

C H L O É C O L C H E S T E R

# THE NEW TEXTILES

TRENDS+  
TRADITIONS

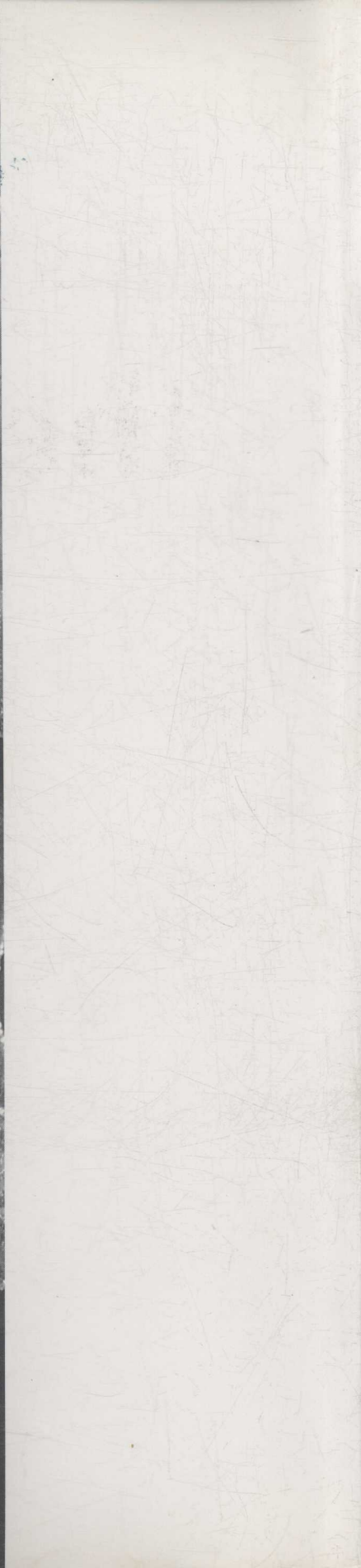
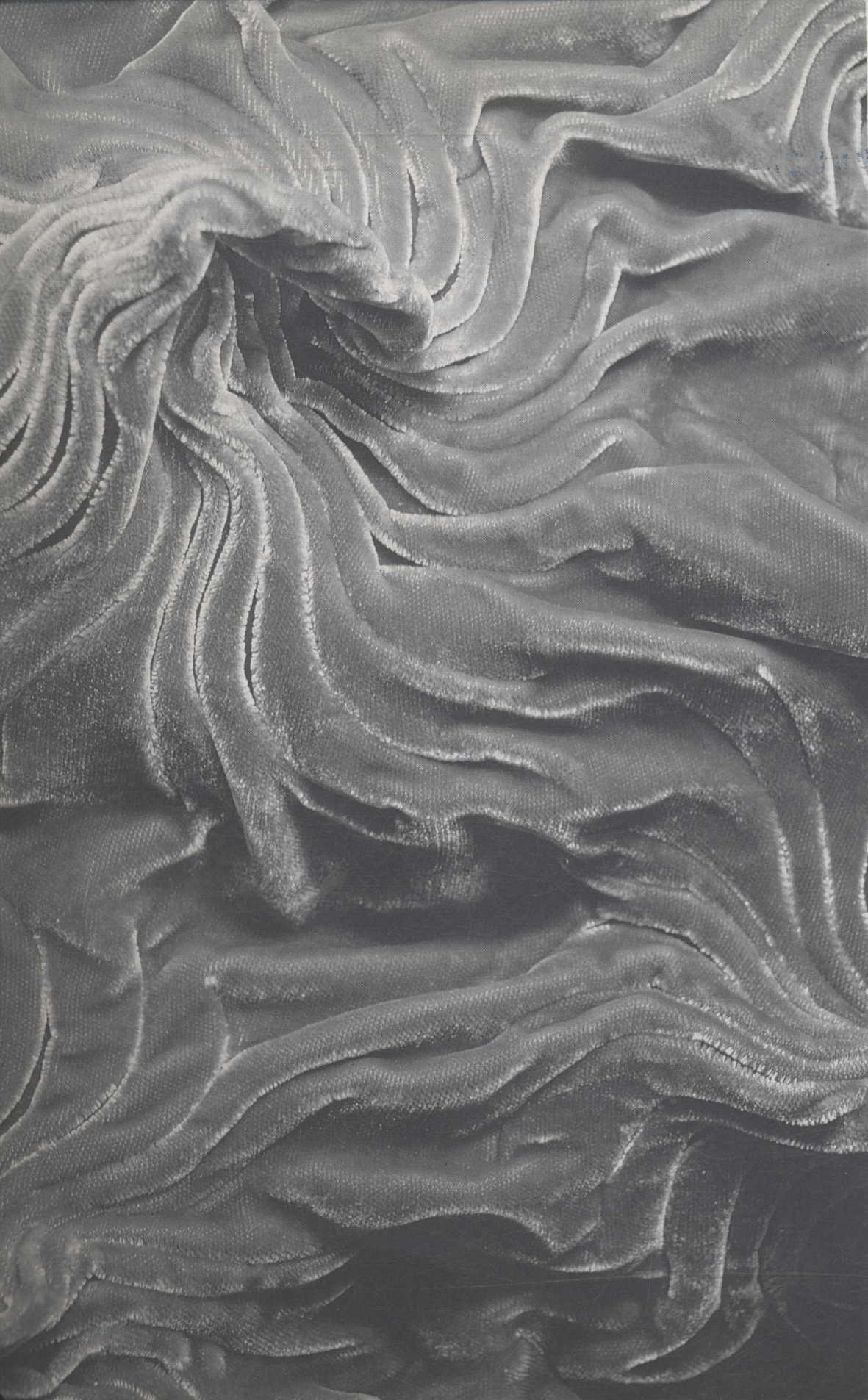


