

The Nature of Textiles

**Exploring the relationship between
textiles and the natural world.**

Andy Ross – collector

I have been collecting textiles since the age of five, first in my home country of Zimbabwe where a thriving cotton industry once supplied international markets with high quality cloths, then in London, and Shetland where I owned a weaving studio and company. Now based in Greymouth, I continue to collect.

I like the stories that textiles tell. From clothes that help inform us about different ways of living, to the things that people keep because they are part of a personal history, cloth and clothing have helped me to understand the world. It is a different sort of understanding and I hope you enjoy this show of some of the things that I treasure.

The Nature of Textiles

The natural world contributes vastly to our lives and this exhibition showcases some of the amazing ways in which it supports our existence.

From natural materials to depictions of nature, the cloths, costumes and textiles on display are the result of millennia of human experience and experimentation.

In this section... left to right

- 1. Velvet curtains**, printed with Foraminifera, Heather Barnett.

Designed as part of “Small Worlds” at the Museum of the History of Science in Oxford, England, UK. 2008.

- 2. (Art work) Nature’s Wheel**, linocut print on paper, Bohuslav Barlow, England, UK. Undated.

- 3. Boboli I**, wool and lurex tapestry, Archie Brennan for Edinburgh Weavers, 1963. The piece is an aerial map of the famous gardens in Florence, Italy.

Maelstrom - a woven whirlpool

Shetland wool and silk-covered copper wire, Lucy MacMullen at ASF Weave in England, UK, 2007.

Based on the Fibonacci sequence describing natural spirals such as shells, sunflowers, ram's horns, etc, this mathematical progression adds one number to the previous in order to find the next. i.e. 0,1,1,2,3,5,8,13...

The complex piece is woven in four layers using the Fibonacci series and each layer crosses through the next to form a join, in a technique called "double cloth" or "double weave". To see this, choose one colour from the piece and see how it interweaves backwards and forwards through the layers. The join is what makes the structure stand; there is no sewing involved at all.

Status and Identity

Nature is often perceived as powerful.

Natural materials, by and large, have traditionally been expensive ways to produce cloth and this adds to their importance. Depictions of nature allude to this while also adding other elements such as “power” or “wholesomeness”. Nowadays, with artificial fibres becoming problematic in our oceans, seas and waterways as well as in landfills, natural materials are desirable once again.

In this section... left to right

1. (Centre) **Indigo-dyed robe**, with embroidery. Strip woven and pieced together, unknown maker. Nigeria, mid 20th Century.
2. **Ikat with monkeys and lizards(?) motifs**, Unknown maker (marked on the selvedge “Indai Boy”, Borneo. Late 20th Century.
3. **Tivaevae**, cotton reverse applique, unknown maker, Rarotonga, Cook Islands Kūki ‘Āirani. 21st Century.
4. **Shetland Tweed**, Shetland wool, Andy Ross, Shetland Isles, Scotland, UK. 2017 onwards.
5. In the cabinet.
 1. **Clay spindle whorl for spinning**, European. Between 2000 and 3000 years old.
 2. **Pre-Columbian woven fragment**, wool, unknown maker, Peru. Unknown date but before 1492.
 3. **Silver thread cloth**, silk and silver thread, unknown maker, France? Late 19th Century.
 4. **Silver thread**, beaten silver, unknown manufacturer. Italy. Mid 20th Century.

Embellishment and Decoration

Nature has long been a source of inspiration for textile makers.

Early woven cloths made from plant fibres depict patterns that have been interpreted as showing water, flora or fauna. Nowadays fabrics are woven or printed with natural motifs to communicate meaning or to show a connection to the outside world in our buildings.

In this section... left to right

1. Waterfall, jacquard woven hanging, cotton, Kathy Schicker, England, UK

2. Muster in the High Country, South Island, cross-stitch , unknown maker, purchased August 2023

3. Ewe and I (and at last the t-shirt), embossing and drawing on a cotton t-shirt, by Barry Cleavin, Aotearoa New Zealand, 1980s.

4. Coral Track, Arthur's Pass, Vivienne Mountfort, Aotearoa New Zealand, 1975

5. Mount Egmont NZ, wool carpet by Feltex Carpets, designed by Brendan Hartwell, 1958?

6. (Floor) Natural History Museum runner, from the halls of the museum, London. 1980s

In this section... left to right

7.Aloes and Kudu, two woolwork hangings. Purchased Cape Province, South Africa. 1970s?

8.Endless Sea, single thread cotton embroidery on cotton, Marjorie A Lucas, 1981.

9.Hyacinths, hand-printed linen, unknown UK(?) maker, mid-20th Century.

10.Man's bekasab robe, cotton, Uzbekistan. Mid 20th Century.

11.Coptic textile, wool and cotton/ linen (?), Morocco, between 1800 and 2000 years old.

12.In the cabinet

1.Gannet Skulls, brooch knitted in silver wire, Helen Robertson. Free-machine embroidery and applique , Shona Skinner. Shetland Islands, Scotland, UK, 2010 onwards

2.Four insects make a collection, cotton embroidery, 3-D extruded plastic, upholstery fabric, papier-mâché, various makers, 2010 onwards.

Ceremony and Celebration

People often make use of the natural world to emphasise the power of an occasion or the importance of a place.

Natural materials or images of plants, animals and birds can add to a sense of drama, highlighting the importance of an event or place by association.

In this section... left to right

1. **Advertising banner for a bull fight**, silk and pigments, Spain, 1963
2. **Boy's circumcision jacket**, cotton, silk, items of value, buttons, unknown maker, Turkmenistan. Mid 20th Century.
3. **Uchikake (bride's wedding coat)**, silk, gold thread, gold braid, red and black thread embroidery, paints and pigments, unknown maker, Japan. Mid to late 20th Century.
4. (Centre) **Part of a larger Samoan Siapo (Tapa)**, (left) **cotton printed with siapo motifs**, Samoa, and (right) **Tanzanian barkcloth**, Unknown makers, unknown dates but after the 1970s.

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