



# ‘BLACK BECAUSE IT HAS POWER IN IT ...’

The Textile Designs of Althea McNish

ROSE SINCLAIR

Althea McNish (1924–2020) is regarded as the first black designer of Caribbean heritage to gain international recognition for her textile designs. Her work in the field of textiles and interior design is remarkable, both for its artistic achievement and its social and cultural significance for British post-war design. Although McNish would go on to have a career spanning nearly 60 years as a designer, there is very little written about her approach to practice and process and use of colour. This article will discuss and highlight McNish’s impact, influence and role in the development of the use of colour in mid twentieth-century textile design, through unpublished archival research and reflections on the recent exhibition of her work. McNish’s work is informed by her dynamic palette and her vibrant use of colour, for which she would become renowned, indeed McNish herself stated, ‘I was born seeing colour from the day of my birth.’<sup>1</sup>

Althea McNish’s clients were from companies across the UK, Europe and the USA and included Liberty, Heals, Hull Traders, Danasco and fashion entrepreneur Zika Ascher.

McNish was commissioned by the Design Research Unit (DRU) to design interiors for the restaurant car of the *SS Oriana* in 1960. She also designed several room sets at the Ideal Home Exhibition including her famous ‘Bachelor Girl’s Room’ in 1966. That same year she designed the fabrics which would adorn the temporary residence of Queen Elizabeth II when she visited Trinidad as part of her Caribbean Tour. In the 1960s, as a member of the Caribbean Artists Movement, 1966–1972 (CAM), McNish was a cultural voice in the arts showcasing her printed textiles. She received three medals from the Government of Trinidad and Tobago; the (Gold) Chaconia Medal for ‘long and meritorious service to art and design’ in 1976, the Scarlet Ibis Award in 1993 and in 2006 she was awarded an Honorary Doctor of Fine Art of the University

25. *Tomee* (1961). Designed by Althea McNish for Danasco Fabrics Ltd. The Whitworth Art Gallery, 2022–23. Installation image, Rose Sinclair

of Trinidad and Tobago. In 2012 she received the Award for Achievement in the Arts.<sup>2</sup>

‘Her work in the field of textiles straddles interior and fashion design and is remarkable both for its artistic intention and technical acuity, as well as being both socially and culturally significant for British post-war design. Althea herself states that it was her early days in England and ‘her first experience of the English winter that has prompted her ever since to express in her designs the warmth and colour of her sunlit home’.<sup>3</sup>

For McNish, the links between Trinidad and Britain are omnipresent in her work; the names she gives to each of her designs echo the memory of the home she left in Trinidad, or her new home in England. Her designs reflect both countries, with artistic and aesthetic influences drawn from the Caribbean artists, whom she met whilst growing up, during her early days as member of the Trinidad Art Society, as a member of CAM, and from European and international artists.

Two years after the *SS Empire Windrush* landed at Tilbury Docks, with many migrants

from the West Indies, Althea McNish and her mother Margaret made their own journey from Trinidad to England on the SS *Colombie*, arriving at Southampton Docks on 9 November 1950. They had come to join McNish's father Joseph, who had settled in England the year before and thought it would be the right place to further nurture his daughter's artistic talents.

In 1951, McNish should have joined her assigned course at the Architectural Association, for which she had won a scholarship. Instead, having stated that architecture was 'a man's job', she made a U-turn, deciding to study graphics, then known as commercial design, at the London College of Printing, which offered a better fit for her technical and drawing skills.<sup>4</sup> During this time, she attended evening classes at the Central School of Art where she met Eduardo Paolozzi and the influential textiles tutor Dora Batty. She realised that through textiles she could combine her passion for painting with her knowledge and love of printing.

### Offbeat Colour

The front cover of the 1962 April issue of *Ideal Home*, the long-running domestic interiors magazine, features the latest collection of wallpapers and fabrics the consumer would need to decorate their home. (Fig. 1) The changing interior design interests of the householder/ consumer alongside changes in lifestyle, such as the installation of central heating, meant that, as a nation, we were changing from traditional curtains for insulation and moving towards what could be regarded as more frivolous, colourful furnishings. Experimenting with colour and printed pattern had become the vogue.

