



NOTTING HILL & HOLLAND PARK

OCTOBER 2016 • £3

MAGAZINE

THE DESIGN ISSUE

ELLE MACPHERSON ON HER NEW LINGERIE LINE,
ANTI-STYLE ARCHITECT ERIC CARLSON,
& LEATHER SPECIALIST STUDIOART'S TENTH ANNIVERSARY

A Stitch IN TIME

As the Victoria and Albert Museum celebrates the art of embroidery with an exhibition dedicated to medieval needlework, *SOPHIE HALSE* discovers the contemporary textile artisans sticking with time-honoured traditions



When HRH The Duchess of Cambridge spent the eve of her wedding day in The Goring hotel's Royal Suite, she was no doubt fully aware of the historic journey on which she would be embarking the next day. With her mind preoccupied, it may have slipped her notice that the room in which she was staying harboured its very own slice of British history,

too. Designed by Russell Sage to mark the hotel's centenary, the suite's master bedroom is swathed in a facsimile of the silk that decorated the First Class Dining Room of the RMS Titanic, while the bathroom features a fabric identical to that which is in the throne room of Buckingham Palace. Both the replicas and originals were created by Gainsborough, a silk weaving company that Sage has been the creative director of since 2013.

Founded in 1903 by Reginald Warner, Gainsborough's Sudbury-based textile mill is still churning out weaves on 80-year-old looms today, and has done so for the likes of Paul Smith, Tom Dixon, The National Gallery, The White House, 10 Downing Street, as well as the sets of *Downton Abbey* and *Pirates of the Caribbean*, to name but a few. Along with 1920s machinery, original pattern cards and a process that harks back to the early 1900s, the mill is home to an extensive archive of more than 7,000 fabrics.

"It's like stepping back in time," Karen Beauchamp, former design director of Cole & Son and Gainsborough's latest collaborator, tells me. "I spent a week there going through the archives and it was amazing. I still think that there are things that I haven't seen so every time I go back I spend some more time in the archives and pull more things out."

Beauchamp's collection for the brand comprises a line of weaves modelled on archive designs that have been reworked for the 21st century, from dark coloured damasks to gingham checks and candy stripes in dusty pastel hues. The designer's brief was simply to search through the company's history and redesign the weaves that she picked for a contemporary audience, ensuring that they could work for an urban-based space or a country dwelling. "There is a wealth of weaves and they all have different textures and yarns; it's just fantastic what you can actually glean from each design."

And she's not the only one who's been rediscovering the textiles of yesteryear. This October, the V&A looks back at medieval embroidery in the largest exhibition of its kind for half a century, featuring works that are returning to England for the first time since their creation. *Opus Anglicanum: Masterpieces of English Medieval Embroidery* highlights the use of intricate

needlework that was popular in England between the 12th and 15th centuries. One hundred handmade objects that are linked to luminaries from the Middle Ages, including King Edward I and Queen Eleanor of Castile, will be on display alongside panel paintings, manuscripts, metalwork and sculptures that shed light on the tools and methods used to create each piece.

Clare Browne, co-curator of the exhibition and textiles specialist at the museum, was heavily involved in sourcing the artefacts, having travelled all over to New York, Madrid, Stockholm, Rome and Reykjavik. "English embroidery from the medieval period is generally thought to be some of the most beautiful and skilled ever carried out," Browne enthuses. "Although the objects may not be as beautiful to look at now because inevitably, after 700 years, textiles do tend to deteriorate slightly, we still think that these objects are some of the most beautiful our visitors will have seen and they'll be amazed at how much artistry and skill there is in them."

While the level of expertise that medieval embroidery requires is rarely seen in the present day – and the few that can do it are specialist practitioners – hand embroidery is certainly making a comeback in fashion, with the likes of Valentino, Erdem and Gucci championing intricate needlework. "Because embroidery is so painstakingly slow, it's really only at the very top end of the market that high quality embroidery is being carried out," Browne explains. "The particular techniques that were used in medieval times rather fell out of use among professionals because they are so difficult and intricate."