# the new textiles

*trends + traditions*

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Chloë Colchester

# the new textiles

*trends + traditions*

with over 250 illustrations, 153 in colour



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Frontispiece:

'Jellyfish', heat-moulded velvet. Nigel Atkinson, UK, 1990

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# INTRODUCTION

THE design and manufacture of textiles is one of our oldest industries. It <sup>cater for</sup> caters for the fundamental human need for clothing and for protection and fulfils a basic demand for decoration. But although textile making is an ancient activity it is not a conservative one. The very centrality of fabric in human culture has ensured that it is at the forefront of both technological and artistic development. Weaving was the first industry to be fully mechanized; it was the catalyst to the Industrial Revolution, and today the possibilities that have been created as a consequence of the advances in synthetics engineering, micro-electronics and dyes have yielded a new and hitherto undreamed of area of 'intelligent' fabrics. Yet, despite the technological and manufacturing changes in textile production, the industry remains diverse in production techniques and pluralistic in terms of the designs, styles and patterns that make up the contemporary designer's modern vocabulary.

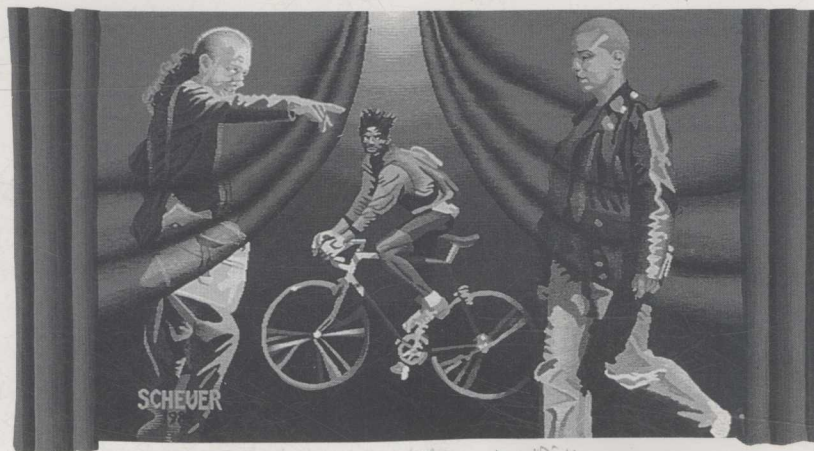
The importance of the textile industry has meant that fabric has been taken seriously by the male-dominated world of commerce as a major merchandizing commodity. But within this industry there is a core of aesthetic concerns which have failed to receive their due regard for the reason that textiles are still so strongly associated with the home, homemaking and women. Neither textile design nor textile art has enjoyed the interest or acclaim (let alone status) that products within a more masculine sphere, or, of course, fine art, have been accorded. Part of the reason for this disregard stems from the fact that although thousands of women are still employed in both textile manufacture and design, there are still very few women playing an active role in textile management. Textile design still has strong roots in the home, however, and textile art in part stems from post-war feminist art practice. Both are given some weight in this book.

