnership of sisters, Susan Collier and Sarah Campbell, in the period 1961-77, designing fabrics for Liberty. They worked on textile print designs for 'Liberty of London Prints', both reworking designs from the Liberty archive from fragments of print and from their own designs. In this section, there are huge wall displays of fabric and painted swatches, scarves and Fired Earth ceramic tiles. The Bauhaus design was incredibly popular, created as a result of the exhibition on the Bauhaus Movement in 1968 at the Royal Academy, where they were asked to reflect the atmosphere of the time in print. 'The Art of Pattern' is an incredibly interesting section, given that the accompanying text to the displays are written by Sarah Campbell and reveal first-hand what it was like to be working and designing at that time. The stories told are personal memories and offer great insight into how the designs were created and inspired.



I loved this exhibition - it is not only a snapshot of fashion through the 20<sup>th</sup> century, as seen through the eyes of the Liberty company, but that of the artistic movements of the time, the influences on styles and print, the skill of embroiderers, interpretations by designers and their personal recollections. All these work together to create a rich exhibition that introduces a very detailed history of fashion at Liberty but shows how it moves beyond the bricks and mortar shop and pervades into our consciousness as a brand that today is still feted for its iconic prints.

## **Knitting and Stitching Show Alexandra Palace, London 7 - 11 October 2015**

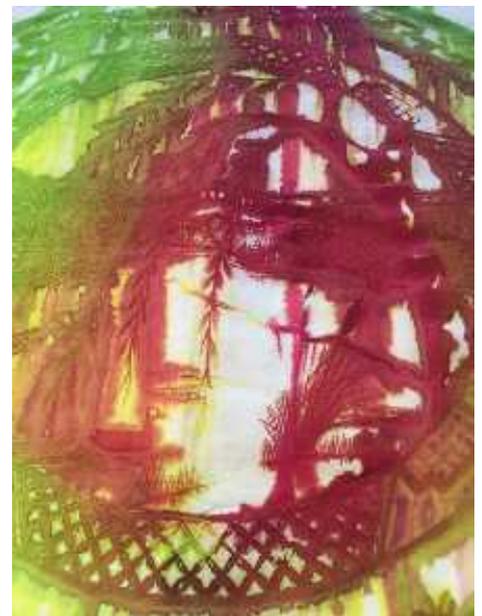
The Workshop on the Web team enjoyed a group outing to the Knitting and Stitching Show at Alexandra Palace, London. There seemed to be fewer exhibitions this year, although we still had a few favourites.

It was great to meet up again with Alysnn Midgelow-Marsden, who had curated an exhibition of New Zealand textile artists, Art Textiles from Aotearoa. This was a very interesting and thought-provoking display of work. Bringing together artists from a range of backgrounds, ages and interests, it created an eclectic exhibition that was rich in its diversity but fascinating to see some of the studies of nature, the environment, social issues and traditional textile techniques.

Particular works of interest came from Katherine Bertram, below, who created beautiful bird portraits and sculptures and machine-stitched suburban snapshots.

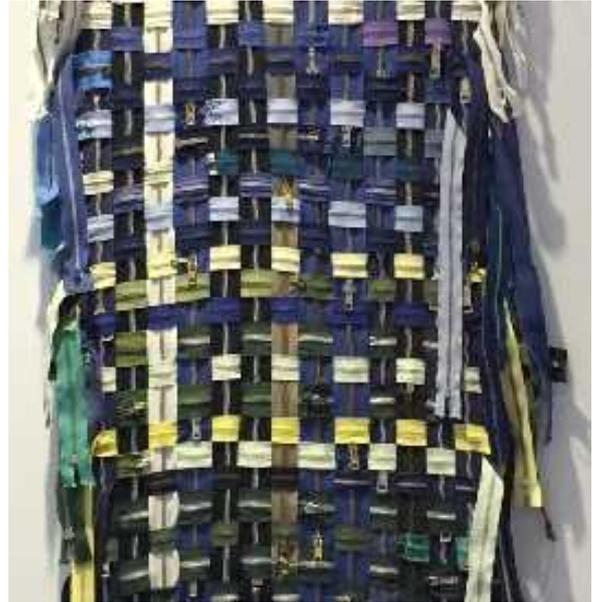


Clare Smith's work (recently seen in the UK at the 'Through our Hands' exhibitions) had created some beautiful pieces of work. Titled 'Watermark' about the environmental hazards of the textile industry and waste products from dyeing processes contaminating rivers, these works (below) were stitched and then dye poured from the top to seep through the stitching and cloth, making an environmental statement.



Joyce Stalker's piece 'Night Sounds on Pitcairn Island' made from zips was a striking piece, but on looking more closely, you realise that it has much deeper symbolism.

A darker message is contained in the piece; that the history of the Pitcairns is steeped in the systematic abuse of the islands' young girls and the acceptance by islanders and authority of this state of affairs.



'Kate's Plaice' was a very popular stand this year. Constructed to look like a Fishmongers Shop with 'staff' dressed as fishmongers, this stand had a wet fish counter with wall-mounted tins of sardines and other fish. These were all knitted, crocheted and sequined. You could buy the pieces on display and this stand was buzzing.



Colleen Plank's 'Get a Grip' series of wreaths, made up of joined hands, was a comment on our obsession with haste and hurrying our way through tasks, rather than savouring the moment. This ties in with the current trend of 'Slow' (with Alice Fox's recent book - reviewed in the September 2015 issue of WoW and Claire Wellesley-Smith's 'Slow Stitch', see Book Reviews) which has captured the imagination of many artists at the moment.



Another WoW favourite was Sue Dove and Jill Denton's exhibition – 'Our Artful Selves'. Both share the insatiable need to create art every day and this showcase of work reflected that. Using rag-rugging, stitch, painting, collage, felt and sketchbooks, this stand was full of colourful, fun and complex cloth constructions. It was one of the most vibrant stands at the show. You can see Sue Dove's article for WoW in September 2009's issue called 'Collage for Textiles'.



Shopping was a pleasure, as always, and our lovely traders, Art Van Go, Oliver Twists, 21<sup>st</sup> Century Yarns and Mulberry Silks, were all in attendance. Maggie cleared out the stock of Oliver Twists' silk carrier rods, bought some new InkAid products from Art Van Go for work on her new book and Sam added to her collection of Mulberry Silks threads.

Compared to the Festival of Quilts, many of the K&S exhibitions seemed very lack-lustre. This was the view expressed by most of the people that we asked when conducting a quick survey of the show.