A new 'untapped market', for bold designs and 'offbeat colour' began to change the domestic space. Many of the designer fabrics and wallpapers were being made at affordable prices. Changes in manufacturing heralded new approaches to printing, from high end,

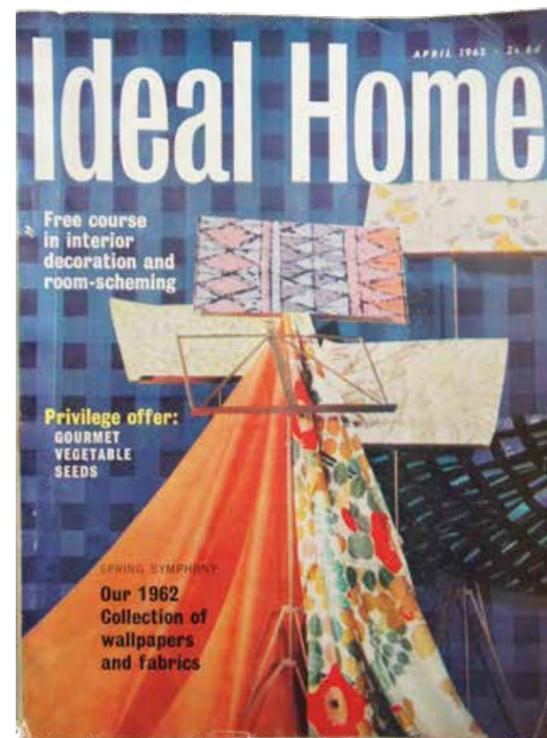
hand-printed fabrics and wallpapers to new more automated screen-printing and roller-printing technology. As *Ideal Home* pointed out,

'Wallpaper Manufacturers have introduced the Palladio Mondo book of patterns, inspired by their Palladio Magnus and Modus ranges but scaled down in size and price for domestic use.'<sup>5</sup>

Furnishing fabrics and wallpapers had become consumer goods and their designs are discussed by the magazine,

'We've become designer conscious. A designer's name on the selvedge is becoming a selling point, but it isn't only established designers that are decorating our cloth.'<sup>6</sup> The colours of the year are '...reds, pinks, blues, greens... rainbow ranges of yellows, oranges and browns.'<sup>7</sup>

1. *Ideal Home* magazine: April 1962. Collection of Rose Sinclair, Photo: John Banks



On the front cover is a wallpaper printed in pinks, blues and oranges with black diamond outlines, placed on a music stand, designed by McNish, for the Wallpaper Manufacturer for its 'Palladio 5' range. This wallpaper, called *Taiga* (1960) was created in four colourways, inspired by the colours and motifs of the Caribbean's Hosein Festival.<sup>8</sup> (Figs 2,3). The bright pink, and blue and orange are offset by the black diamonds, which had become a signature trait in many of McNish's previous textile works. Also significant in the range of colourways of this design in deep grey-black (Fig. 2 – on right of installation shot). Here McNish goes against the grain of the year's 'spring colours' as highlighted in the magazine, including another colourway for the *Taiga* range featuring rich charcoals, browns, dark greys and black.

*Crystalline*, one of McNish's first Palladio designs, was also illustrated in *Ideal Home* Magazine (Fig. 4). She used two processes, monoprint and coloured acetate, to achieve subtle colour changes for the background (Figs 5, 6). The finished wallpaper was available in four colourways: white, orange, lime and olive. The painterly textured black line dominates the image, described as giving the wallpaper an 'antique' texture. Its large repeat pattern, inspired by nature, utilises McNish's drawing

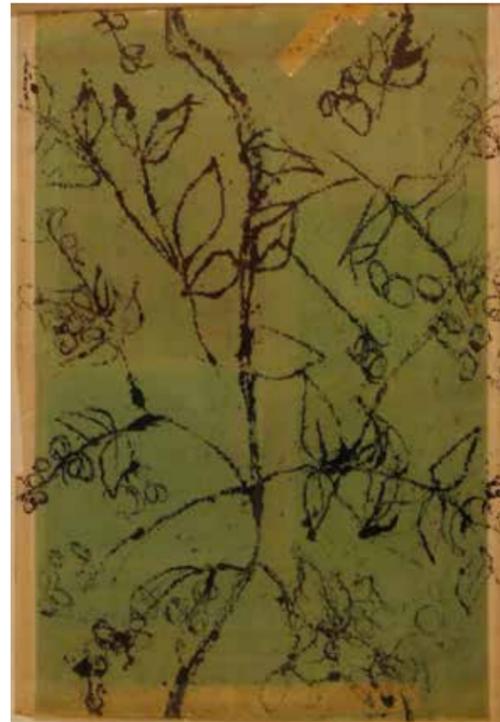
2. Palladio 5 wallpapers for Wallpaper Manufacturers (WPM). L-R: 1. *Crystalline*, 2. *Cornflower*, 3. *Taiga* with alternative colourways. Designed by Althea McNish. The Whitworth Art Gallery, 2022–23. Photo: Rose Sinclair