In recent years textile design has grown in status. It is simultaneously both futuristic and traditional, reflecting the tensions of a number of different forces coming together in the market place, which have led, in turn, to a new generation of hybrid products. Textile design today is influenced on the one hand by major, broad-based industrial research projects into new fibre technologies for sportswear and industrial textiles, and also by the development of automation and flexible manufacturing systems; and on the other, by the luxury markets and their revival of elaborate, decorative and ancient craft techniques and traditional patterns.

Parallel to the strengthening of the art market, the 1980s also witnessed a boom in the collecting of craft textiles and fibre arts, and a vast increase in the number of specialized galleries in



'Veils'  
Gobelin tapestry  
Ruth Scheuer  
USA, 1989



Europe, Japan and America to supply it. Craft collecting thrived due to affluence at the top end of the market; but affluence itself, and the growing desire to display affluence, has had its effect upon the style of work produced. At one end of the scale, there has been a clear move towards work which displays virtuoso skills, rich materials embellished with expensive-looking surface patina. At the other, crafts have become more artlike, more diverse. This new market for craft and art textiles, which values the work of patient hands, has prompted a second renaissance of traditional flat tapestry work, and it is in this field, after years of surviving at low ebb, that narrative content has become important again. At the same time Japan, encouraged by its textile industry, which recognizes the value of the fibre arts as an image-bank and as a promotional tool, has become a new arena for the more abstract side of fibre art. It could be suggested that there is something atavistic about tapestry, a medium that has appealed to traders and merchants throughout history. Although tapestries are genuinely non-functional, their attraction lies in the fact that they speak of the great labour and time that was spent in their construction: this is part of their enduring allure.

It needs to be understood that since 1960 the textile industry in the West has developed in an unnatural economy. Protectionism has existed for the past thirty years in the textile trade and the last seventeen of those have been regulated by a system called the Multifibre Arrangement. This is a system of trade tariffs and export quotas of Byzantine complexity which in effect exists to protect the Western textile and clothing industries from market disruption, dumping or tactical undercutting from the low-wage developing countries. Put simply, this agreement has had the effect of blocking a significant number of imports from advanced developing countries, with the consequence that Western textiles and Western clothing are sold at an artificially high price. It is widely believed that without the support of this system the textile industry in the West would be unable to continue at its current level.

In the 1960s and 1970s textile manufacture was perhaps more affected than any other industry in the West by the idea of mass production that was so typified by the photographs of the endless chains of cars lined up on the Fiat production lines in the late 1950s. Industrialists, particularly in France, America and Britain, became a little mesmerized by the idea of mass production, imagining that engorging vast yardages of cloth at speed would provide a lasting solution to the problem of overseas competition. This was a mistake, and it was exacerbated by the first oil crisis



of the 1970s. The specialized skills and character of the smaller family-run businesses were lost, as they went under or were amalgamated into large, unwieldy, featureless conglomerates, and textile products became standardized and dull.

This process of amalgamation and consolidation was not an even one across all Western nations – it was especially prominent in Britain and the USA. In both countries, but in particular in Britain, the manufacturing and retail industries (regardless of what was made or sold) became dominated by a few very large companies. Indeed, it was the rapidly emerging mono-culture of the 1970s that spurred rebellion. The reason why the crafts revival, and later, the street-style movements, were so striking in Britain was that they were part of a general mood of resistance which combined with a search for smaller, more individual options, whether it be in textiles, food, clothing or design generally.

