



**Althea
McNish**

**Colour
is Mine**



Althea McNish, Painted Desert, for Hull Traders, 1961. © the Whitworth, The University of Manchester

**An extraordinary designer,
her prints jump and jive,
tropical Trinidadian dazzle
in hot pink,
sharpest grapefruit,
dusky coral,
jostling jazz expressiveness
with
authentic thrumming rhythm.**

Internationally recognised, respected and revered, McNish's artistic power is celebrated in this fabulous and timely exhibition, reminding us of the chromatic energy of her work and its critical representation of an African-Caribbean heritage insisting that 'colour is mine'. While cloth culture discourse tends towards the margin, often alluding to textile's reclaimed selvedge position, McNish's prints decline contemporaneous well-behaved and modest post-war British design. Visually stunning, these works – impactful now – were revolutionary then, proclaiming the demise of a colonial canon where 'exotic' decorative arts were enjoyed only as 'other'. The era of Black Lives Matter is the time for McNish's vibrant vision to be centre-stage, and for her potent print legacy to shine out brightly, as it does here.

Foreword

Professor Catherine Harper

Deputy Vice-Chancellor, University of the Creative Arts, UK

Introduction

Althea McNish: Colour is Mine is the first retrospective to celebrate and showcase the extraordinary career of the pioneering Trinidadian designer Althea McNish (1924–2020). Her work in the field of textiles and interior design is remarkable, both for its artistic intention as well as being both socially and culturally significant for British post-war design.

Two years after the SS Windrush landed at Tilbury docks, McNish and her mother Margaret made their own journey



Althea McNish, 1960s. Photo: Bill Patterson. Courtesy N15 ARCHIVE: The Althea McNish Collection

to England on the SS *Colombie*, disembarking at Southampton on 9th November 1950. They had left their home in Trinidad to join Joseph McNish, Althea's father, who had settled in London the previous year to set up a publishing venture.

In 1951, the same year McNish first enrolled as a student of design, the Festival of Britain opened, heralding a new approach to design thinking. By 1957, the year she graduated from the Royal College of Art, design had become something to be consumed, with young designers attuned to what the public wanted. The newly constructed buildings of post-war Britain — with their large windows, open plan design and contemporary styling — demanded bold new textile treatments. Companies such as Heals, Cavendish Textiles, Hull Traders and Liberty were eager to commission designers that could respond to the new aesthetic. McNish fitted the brief and then some. It was not only her bold use of colour but her spatial awareness and understanding of how designs would look in these interiors that set her apart.

Her experiments with scale, texture and multilayering of pattern achieved vibrant, colourful designs never before seen by the British consumer. Crucially, she developed an in-depth understanding of the technology of textile production, further enabling her to test the limits of her designs:

"I have found that whatever I can design, I can print. I have no patience with people who say that too much technology prevents creativity. I have always been known for my very free designs; I have made a point of keeping up with technical developments to allow me complete freedom."
(Althea McNish, 1996)

As a Black woman, McNish is rare in the history of postmodern design and textiles. McNish herself had no such role models. Although she wouldn't have described herself as a radical in the political sense, she told me: "I opened the doors so others could follow".

McNish's self-confidence can be attributed to her parents, who encouraged and nurtured her artistic talent. In part it was the reason they left Trinidad. At the same time, McNish had grown up with a strong culture, surrounded by a majority that looked like her. In this way her sense of belonging was already formed, and meant she arrived in Britain already a confident young woman. Like many of her Caribbean contemporaries, McNish reconciled herself to the fact that in order to develop her career she would have to emigrate. Yet she never lost her longing for home, referencing Trinidad in the patterns and names of her designs, becoming a member of the Caribbean Art Movement in the UK and returning to Trinidad many times over the years.

Whilst proud of her Trinidadian heritage and the professional success she enjoyed in Britain, McNish transcended national claims to her identity:

"I am a citizen of the world and I am multicultural. My ancestry is Carib. I take my inspiration from nature and from man's art and artefacts. My imagination is fed by folk art from many cultures, by architecture and technology, and by the flowers of the English countryside, which I transform into Caribbean flamboyance." (Althea McNish, 1990)

McNish's fabrics are themselves an art form and of cultural value – it matters that they are shown in the context of the William Morris Gallery. Their painterly attributes straddle both textiles and fine art and have the ability to transform the space in which they are seen, or the human form over which they are draped. This, the first major retrospective of McNish's design career, aims to do her justice. In McNish's words: *"Women should always have the opportunity of showing off themselves, their talents and their achievements..."* (Althea McNish speaking at The Women's International Art Exhibition, Jamaica Oct 1975).

