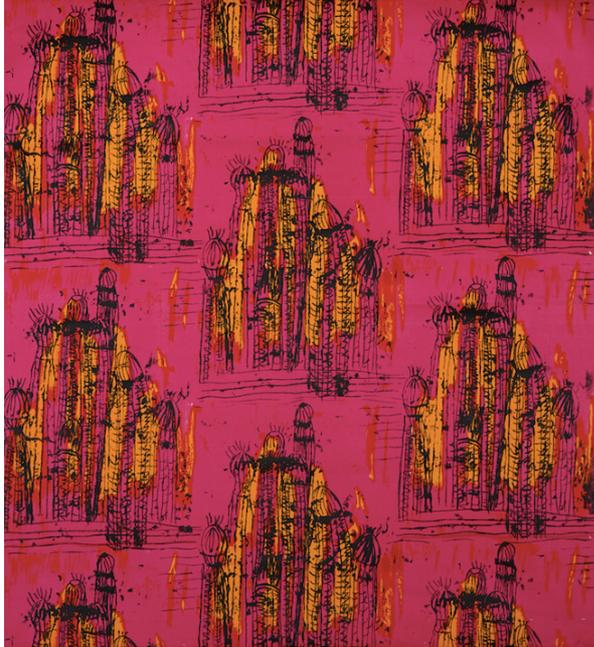


PRESS RELEASE

Althea McNish: Colour is Mine
William Morris Gallery
Saturday 2 April – Sunday 26 June 2022
Admission Free



The William Morris Gallery is pleased to announce *Althea McNish: Colour is Mine*, the first major retrospective of Althea McNish (1924 – 2020). McNish was one of the UK's most influential and innovative textile designers and the first designer of Caribbean descent to achieve international recognition. Drawing on extensive new research, the exhibition will explore McNish's extraordinary career and her transformative impact on mid-century design, along with her enduring influence today. Highlights will include items from McNish's recently uncovered personal archive – much of which has never been seen before. Also on display will be examples of McNish's original designs alongside her most celebrated textile and wallpapers.

Born in Port of Spain, Trinidad, Althea McNish moved to the UK with her family in 1950. Initially intending to study Architecture, she decided instead to enrol in a graphics course at London School of Printing and Graphic Arts (now the London College of Communication). She later went on to gain a scholarship for a postgraduate degree in textiles at the Royal College of Art. On display will be personal photographs from her student days in London, her scrapbooks and her RCA dissertation, on loan from N15 ARCHIVE: The Althea McNish Collection. McNish had been active in the arts scene in Trinidad from an early age and her work was exhibited with the Trinidad Art Society between 1948 –1953. She would later become a member of the Caribbean Arts Movement (CAM) in London along with other notable artists, such as the writer John La Rose, sculptor Ronald Moody and painter Aubrey Williams.

Two days after graduating in 1957, McNish's father arranged for her to have an interview with Arthur-Stuart Liberty, the Chairman of Liberty of London who bought her graduate collection on the spot. From that day McNish's career as a commercial designer was set and she would go on to design bestselling furnishing and fashion fabrics for iconic firms including Liberty, Dior, Conran, Cavendish Textiles, Heal's and Hull Traders – examples of which will all be on display, including items from Liberty's archive. McNish created her most famous pattern, *Golden Harvest*, in 1959 for Hull Traders after seeing a wheat field for the first time while visiting her RCA tutor Edward Bawden in Essex. The field reminded her of the sugarcane plantations of her childhood in Trinidad and she was inspired to capture it using what she described as the 'tropical eye' through which she created all her work. *Golden Harvest* went on to become Hull Traders' best-selling design and stayed in production until the 1970s. Examples in two colourways will be on display alongside McNish's best known designs created for Heals: *Trinidad* (1961) and *Tobago* (1960) and designs created for Liberty including *Marina* (1957), McNish's first for the brand, *Osiris* (1962) and *Hula Hula* (1963). Also on show will be floral designs such as *Tropic* and *Roses*, created in 1959 for Ascher Ltd., known for its experimental approach to fashion fabric production and for commissioning prominent artists of the day including Lucien Freud, Celia Birtwell and Henry Moore.