So, although the 1970s recession may have put a stop to much interesting and experimental design work, it did provide the space for a number of alternative movements in textiles to flourish which questioned the role and status of textiles in contemporary society. The 1970s are generally viewed as the hangover after the party of the 1960s. This view is of course a simplification of the facts. Nonetheless, for the first time since the Second World War there was a crisis of confidence in the values of the dominant culture – technology, science and mass production. This scepticism revealed itself in a number of ways, but of special interest here was the rise of arts and crafts textiles and the flourishing of fibre art in the 1970s.

Influenced by the increasingly fashionable science of anthropology, textiles were analysed as a revealing material facet of culture – terms such as ‘textile culture’ and ‘textile language’ came into being. Themes as various as the meaning of textiles in the home, the link between textiles and nature, textiles in folk and tribal art, and the meaning and etymology of motifs, became the subject not only of publications but of fibre art works as well. This period of introspection provided the groundwork for many contemporary fibre arts and crafts. It also led to a new trend of what ceramicist and critic Alison Britton so aptly described as ‘self-consciousness’ or ‘self-reflection’ in textiles, which prompted both designers and craftspeople to make textiles not only the substance but also the subject of their work. Together with the trend in conceptualizing textiles, the 1960s and 1970s also witnessed a widescale revival of interest in ancient textile-making techniques, from pre-Columbian textiles to South-East Asian resist-dyeing techniques. The development of a fibre art movement in America and Europe, and the strengthening of an arts and crafts movement in Britain and Scandinavia created therefore an idea-bank of images and techniques which a new generation of designers were able to exploit.

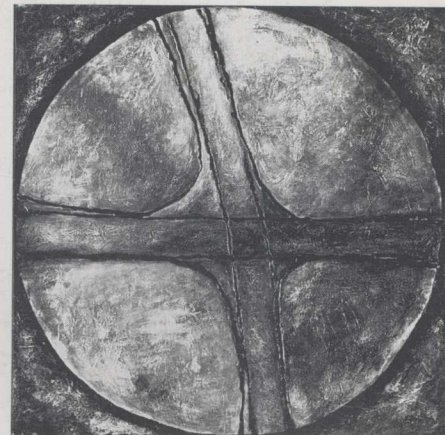
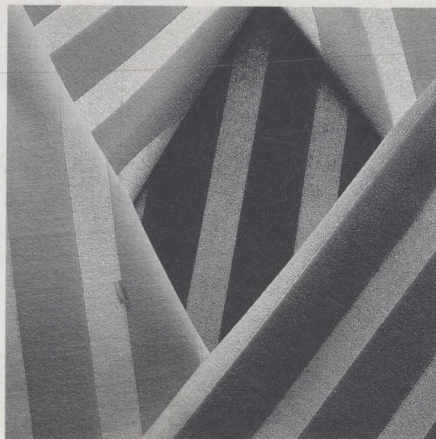
The early 1980s saw the rapid rise of a new ideology across the field of design under the general umbrella of post-modernism; the idea of pluralism, individuality and decoration was exploited in everything from product design and furnishings to architecture. In textiles, particularly in the young, experimental style-based design movements, the spirit of innovation, humour and rebellion led the textiles industry out of the static conservative spirit that it had sunk into during the 1970s. Then, in the late 1980s, it started adopting craft techniques.

As with any historical overview, it is easy to succumb to the simplest diagnosis of change in fashion or ideology as being merely the swing of the pendulum, each phase a reaction against its predecessor. Change in design in the 1980s was not simply a response to a ‘natural’ perennial



'Verone'  
Deposit printing on velvet  
Andrée Putman  
Edmond Petit, France, 1990

A non-woven fabric (detail, artist's impression). Two heterofil fibres are thermally bonded together. The nylon 6-6 core has a higher melting point, whilst the nylon 6 sheath melts to form a protective bond.