3. Palladio 5, *Taiga* (1960). Designed by Althea McNish for Wallpaper Manufacturers (WPM), pink/blue colourway, The Whitworth Art Gallery, Manchester, 2022–23. Photo: Rose Sinclair





4. *Ideal Home* Magazine, March 1961. This edition features *Crystalline* wallpaper design by Althea McNish for WPM. Museum of Domestic Design and Architecture. Photo: Paul Berman



6. Study for *Crystalline*, (1960), by Althea McNish. Monoprint and acetate. Collection of Anna Harris and Emma Thornton. The Whitworth Art Gallery, Manchester, 2022–23. Photo: Rose Sinclair

5. *Crystalline* Designed by Althea McNish for WPM (1960), in four colourways. Photos courtesy of Museum of Domestic Design and Architecture, Middlesex University.



skills whilst at the same time allows her to add colour. An earlier wallpaper produced for Palladio 4 was described as ‘excitingly drawn’, with its focus on the vertical and in her signature black and white.<sup>9</sup>

### The Creative space of Althea McNish

“I look to nature for all my designs”. She refused to join the army of ‘abstract’ designers. Her bold, bright, lush colours which pulsate with the brightness of a tropical day, have given the anaemic two-colour, thin-line designs currently flooding the furnishing-fabric market, a much needed shot-in-the-arm. Her bright blues, greens, reds, oranges, yellows and purples are incorporated in dazzling patterns ... over-sized butterflies chase each other across a silken square and large sunflowers stand upright and proud in the brilliant orange fields in which she has planted them’.<sup>10</sup>

The Festival of Britain, heralding a new approach to design thinking, opened in 1951, the same year McNish first enrolled as a student of design. By 1957, the year she graduated from the Royal College of Art, design had become a consumer priority, 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. McNish used her strong sense of colour alongside her spatial awareness and understanding of how designs would look in these interiors, setting her apart from other designers.

In the creative space of the 1960s McNish had become an established designer, her name already printed on the selvedge of fabrics she had created for the likes of Tofos Prints, Liberty’s, Heals and Hull Traders, and wallpapers for Wallpaper Manufacturers. (The last named company was known as WPM and would later become Sandersons). Her early wallpaper ranges had been aimed at architects; the handprinted wallpapers that were large in

both pattern and scale were unaffordable for many. This new range of fabrics and wallpapers was better suited to the domestic consumer’s wallet and targeted a new domestic market eager for colour and pattern and the opportunity to experiment in their new home interiors. However, none of the exuberance or energy she had already applied to the designs created for the upper end of the market was lost.

From designing seminal fabrics such as *Golden Harvest* (1957), whilst in her last year as a student at the RCA, to the new Scandinavian-inspired work for Danasco in the 1960s, McNish’s early works are both reminiscent of the colours and landscape of Trinidad but also address her new life in Europe, located in what she termed a ‘grey London’. Her exuberant style would find its home in ‘The New Fabrics’ being produced by companies such as Danasco, Heals, Hull Traders and Liberty’s. Her style displayed a range of influences from European expressionism to new bold abstracts but also her intense longing for home. She also drew on both the colour and forms of nature and landscape while using the technology of printing to realise her vision.

Many textile companies emerged during the 1950s and production processes evolved, moving from the slower and more expensive handprinted, or roller-printed textiles to the faster mechanised flat-bed screen printing. New manufacturing practices demanded new approaches to commissioning designs. Many textile companies that had relied heavily on bought-in textile designs or freelance designers began setting up in-house design studios. They employed their own heads of design to create a distinct design direction and establish policies which would focus on buying designs from either established or emerging designers.<sup>11</sup> McNish’s work had emerged during the late 1950s and early 1960s, just as textiles were undergoing this metamorphosis, where ‘art textiles’ were increasingly used both for fashion and furnishing and the influences of ‘pop-art’ culture became more dominant. McNish’s palette for colour, scale and exuberance fitted the times.