While that particular style of embroidery is lesser known in contemporary circles, interest in needlework, cross-stitch and knitting is still going strong in the 21st century, a trend that is no doubt helped by the likes of aficionado Kaffe Fassett. "Those high tech girls and guys have got to have some therapy and there's nothing like sitting down and stitching some needlepoint," Fassett jokes when I ask if his craft has a place in a digital world. "The more machines take over our lives, the better connected people will be to their resources, so people will be able to find wonderful teachers and materials."

Known for his colourful prints, which often feature floral designs, Fassett found a love for the bold and the bright through his mother, who "had a tremendous sense of colour and style". After stumbling upon patchwork through a friend and learning to knit in just 25 minutes on a train, the designer has since been spreading his knowledge to the masses through his workshops and books. His latest release, *Kaffe Fassett's Bold Blooms*, focuses on his love of florals. "When I got to England I was bowled over by the English approach to gardens," ►



Image courtesy of: Gainsborough Photography: Ann Callender



► Fassett enthuses. "I just love the energy that goes into reviving old styles. Colour is the magic of this world and you don't get it more pure than the petal of a flower, so my work is filled with flowers and leaves."

The natural world has long been used in craftsmanship, whether it be as inspiration or as a source for materials. Interior design brand Studioart works with nature in a rather different way to Fassett, calling on the hides of animals to create its luxurious leather pieces. "It's amazing to see what you can obtain by treating and processing leather that otherwise would be food waste," Studioart's founder, Nadia Dalle Mese, explains. "It is sort of recycling and the result is incredible. It ages and gets better with use so it is never the same twice."

While Studioart won't be winning any brownie points with vegans, those keen to add a touch of leather to their homes should take heed of the brand's tannery in Italy, where the Dalle Mese family has been crafting the material since the early 1960s. "After World War II, the Chiampo Valley in Veneto became renowned for leather treatments, processes and craftsmanship," the designer explains. "My father started working in one of the first tanneries in the valley and soon gained the necessary knowledge for treating and processing to start his own business."

Dalle Mese began Studioart 10 years ago, a by-product of her family's long history in leather craftsmanship that combines her love of fashion and interior design. Since its birth, the brand has collaborated with Porta Romana, Rubelli, Donghia and Giorgetti and contributed to hotels such as Brown's in London and the JW Marriott Resort in Venice. "Leather used to be considered a classic material mainly used for upholstery and boiseries," Dalle Mese tells me. "Thanks to improved

knowledge and manufacturing processes, leather is no longer considered old-fashioned, but an original decorative and modern aspect for interior design."

Now in its 10th year, Studioart will launch an anniversary collection of new products, as well as collaborative lines with young emerging designers, who will put their own stamp on the brand's signature product, Leatherwall. Coming from a family of craftsmen, Dalle Mese is well-versed in luxury artisanship, all the more so having been born and bred in Italy, where creativity is cherished. "From an historic point of view, Italy did not have a uniform growth of industries," the designer tells me. "Each region specialised in certain crafts according to the weather conditions and what local industries demanded. I think that certain beautiful results couldn't be obtained without craftsmen."

Back in the UK, a similar appreciation for such artistry continues to thrive, meaning that there will always be a place for the silk weavers, embroiderers, knitters and other artisans of the nation. "In the British Isles I think that there's a great respect for the old crafts and trades," Beauchamp concludes. "So many jobs are desk-bound these days, people actually want to create and do something with their hands. To buy a piece that's handmade is to buy something that's unique, and I think that's very important." ■

Karen Beauchamp for Gainsborough, from a selection, gainsborough.co.uk; Opus Anglicanum: Masterpieces of English Medieval Embroidery, £12, 1 October – 5 February 2017, Victoria and Albert Museum, vam.ac.uk/opus; Kaffe Fassett's Bold Blooms by Kaffe Fassett and Liza Prior Lucy, £21.99, abramsbooks.com; Studioart is available at Donghia/Rubelli, Design Centre East, Chelsea Harbour, SW10, rubelli.com

Clockwise from top left: Studioart Leatherwall, photography: Paolo Veciani; Image courtesy of: Silk weaving machine, Gainsborough; Photography: Alun Callender; Images courtesy of: Kaffe Fassett's Bold Blooms, photography: ©Debbie Patterson