demand for new styles. The boom in information technology accelerated the flow of visual information around the world to such an extent that fashion itself became accelerated with it; also, more importantly, it democratized information. Suddenly it dawned on design theorists that people had their own news, that there was no longer any need for them to foretell what was to happen in the future. Hitherto, in both design and architecture, there had been an assumption among professionals that they knew best about what looked good and what was good. Yet, it was realized, after decades of designers and architects preaching that this or that style was 'correct' both aesthetically, and, often, morally, it was seen that both in clothing and dress people still selected what they liked and ignored the rest. Designers especially, and architects to an extent, stopped trying to work to an ideology but, like food manufacturers, started experimenting with new 'lines' to see what might be palatable. The boom in the availability of style choices coincided with a change of attitude by the industry; it was realized that specialization, not just automation, was the answer to overseas competition. And because there were few other sources to draw from, the industry began to recognize the potential of craft and the independent designer-makers as a means of sophisticating their products.

In the 1970s Japan and, to a lesser extent, Europe and America, sensing the danger of being undercut by rapidly developing countries – South Korea, for example – embarked on an extensive research programme to develop new, technology-rich products which would overcome the shortcomings of the first generation of synthetics, diversify markets and be difficult to imitate. Both manufactured and art or craft textiles have been affected by the new interest in fibre technologies. The presence of synthetics in engineering and even, in the case of vascular grafts and ligament repair, our bodies, is becoming increasingly important. Non-corrosive, lighter and stronger than metal, second and third generation synthetics, highly prized for their lightness and strength, are now used to build space, air and marine craft – they are woven into fabrics which can withstand bullets and extremes of heat and cold, they are used in earthworks, in bridges and in roofs, or they are extruded at high speed into non-woven fabrics for uses as diverse as car-battery linings and babies' disposable nappies. The hype surrounding the synthetics industries' performance fibres, which have the elasticity of human skin, absorbing or repelling heat as body temperature fluctuates, have made the natural fibre industry consider ways to bring out the qualities of its products. The industry has started to pour more design resources into yarn-spinning techniques



New fibre technologies and safety: this electronically triggered airbag, developed by Mercedes-Benz, inflates within thirty milliseconds in the event of a car crash.

to maximize, for example, the natural springiness of silk. This is an example of the way in which artificial materials are bringing about a change not only in the way that we see but also in the way we use and perceive natural materials. Yarn spinners are now considering ways in which they can maximize or better express natural fibres' 'performance' qualities.

Computerized weaving provides the space in which the full creative potential of these new inventions can be explored and tested – fast. Just as the arrival (1930) and mechanization (1950) of screen printing changed attitudes towards the established methods, so the advent of computer-automated jacquard looms has transformed woven fabrics. The results are fascinating because computerization, synthetic textiles and now a new generation of natural fibre production methods mean that the textile industry can make use of ideas developed by artists, designer-makers and craftspeople. Indeed the very fact of flexibility means that choice – diverse ranges of designs and fabrics – becomes a market necessity. The small, individual crafts-based artist or designer has therefore been given a new sense of purpose through the development of new technology.

*The New Textiles* focuses on the work of individuals, in craft, in art and at the fringes of mainstream design. This is a selective approach: much of textile design is and must be a collective, collaborative venture. Yet creatively, however, the work of individual designer-makers and artist-craftspeople does have an important role to play. They are free to take imaginative leaps and break the rules; they have fewer commercial or marketing constraints and they are prepared to take risks. But above all, their work is important because they create dazzling image-building objects that not only raise the status of textile design but also encourage interest in it as well. This book looks at the role that these independent textile makers have had in textile design, craft and art, and within fashion design, in the 1980s. It analyses the revival of the textile artisanal heritage in the French couture system, the development of a radical, alternative approach to textiles as an applied art in Britain and the fusion between high technology and craft which took place in Japan. It traces the role that craftspeople have had to play in the shift from simple printed fabrics which dominated textile production in the 1960s and 1970s to more complex, woven fabrics and prints in both fashion and furnishing fabrics. It also examines the manner in which a new decorative language of pattern has developed from independent art-based designers on the one hand, and the fusion of craft and technology on the other. The chapter on craft traces the development of



Applying art to cloth: Sylvie Skinazi prepares a transfer to be heat-printed on to fabric for Christian Lacroix at Patou in 1986.



the post-war contemporary craft movement in textiles, the flowering of 'alternative' movements in the 1960s and 1970s and the impact that these ideas had upon it, focusing on the way in which familiar domestic crafts, such as embroidery, quilting and later basketry, have been adapted and transformed by contemporary sensibilities. The discussion of textile art in the final chapter charts the development of the fibre art movement in America, alongside its equivalent on the European continent, and takes a look at the growing interest in tapestry.