McNish is celebrated for her extraordinary use of colour and its application to cloth.<sup>12</sup> She was the first designer of Caribbean heritage to make her mark on the international field of textile design<sup>13</sup> and is regarded as one of the icons of mid-twentieth century design as well as ‘...the creator of some of the most original and vital printed textile patterns of the last half century’.<sup>14</sup> The textile designs she created during the early part of her career between 1957 and 1970 are recognisable not only for their dramatic linear designs but also for their bold and distinctive use of colour. They were seen as instrumental in changing the way colour in textiles informed mid-century design. McNish created textiles that would decorate both interior spaces and the body and were interchangeable. Her achievements required her to push the boundaries of silk-screen technology (or ‘serigraphy’).<sup>15</sup>

As well as travelling throughout Europe after her arrival in Britain in the 1950s, Althea spent two extended periods in both Trinidad and Europe which influenced her design work and technical skills and her approaches to colour and design. In 1962 a travel scholarship from the Trinidad and Tobago government allowed her to travel back ‘home’ as she said, where she showcased her work in a solo exhibition entitled *Colour is Ours*.<sup>16</sup> Describing her design process to fellow Trinidadians,

‘...each design is reproduced in several shades to please buyers’ tastes for brighter, darker, warmer or cooler tints’<sup>17</sup> and ‘I use all sorts of English flowers and add tropical colours to them. No one ever notices the metamorphosis.’<sup>18</sup>

In 1963 she was the recipient of the Cotton Board scholarship,<sup>19</sup> enabling her to travel for three months around the cotton mills of Europe.<sup>20</sup>

‘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)

Her experiments with scale, texture and the multilayering of patterns achieved vibrant, colourful designs never before seen in Britain. Crucially, she developed an in-depth understanding of the technology of textile production, further enabling her to test the limits of her designs. She stated that, ‘I did “serigraphy” to produce my own paintings in editions.’<sup>21</sup> She regarded her textiles as a form of painting on cloth, which fitted with the wider development of textile art, prevalent in the early 1960s, where the process of silk-screen printing by hand occupied a mid-space between fine art and design and commercial printing. McNish was able to combine both approaches and applied them to the textiles medium and beyond.

‘Yes, you see grey is a colour I would never use on my palette. Black! Because it has power in it to do for me what I want. I use black in my paint. Whereas grey is a non-colour for me, red is colour. It’s vibrant. I mean if you look at my things you can see it is red throughout. I never leave red out of my palette. But I have no use for grey.’<sup>22</sup>

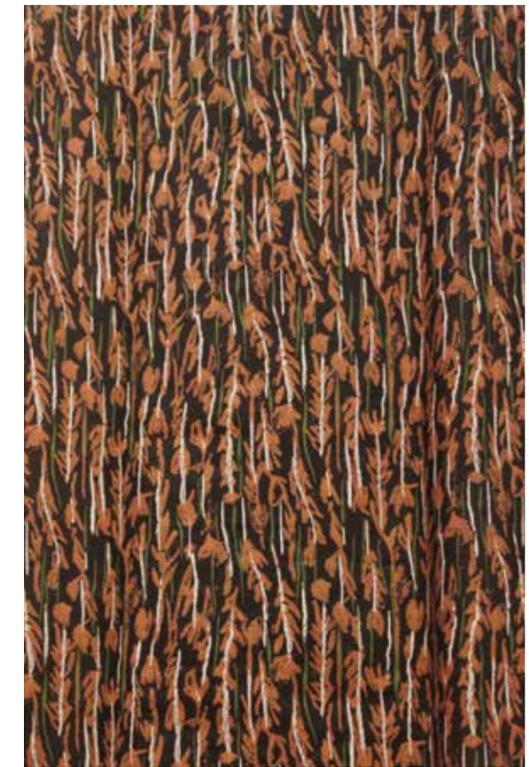
At the time of this conversation in 1999, McNish had already had a 40-year career as a designer and was reflecting on aspects of her textile practice and her approach to design. Her use of colour in design is a key feature and the focus of this discussion. In a 2015 interview McNish stated that her use of colour was an area where she refused to compromise.

‘I wanted to experiment, I had a great sense of technology in what I was doing, and I wanted to learn the complete technology of my business. I didn’t just want to paint pictures and show you this idea. It had to go further than that.’<sup>23</sup>

## Designing for Liberty

‘Her colourful painterly designs of abstract flowers were particularly suited to Liberty’s method of hand screen-printing.’