While taking night classes in the mid 1950s at the Central School of Art and Design McNish was taught by Eduardo Paolozzi who recognised her skill as a draughtsperson and printmaker and encouraged her to switch to the textile design programme at the Royal College of Art. Her background as a painter and printmaker became integral to her success as a textile designer and McNish continued to exhibit her paintings throughout her career. She described herself as an artist, ignoring the perceived boundaries between fine art and manufactured textiles. McNish's painterly textile designs took natural botanical forms to the edge of abstraction, with a riotous colour palette that overturned the staid rules of British post war design. Her technical mastery of the production process and direct involvement gave her the freedom to create ever more technically complex prints, further setting her apart from her contemporaries. 'Whenever printers told me it couldn't be done, I would show them how to do it' she said. 'Before long, the impossible became possible.' On display will be examples of McNish's screen-print designs including those created in the 1960s for Lightbown Aspinall's *Palladio* range, a series of lavish artist-designed wallpapers aimed at architects working on large-scale interiors. The range helped launch the careers of many young designers including McNish and Terence Conran.

Throughout her career McNish continued to experiment with pioneering techniques and new materials. On display will be a prototype for a mural she created for the restaurant of the SS Oriana P&O cruise ship, showing an innovative technique McNish devised for printing her designs directly onto panels of Wareite plastic. McNish later used the prototype as her wardrobe door for many years. Further high-profile commissions included the interior of British Rail's high speed train. In 1966 McNish designed a 'Bachelor Girl's Room' for the influential Ideal Home Show, creating a studio-like space for a creative woman much like herself that reflected the newfound freedom afforded to women during the period. In 1963 she was highlighted as a new face of British Design by British Vogue. Also included in the exhibition will be photographs showing McNish's award winning 'Fiesta' display for the 1969 Ideal Home Show, featuring a costume from that year's Trinidad carnival. McNish was also closely involved in London's Notting Hill Carnival, serving as a patron on the organising committee in 1958 and on the selection panel during the 1980s.

During her lifetime McNish's work was featured in landmark exhibitions including *Paintings by Trinidad and Tobago Artists* at the Commonwealth Institute in London in 1961, *The Way we Live Now* at the V&A in 1978 and more recently *Get Up, Stand Up Now: Generations of Black Creative Pioneers* at Somerset House 2019. Her work is also included in the major survey of Caribbean-British art 'Life Between Islands: Caribbean-British Art 1950s – Now', currently on show at Tate Britain until 3 April 2022.

The exhibition is being curated by Rowan Bain, Principal Curator at the William Morris Gallery and Rose Sinclair, Lecturer in Design Education at Goldsmiths, University of London. *Althea McNish: Colour Is Mine* is part of a three-year research, exhibition and archiving project generously supported by the Society of Antiquaries through its Janet Arnold Award.

Althea McNish: Colour is Mine is sponsored by Liberty Fabrics, which will also be reissuing a capsule collection of Althea McNish's original fabric designs in Spring 2022 to coincide with the exhibition. The collection will be available to purchase at Liberty in store and online.

The exhibition will also be part of the BBC's Art That Made Us Festival, a partnership between museums, libraries, archives and galleries coinciding with the broadcast of a major new series exploring Britain's creative history. The Festival will run from 1 – 30 April 2022.

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Notes to Editors

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The exhibition will be on view from Saturday 2 April – Sunday 26 June 2022. Gallery opening hours are Tuesday to Sunday, 10am – 5pm; Admission free (suggested £5 donation).

Image credit: *Painted Desert*, designed by Althea McNish for Hull Traders (1961). Screen printed on cotton. Image © the Whitworth, The University of Manchester

About the William Morris Gallery

Owned and run by Waltham Forest Council, the William Morris Gallery is the only public Gallery devoted to William Morris: designer, craftsman and radical socialist. Housed in the Grade II* listed building that was Morris's family home from 1848 to 1856, it displays the world's largest collection of his work. In recent years the Gallery has developed an ambitious programme of contemporary and historical exhibitions by artists including Kehinde Wiley, Jeremy Deller, Yinka Shonibare CBE, Frank Brangwyn and May Morris. Other special exhibitions have explored 20th-century political posters and African textiles. The Gallery was awarded the Art Fund Prize for Museum of the Year in 2013 and was nominated for the European Museum of the Year Award in 2014.

William Morris Gallery
Forest Road
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www.wmgallery.org.uk

About Liberty Fabrics

Liberty Fabrics has been at the cutting-edge of design and decorative arts since 1875 and now forms an international wholesale business, working with retailers, brands and designers across womenswear, menswear, childrenswear and homewares. Designed by an in-house team in the heart of London, printing takes place at our mill in northern Italy, which uses both innovative digital technology and age-old techniques. From signature, obsessively fine-tuned Tana Lawn cotton and luxurious silk to lightweight linen, Liberty Fabrics are brilliant canvases for bespoke creations of all kinds.

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