Divisions between design, craft and art, even for practical purposes, may seem brutal and somewhat rash, given the volumes of debate that these particularly controversial boundaries have generated. Indeed, so much cross-referencing has taken place between artists, craftspeople and designers that it has been argued that the old categories of art, craft and design are splitting into hybrids of various sorts. This book certainly covers some of the complexities that exist: multimedia artists; artists who explore the metaphoric content of designed manufactured products; tapestry makers who skilfully reproduce artists' work; independent tapestry makers; applied artists and designer makers; that hybrid of art and design; the applied arts; and more recently, famous artists who are now adding a new 'design' dimension to art.

The debate continues, not so much for the ideological reasons which may have been its primary motivation in the 1970s, but more because there is still a lot of money at stake – especially in America. One of the central problems of the issue is a general lack of honesty as to what is actually being discussed. Decorative artists and craftspeople are now employing writers to 'talk up' their work into something more allusive and philosophical than it actually is. Look at it hard and it begins to seem that the debate about art, craft and design is about pretensions motivated by ambition, perhaps even greed, and the desire for personal glory. A more diplomatic approach, as Nancy Corwin suggested in her review of the 'Fiber R/evolution' exhibition at the American Craft Museum in 1986, is to adopt an 'inclusive aesthetic'. As she puts it, 'Contemporary fiber art ... is interesting and vital precisely because it exists between the old categories of craft and art as two things at once. It defines a new art form by merging old separate ones.' Overall, however, *The New Textiles* seeks to show a balance of design and craft, recognizing that whilst the avant-garde is always important in leading the way, there is also a need for good, sober contemporary work that satisfies the mass of consumer design. This book celebrates textiles as both an artistic and a service enterprise.



'Read Your Jacket', jacquard double cloth. François Girbaud for Marithé and François Girbaud. France, 1986



# TEXTILE DESIGN

## Textiles in Fashion

IN 1986, the French fashion designer François Girbaud, celebrated for his fifteen attempts at restyling a pair of blue jeans, used an Egyptian cotton jacket to summarize neatly the predicament faced by the fashion and textile designers at that time. Egyptian cotton had once been renowned for its softness, but with the advent of synthetics, this had been forgotten. In the jacquard pattern of the jacket, Girbaud wove a cartoon that bluntly indicated the value of the jacket to the consumer: 'Feel this jacket' is written in large letters on its sleeve, and various images showed cotton being harvested in Egypt, Egyptian hieroglyphs, people feeling the jacket on display and admiring it at home. The message behind Girbaud's cartoon, that the consumer had to some extent lost contact with the goods he bought, playfully reiterated the concerns expressed by William Morris a century before: that the industrialization of textile production has led to a decline in standards expressed in the lack of 'authenticity' of the product.

Girbaud's anxieties were shared by many. In 1987 Micheline Alland, the director for the exhibition mounted at La Villette in Paris entitled 'La Mode: Une Industrie de Pointe', expressed similar concerns. 'Today', she said, 'we impose a colour fabric and design standard on the consumer who no longer has any idea of what fabric is about. He buys a grey suit or a red dress, and that's it.' In France it was realized that the restructuring of the textile industry during the late 1970s had, by the mid-1980s, all but obliterated specialist production. The French textile industry had become a manufacturer of commodities and as such was made vulnerable by overseas imports. French conservationists in particular woke up to the fact that the 'big is beautiful' approach to industrial production was placing their cultural heritage in peril.