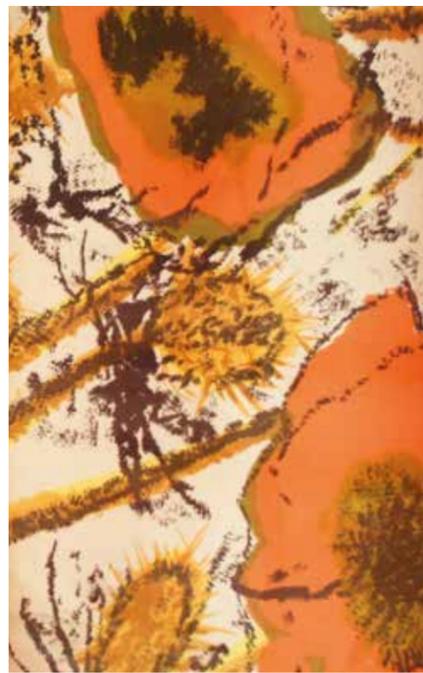
Liberty, the iconic London department store, anticipated post-war Britain’s readiness for more vibrant colourful fabrics and McNish proved the perfect designer. The day after graduating from the RCA, on 17 July 1957, McNish met the head of the company, Arthur Stuart-Liberty. The introduction was arranged by her father’s friend W.G. Binnie. McNish’s method of ‘tropicalising’ her designs was unlike anything Liberty had seen before. (Fig. 7). They commissioned textile designs from her graduate collection, including *Marina* her very first. (Fig. 8) She went on to design over 60 silk scarves, dress and furnishing fabrics for the firm. *Marina* employs two of McNish’s favourite approaches



7. Furnishing and fashion fabrics, designed by Althea McNish for Liberty. The Whitworth Art Gallery, Manchester, 2022–23. Photo: Michael Pollard

8. *Marina*, (1957), Designed by Althea McNish for Liberty, Printed cotton dress fabric. The Whitworth Art Gallery, Manchester, 2022–23 Photo: Rose Sinclair





9. and 10. *Akarana* (1961) designed by Althea McNish for Liberty. William Morris Gallery, London, 2022. Photo: Rose Sinclair

11. *Grenada and Blush* (1962) (silk in background) dress fabrics designed by Althea McNish for Liberty. The Whitworth Art Gallery, Manchester, 2022–23. Photo: Rose Sinclair

to her work: the influence of nature, shown in the swirling leaves, and the textural approach in her use of the wax crayon crackle effect. The leaf and berries in a tawny tan, the green and white stems and her use of the black ground combine to create a design that flows, giving the impression that the cloth is moving even when it is still. The black does not make the design dowdy or drab but enlivens the motifs.

In *Akarana* (1961), a design for a Liberty dress fabric, we see McNish's love of colour, flora and fauna used to create painterly textiles. Here she combines her love of drawing plants, in the form of poppies (one of her favourite flowers), using this bold black outline for them and for the smaller teasels. It is shown in two colourways, deep violet (Fig. 9) and orange (Fig. 10). Plants and flowers were a constant source of inspiration for McNish. She transformed them into intense visuals with riotous colour, using a combination of paint, ink and crayon layered over monoprint or in mixed media. She used this to full effect in her designs for dress fabrics (Fig. 11) for *Grenada* (a design originally called *Summer Madness*). Inspired by homesickness for Trinidad and the trend for flowers and colour, she uses flowers such as zinnias and African daisies to explore colour and scale, incorporating her favourite



colour, red. Red was used repeatedly, in every shade, throughout her work.<sup>24</sup>

In *Tobago* (1960), (Fig. 12) also for Liberty, red and bright yellow are used as highlights. Once again small English flowers are expanded into unrecognisable shapes, layering up subtle tones and brights to create accents and spots to draw the eye. This fabric especially conforms to the mantra she had established, creating

12. *Belladonna* (1960), *Tizi-Ouzo* (1958) and *Tobago* (1960) dress fabrics designed by Althea McNish for Liberty. The Whitworth Art Gallery, Manchester, 2022–23. Photo: Rose Sinclair

fabric designs that moved with the female form. Rather than just showcasing flowers in flowerpots on women, she wanted the floral form to mirror the female form.

## Hull Traders and *Golden Harvest*

Hull Traders was founded in 1957 by Tristram Hull. The company was originally conceived as a platform to promote contemporary British craftsmanship, producing high-quality artistic home furnishings. The earliest textiles the firm sold were designed and screen-printed by hand by innovative designers such as Eduardo Paolozzi and Nigel Henderson. Soon other emerging designers (many from the RCA) were invited to join the firm, including Shirley Craven, who later became the company's Design and Colour Consultant and a director, leading design and external commissioning policy. McNish designed eight fabrics for Hull Traders between 1959–64. *Golden Harvest*,

(Figs 13, 15) regarded as one of her most important works, was recorded as one of her longest selling designs, available for over 20 years. McNish said:

'I never liked working on a small scale. One thing I learned was to half-drop it... I brought my mind around to convert my enormous ideas into smaller pieces.'