Rose Sinclair, Goldsmiths, University of London
and Co-Curator of *Althea McNish: Colour is Mine*

Althea McNish, Orina, for Danasco, 1960. Courtesy Nicola Tree, William Morris Gallery







Colour is Mine

Althea McNish: Colour is Mine (2 April – 11 September 2022) brings together a diverse range of objects, many from McNish's own archive.

"My designing is functional but free, you can wear it, sit on it, lie on it, stand on it. I can see people wearing my designs all over the world and they are in people's homes and in museums. My paintings are just as free and are in homes and in museums and on ships: they and my textiles are the statement of my being" (Althea McNish, 1996)

Room 1: Special Exhibition Gallery (Ground Floor)

Althea McNish was born on 15th May 1924 in Port of Spain, Trinidad. Family photo albums show her parents Margaret and Joseph, as well as early childhood portraits of McNish. As a junior member of the Trinidad Art Society, McNish was encouraged to pursue her artistic talents, evident in her paintings of rural life in Trinidad.

After moving to London in 1950, McNish enrolled in a commercial design course at the London College of Printing and Graphic Arts. She also took evening classes at the Central School of Art where she was taught by artist Eduardo Paolozzi and influential textiles tutor Dora Batty. Under their tutelage, McNish realised that through textile design she could combine her two passions: painting and the technical mastery of printing. In 1954, she gained a scholarship to the Royal College of Art to study textile design. Upon graduating in 1957, she had meetings with two icons of the textiles and fashion world, Arthur Stuart-Liberty and Zika Ascher, both of whom immediately commissioned her work and who in her words "changed her life".

McNish's earliest textile designs are displayed, including 'Marina', her first design for Liberty in 1957 and 'Golden Harvest',

manufactured by Hull Traders from 1959 to the late 1970s. These, and other fabrics for Heals and Cavendish Textiles, show McNish's ability to not only play with pattern and scale, but also the complexity of pattern she embedded within her designs.

Room 2: Discovery Lounge (Ground Floor)

McNish experimented with different techniques to achieve the range of designs for textiles. She used monoprinting and lightboxes to quickly replicate her drawings, overlaying them with paint, crayon and acetate to achieve different textures and colour combinations.

A film shows a collection of recordings and interviews relating to McNish's design career.



Althea McNish, c.1960. Photo: Bill Patterson.
Courtesy N15 ARCHIVE: The Althea McNish Collection

Althea McNish working on murals for
SS Oriana, 1959. Courtesy N15 ARCHIVE:
The Althea McNish Collection



Room 3: Landing (First Floor)

As McNish's reputation as a textile designer grew, she was commissioned to take on several commercial projects including working for ICI in the 1960s developing fabric designs for Terylene Toile — a new synthetic fabric. She also designed plastic murals for P&O's SS Oriana. The launch of new materials like Warerite for the domestic space in the mid-20th century provided McNish with the technology to push her design boundaries, showcasing how she could translate her painterly skills to a variety of surfaces.

She also collaborated with her husband John Weiss, a gifted designer in his own right, on projects such as British Rail's Advanced Passenger Train project (1980–1984).

Room 4: Bachelor Girls Room (First Floor)

Designed by Studio NYALI, the Bachelor Girls Room reimagines the model room McNish created for the Ideal Home Exhibition in 1966 and asks us to consider what it means to be a single person living alone in 21st century London. What stories do you want to share about your room, your space and what would your design look like today?

Althea McNish: Colour is Mine

2 April – 11 September 2022

Open Tuesday–Sunday, 10–5pm, Free Entry

William Morris Gallery

Lloyd Park, Forest Road
London E17 4PP

wmg.enquiries@walthamforest.gov.uk

0208 496 1470

Events for Adults and Young People

The exhibition's public programme will include a series of curatorial talks, events and workshops.

Events for Children and Families

Join us at our regular free Creative Kids sessions for under 5s and at our Family Days in school holidays. Explore the themes of the exhibition in a free family trail, available throughout the exhibition from the front desk.



Please look online for more details:
www.wmgallery.org.uk/whats-on

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Althea McNish: Colour is Mine is sponsored by Liberty Fabrics

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Front/back cover: Althea McNish, Golden Harvest, for Hull Traders, 1959.

Centre: Althea McNish, 1970s. Photo: Bill Patterson. N15 ARCHIVE: The Althea McNish Collection.

Booklet design: Studio Mark El-khatib Printed on recycled paper by Pureprint

Althea McNish, Rubra, for Hull Traders, 1960