In 1988, the conservative Parisians' concern for the loss of their *patrimoine* prompted a vast exhibition called 'De Main de Maître', held at the Grand Palais, on the use of traditional craft skills to create luxury products. For the next three years the luxury market was extensively promoted as the bastion of France's artisanal heritage. Financial investment and a flurry of attention revived the flagging interest in the haute couture system, and for the first time the doors of its suppliers opened to the public. Thus exposed to new scrutiny, 'les petites mains' (as the hundreds of anonymous artisans behind the great names of the Parisian couturiers were habitually called) were suddenly heaped with awards for their years of devoted service.

The embroideries of the master *parurier* François Lesage, Director of Lesage S.A., were particularly admired and sought after by the thousand or so women in the world that could afford



'A Woman's Work Is Never Done'  
T-shirt (one-off)  
Machine-embroidered organza with  
metallic thread  
Carolyn Corben  
UK, 1990

them, since they represented the pinnacle of exclusivity – hand-embellished fabrics for hand-made clothes. Lesage remains the leading supplier of embellishment to the Parisian couturiers. Each season he provides them with a 'palette' of materials, patterns and embroidery styles which he hopes will anticipate the mood of their collections. After lengthy discussions with Lesage the couturiers present their sketches which Lesage and his team of embellishers must then translate. Lesage's skill resides in his capacity to provide innovation each season within a restricted and conservative idiom. He must embellish fabrics using constantly new and enticing combinations of materials: raffia, semi-precious stones and leather one season, cockerel feathers, beetle wings and Czechoslovakian jet the next. Such materials, taken from Lesage's stocks underneath his workshops, are, like the skills that went into assembling them, unique, and therefore all the more valuable. They are also what makes his work a 'heritage' craft, essentially disarticulated from industrial production. Lesage's atelier, filled with seamstresses apprenticed from the age of fourteen working at wooden work benches, was described in *Le Figaro* as a haven of pre-revolutionary France.

By 1987 Lesage's embroideries had come to be seen as the hallmark of exclusivity, a metaphor for the society of the Reagan era, desiring conspicuous consumption. Lesage knowingly manipulated this need in his creations for couturiers who reached out directly to the booming art market. Yves Saint Laurent dressed up his models as status symbols in sequined copies of Braques, Picassos, and Van Gogh's *Irises*, which had just been sold for a record price in London; earlier, in 1984, Karl Lagerfeld, working for Chanel, dressed his leading model Inès de la Fressange in a bodice that copied a Ming vase made of thousands of seed pearls. What confirmed Lesage's embroidery as an object of status was the amount of time, often hundreds of hours, lavished on each piece, time thrown into relief, as it were, by the accelerating pace of the world outside.



In the couturier Christian Lacroix's first independent collection in 1987, his fabric assistant Sylvie Skinazi provided an interesting, rapid alternative to this time-consuming method of creating art fabrics for fashion. Using a relatively new technique called heat-transfer printing developed by the Swiss chemical company Ciba Geigy, Skinazi was able to create large painterly prints. By sublimating pigment and solvent on to cloth, this technique gave an exceptionally high-fidelity print, recording the full gestural vitality of Skinazi's designs. Describing these painting-dresses in an interview, Lacroix took care to lay special emphasis on the most important point, the fact that each transfer could only work once. A relevant consideration, in view of the fact that his dresses cost as much as a luxury car.

The couture revival had a strong impact on textile design in general. For example, the British designer Carolyn Corben, working outside the conservative idiom of couture, embroidered a telling commentary on it. On the reverse of a shirt machine-embroidered with various different currencies she stitched the words 'Greed is Virtuous'.

### *Radical Prints: British Fashion Textiles in the 1980s*

CORBEN'S roughly made, satirical embroideries are characteristic of the subversive, art-based textile designs that emerged from Britain in the 1980s, as the country clambered its way out of the 1980–83 recession. The stagnation of the economy during the late 1970s that had had such a deadening effect on architecture, fashion and design also dealt a body blow to the ailing British textile industry. It had been the first textile industry in the world to undergo mechanization, but now it was collapsing from a lack of modern management, sufficient capital investment in new machinery and a poor understanding of the value of good design. Not all companies were so inept, but many of the stronger ones grouped together in ever larger conglomerates in an attempt to protect themselves from cheaper imports from developing countries. This resulted in an inevitable loss of individuality and character amongst the independent design companies.