The textural painterly effect of the wheat was achieved by McNish drawing directly onto the silk screen before it was further prepared for printing.<sup>25</sup>

Like many of her designs, it was inspired by nature, this time by watching the early morning sun on a wheatfield near the Essex home of

the artist and RCA tutor Edward Bawden (1903–1989), where McNish was staying as a guest. The design had a dual meaning for McNish, who had never seen wheat growing before. She compared the Essex wheatfields to the sugar cane plantations of Trinidad and recorded this as being a fun day of drawing and design.<sup>26</sup> Never without crayons and paper, she often started her designs on large sheets of paper, developing them quickly through monoprinting. This hand-printmaking process, where the image is printed once only, would create a unique hand-coloured impression, which McNish then worked over with more colour or additional motifs.

*Golden Harvest's* distinctive graphic style can also be recognised in other designs such

as *Orina* and *Rubra* (Figs 16–18). McNish often experimented in monoprint and colour-drawing techniques preparing designs for Hull Traders, such as *Rubra*, *Van-Gogh* and *Painted Desert* (Figs 19–21). She mentioned that her home was full of plants and her garden could readily be used for reference materials; she even grew her own banana plant. McNish regularly visited Kew Gardens and loved the glass houses; on travels to Europe she would also visit gardens and record her inspirations. She was an avid collector of dried flowers and plants which could be stored and recorded in her sketch books for further reference. Working with companies such as Hull Traders, whose aesthetic policy was to allow their chosen designers to reproduce their designs as closely



*Golden Harvest* (1957).  
Designed by Althea McNish for Tofos Prints

13. (left) monoprint study of a wheat sheaf.

14. (right) strike-off print.

15. (below) fabric, screen-printed by hand. Note McNish's name on the selvedge.



Photos: The Whitworth Art Gallery, Manchester, 2022–23 and Rose Sinclair.

*Rubra* (1960).

16. (left) Monoprint study by Althea McNish. Collection Anna Harris and Emma Thornton.

*Rubra* (1961).  
Designed by Althea McNish for Hull Traders.

17. (right) Printed cotton satin, green colourway. Collection Pauline McPherson.

18. (below) Printed cotton satin yellow colourway. Collection Rose Sinclair.



All Photos taken at The Whitworth Art Gallery, Manchester, 2022–23. Photo: Rose Sinclair



*Painted Desert*, (1959).

19. (top left) Hand-coloured Monotype by Althea McNish. Victoria and Albert Museum.

*Painted Desert* (1960). Designed by Althea McNish for Hull Traders.

20. (top right) printed cotton satin, purple colourway. Collection of The McNish Trust.

21. (below) printed cotton satin, pink colourway. Collection and photo courtesy of The Whitworth Art Gallery. Purchased from Hull Traders in 1961 (T.10266).

Other photos: Rose Sinclair

as possible to their artwork, allowed McNish to produce designs as she had intended. She was able to replicate on cloth what she was already doing on paper.

### Danasco and Scandinavian Design

Danasco was a Danish company, established in 1955 by Paul Glitre, that aimed to introduce Scandinavian design and concept living to Britain. As well as importing a range of Danish domestic homeware products to Britain it also manufactured items in Britain. Within five

years of founding Danasco, in 1960 Glitre had formed Danasco Fabrics Ltd.<sup>27</sup> Danasco, like many of its British-based counterparts, had an in-house design team but also commissioned designers from Britain, France, Denmark and Finland. They included Natalie Gibson, Douglas Hamilton, Maija Isola and McNish, who helped to develop specific ranges and designs to capture the new young market, both in Europe and USA.

McNish's designs for Danasco, created between 1960 and 1970 included not only *Orina* (Figs 22, 23) but also *Signal* (Fig. 24) *Tomee*, (Fig. 25, see p. 90) *Crystal*, *Smokee* and *Gothic*.<sup>28</sup> (Fig. 26). All except *Signal* used McNish's signature black abstraction or mottled tones mixed with bright bold tones. Each fabric design used three colours in simple geometric patterns, highlighting McNish's implicit sense of colour and tonal awareness, to create a striking, timeless design. Working with Danasco combined McNish's fine-art approach to textiles and the 'serigraphy' she

*Orina* (1960).

Designed by Althea McNish for Danasco Fabrics Ltd.

22. Screen-printed cotton, orange colourway.

Photo: Nicola Tree for the William Morris Gallery.

23. Blue colourway. Collection of Rose Sinclair.

Photo: Rose Sinclair





saw as an intrinsic part of the development of her practice, with the emphasis that Danasco placed on functionality, design and aesthetics. Glitre, however, wanted to place at the heart of Danasco Fabrics the 'intention to follow the simplicity and style of Scandinavian fabrics and also to introduce new trends in design and more particularly, in colour'.<sup>29</sup>

*Orina* (Figs 22, 23) is an early example of McNish using playful abstraction in her designs. Painterly vertical stripes are overlaid with scratchy black flower motifs. In *Orina* we see McNish express abstraction using black as the dominant colour. She referred to the use of black as a statement or 'power colour', saying that

'...grey is a colour I would never use on my palette. Black! Because it has power in it to do for me what I want. I use black in my paint'.

It is one of her earliest pieces to demonstrate that she was already beginning to be more

24. *Signal* (1971). Designed by Althea McNish for Danasco Fabrics Ltd. Screen printed cotton. The Whitworth Art Gallery, Manchester, 2022–23. Photo: Rose Sinclair

25. *Tomee* (1961). Designed by Althea McNish for Danasco Fabrics Ltd. The Whitworth Art Gallery, 2022–23. Installation image, Rose Sinclair

playful with her design work. McNish revisited stripes in painterly abstracted form, then overlaid them with a flower design (stamen) that has been abstracted so it no longer looks like a stamen. She liked to play with the 'metamorphic process', as she describes the transformation of English flowers into tropical exuberance in this large repeat pattern. Her playful approach to colour can also be seen in the way she experimented with the new types of pigment dyes now available to designers. McNish loved to experiment and many of the designs she created for Danasco, as well as for Hull

Traders demonstrate this experimental approach to colour and layers. Pigment dyes produced bright vibrant colours which suited her chosen palette and the printing technique allowed layering of colours to produce subtle changes in the overall design that can be seen on closer examination. Tones also changed with the varieties of artificial light sources that were increasingly used in the new modern interiors.

A year after first exhibiting McNish's designs for synthetic dyes in Manchester, Hollins Thompson, who licensed Terylene Toile from ICI, created a promotional fashion collection called *Inprint '66*. ICI told *The Times* that McNish was selected for the 'sheer raw impact of her colour'. McNish's Trinidadian identity was made a key part of the marketing campaign.

'...out of her intense love of the sun Miss McNish creates a world of brilliant colours inspired by the flora and fauna of many lands treated with freedom, a sense of tonal values and a high key harmony.'<sup>30</sup>

## The Colour legacy

Althea McNish is celebrated for her extraordinary use of colour and its application to cloth. She is seen as the first designer of Caribbean heritage to make her mark on the international field of textile design and is regarded as one of the design icons of mid-twentieth century design. Her work in the field of textiles encompasses interior and fashion design and is remarkable both for its artistic intention and technical acuity, as well as being both socially and culturally significant for British post-war design. McNish's fabrics are an art form of great cultural value, their painterly attributes include both textiles and fine art; they are able to transform the space in which they are seen, or the human form over which they

26. Fabrics designed by Althea McNish for Danasco Fabrics Ltd. (foreground left to right) including *Crystal*, *Smokee*, *Gothic*. Collection of The McNish Trust. Exhibition Installation photo at The Whitworth Art Gallery, by Michael Pollard





are draped. It was McNish's bold and confident use of colour together with her awareness of how her designs would fit these new dynamic interior spaces that set her apart from her contemporaries. Her use of scale, juxtaposed with her multi-layered textured patterns made her painterly designs sing in the space or on the forms they dressed. Importantly, she realised that there was a need to understand the technology of her craft, as this would bring her the freedom to design as she wished.

Althea McNish was a rare example in the textile canon and in modern design history of a professional black woman who was able to cross barriers and transcend boundaries in the design field in post-war Britain. She did not regard herself as a radical, as she said to me in conversation, 'I opened the doors so others could follow'. Yet there is a need to recognise just how radical she was. As a black professional woman in the design world, she herself had no role models to follow. She showed that making art and working in the design world was no mere 'lifestyle option'. She believed 'Women should always have the opportunity of showing off themselves, their talents and their achievements.'<sup>31</sup>

'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

27. Exhibition panel for The Whitworth Art Gallery, created by Mark El-khatib, 2022. Installation Image, Michael Pollard

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. 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 1990)