One of the consequences of the textile industry's weakness was a failure of nerve. Instead of attempting to open new markets or revive moribund ones with good new design, it tamely allowed the retailers – often a conservative group – to dictate style. And what the retailers demanded were large orders of trivial, bland fabrics. In Britain, perhaps uniquely, the retail world in all categories of consumer products – including food, clothing and furnishing fabrics – is dominated by a few very large companies with shops and stores in every city and town in the land. This means that the retailers are very powerful and are able to dictate to manufacturers.

Yet against this background of uniformity and compliance in design, Britain witnessed the explosion of punk, which revolutionized music, fashion and design. It was successfully marketed by Malcolm McLaren (manager of the Sex Pistols) and Vivienne Westwood from their shop Seditionaries in the World's End, Chelsea. In the early 1980s, graduate fashion students from London art colleges became street-style celebrities overnight. These new designers had no money and no business experience. However much credibility they had in 'the street', they had none in the corporate board rooms. Unable to muster sufficiently large orders from the textile manufacturers, who were geared up to supply the retailers, they were forced to rely on their own

resources. So they turned to friends working in textiles for imaginative designs. For the surplus of textile students that issued from Britain's thirty-odd textile courses each year, the possibility of forging such partnerships provided a tempting alternative to producing standardized designs on paper for the conservative taste of the mass market. New 'studios' for independent fashion and textile designers were established in the crumbling warehouses and disused Victorian factories of East London.

Much of the strength of street-style fashion was derived from these collaborations between fashion and textile designers. Compared to the rest of the fashion design industry, which was separate from textile production in terms of both time and space, these young fashion designers enjoyed a unique relationship with their textile counterparts. The only approximate equivalent was the interaction between the Continental suppliers and the Parisian and Milanese couturiers, but even this was totally different in approach. The British fashion and textile designers matched independence for independence. Their designs were conceived together so that they went well together, manifesting similar intentions and, above all, equal irreverence towards the accepted canons of high fashion. The fashion designers' radical experiments in cut were matched by the textile designers' muscular prints.

Many of the patterns were crudely designed and roughly printed (the textiles were all produced by students), but these qualities complemented the prevalent fashion aesthetic which was intended, above all, to read dramatically at a distance, on the pop promo or the fashion pages of the style magazines. The more subtle designs exhibited a tendency towards self-parody that tapped into the nation's sense of humour and provided a good record of the 'no future' generation's first contact with the commercial world. Working with the young fashion partnership Body Map (who hit the headlines with their graduation show from Middlesex Polytechnic in 1983), their contemporary, Hilde Smith, made painstakingly – by hand – oversize two-tone simulations of computer graphics. Both Helen Lipman, working for the fashion company English Eccentrics, and the young print-design partnership Hodge and Sellers, made mock of the nascent craze for designer clothing with print designs made from famous people's signatures and the reverse side of couturiers' labels – a wry parody of the growing trend of sporting a designer's or couturier's label as a means of accruing status.

Encouraged by the success of their peers, subsequent generations of students followed suit. The confusion of contradictory styles and looks that resulted from this influx of independent talent in textile design was artfully marketed by the menswear designer Paul Smith, who made a medley of strong patterns into a fashionable look. As the decade wore on, the increasing numbers of designers who had set up on their own, not only in textiles and fashion but also in graphics, furniture and interiors, began to shift towards a more craft-based approach. Despite the fact, however, that these designers made most of their work themselves and that much of it was conceived as a 'one-off', never intended for mass production, most vehemently rejected the label 'craftspeople'. 'Craft' in their eyes was a word that carried a stigma, fatally associated with the 'cloying' concerns of the early 1970s back-to-naturalists. The designer-makers' ideas were quite different, inspired by urban style culture. They were less-than-concerned with the display of virtuoso techniques, as their designs were conceived to be used rather than displayed in a gallery. In search of an alternative aesthetic to the pristine cleanliness of high-tech design, experiments