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#### ENDNOTES

- 1 Lesley Jackson, 'Caribbean Blaze', *Crafts Magazine*, No. 194, May/June 2005, p.33
- 2 An award presented in 2012 by H.E. Garvin Nicholas, High Commissioner for the Republic of Trinidad and Tobago, in celebration of the 50th Anniversary of the Independence of the Republic of Trinidad and Tobago.
- 3 'Caribbean art in dress fabric and design - New Ground broken by Althea McNish' *West Indies Chronicle*, March 1967, pp123-126.
- 4 McNish won the student prize for drawing at the London School of Printing in 1954; work from her final year Graphics work would be featured in the *Penrose Annual* in 1956.
- 5 *Ideal Home*, April 1962, Vol. 85, No.4, p.43.
- 6 Ibid.
- 7 Ibid.
- 8 Hosein, Hosay or Hussay (originally from the word Husayn) festival is a manifestation of the commemoration of Muharram, observed by Shi'ite Muslims around the world. The tradition was brought to the Caribbean with the arrival of indentured Muslim servants and other immigrant labour from India. As well as Trinidad and Tobago, it is observed in other Caribbean islands such as Jamaica, Guyana and Suriname. McNish's painting depicts the parade of *tadjah* - symbolic models of tombs that are paraded, then ritually taken to the sea on the last day of observance and pushed into the water.
- 9 'Prints and Papers', *The Observer*, 28 February, 1960, p.15.
- 10 Pat Blair, 'Success to Althea McNish Fabric Designer: The only coloured girl to have achieved prominence in this field', *Tropic*, pp.32-35.
- 11 Established textile and wallpaper manufacturers were eager to commission designers who could respond to the new aesthetic. These included David Whitehead, Heals, Liberty, Edinburgh Weavers, Hull Traders, Cavendish Textiles, Cole & Son, Sandersons. See Lesley Jackson, *20th Pattern Design, Textiles and Wallpaper Pioneers*, (London: Mitchell Beazley, 2002) and Geoffrey Rayner et al., *Artist Textiles in Britain 1945-70*, (Woodbridge: Antique Collectors Club, 1999).
- 12 Pat Blair, (as note 10).
- 13 See Anne Massey, *Women in Design*, (London: Thames & Hudson, 2022) p.100 discussing the emigration of Commonwealth ex-servicemen on the *Empire Windrush* in 1948 and later migration from the Caribbean and Commonwealth countries of which Trinidad was one. Althea McNish arrived in Britain in November 1950.
- 14 Lesley Jackson, (as note 1)
- 15 The term 'serigraphy' is often used to distinguish between the commercial and fine-art application of screen-printing or the silk-screen process. McNish herself often refers to her textile printing process as paintings on cloth.
- 16 During her visit McNish presented a series of workshops and presentations to various educational bodies and institutions on the textiles work she had undertaken and her visit was widely reported in the Trinidadian national press *Trinidad Guardian*, 24 July 1962, *Trinidad Guardian*, 25 July 1962, *Trinidad Sunday Guardian*, 1 July 1962.
- 17 'The Women's Super League Speaks'. *The Nation*, 6 July 1962, p. 6
- 18 Jean Minshall, 'She adds Sunshine to London's Fog'. *Trinidad Sunday Guardian*, 1 July 1962
- 19 'Four New Travel Awards - Textile designers'. *The Guardian*, 26 January, 1963.
- 20 'Focus Meet Althea McNish'. *West Indian World*, 11 June 1971. Photos by Bill Patterson
- 21 Althea McNish in conversation with John Weiss, 2 February 1999. in R. Harris and S. White eds., *Building Britannia: Life Experience with Britain*, (London: New Beacon Books, 2009) p.55
- 22 Ibid.
- 23 Ibid., pp.54-55
- 24 Ibid.
- 25 *Golden Harvest*, designed during McNish's final year at the RCA, was first produced by Tofos Prints in 1957 for use in a school and later incorporated into Hull Traders' 'Time Present' collection. From the 1960s-70s, it was Hull Traders' bestselling design.
- 26 'Whoever heard of a Black Artist? Britain's Hidden Art History'. BBC 2 2018, in interview with Brenda Emmanus, McNish describes the process of designing *Golden Harvest*. [www.imdb.com/title/tt8925296/characters/nm11553301](http://www.imdb.com/title/tt8925296/characters/nm11553301).
- 27 Danasco Fabrics was an offshoot of Danasco Ltd., originally importing fabrics by Swedish firm Mölnlycke.
- 28 J.S Barker, 'A happy exile. Althea's the rarest of them all!' *The Observer*, 2 February 1964, p.2.
- 29 Paul Glitre, 'A new venture for Danasco', *House & Garden*, February 1961. In S. Jorgen, ed., *Britain and Denmark: Political, Economic and Cultural Relations in the 19th & 20th Centuries* (Copenhagen: Museum Tusulanum Press, 2003), p.420
- 30 Transcript notes for 'Caribbean Calling', 1958, the first known BBC radio programme Althea McNish recorded.
- 31 McNish speaking at The Women's International Art Exhibition, Jamaica, October 1975.

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