



Dressed to Impress

When venerable US fabric house Schumacher decided to launch its Masterpieces collection, it turned to textile designer Alison Gee to create the début design – with spectacular results. Toby Alleyne-Gee investigates its royal provenance.

Based on the gown worn by Elizabeth I in a portrait by Nicholas Hilliard, the recently launched Royal Silk Embroidery is not only a stunning example of fine craftsmanship, but also full of intriguing symbolism. Alison Gee, former Head of Design at Morris & Co., an acknowledged authority on historical textiles and now the creator of a fabric collection in her own right, was the natural choice to interpret the Tudor sovereign's dress for the new Schumacher design.

"Since the original painting is in oil and Schumacher wanted an interpretation that was as faithful as possible to the original, I painted the artwork in acrylic to reproduce the texture of the canvas," Alison explains. "To ensure a usable, attractive repeat, I added certain elements to the design. All in keeping with the original, they include the peacock, symbol of renewal, as well as the hare and the leopard, which both allude to the hunt. As there were already butterflies in the painting, I also added caterpillars. Meanwhile, the stylised flowers are typical of the Elizabethan period, which I find particularly inspiring," she continues. "It's fascinating to think that at the time, stylised floral motifs were prevalent throughout the world. We also see them in the paintings of the Italian Renaissance, Ottoman ceramics and Indian textiles – the stylisation resulted from the block-printing technique. These simplified floral motifs were disseminated along the trade routes from East to West, and interestingly, feature in William Morris's mediaeval-inspired designs – his reaction against the more naturalistic but mass-produced textiles of the 19th century."

Hand-stitched on a pearly-white, silk-linen ground, Schumacher's Royal Silk Embroidery is a wonderful example of the true craftsmanship championed by Morris, and no limits were placed

on Alison's creativity. "Usually, a design intended to be embroidered will be restricted to about eight colours," she explains. "I was very fortunate to be given carte blanche. There are 58 colours in this stunning design." A team of 25 artisans, including weavers, dyers and embroiderers, takes 30 weeks to handmade just 100 metres of this exquisite fabric.

Secret Meanings

Examination of the portrait that inspired Royal Silk Embroidery reveals several tantalising insights. Painted by Nicholas Hilliard (circa 1547–1619) in about 1598, the work was commissioned by one of Elizabeth I's most powerful subjects and staunchest supporters to demonstrate her allegiance to the crown. The widowed Elizabeth Talbot, Countess of Shrewsbury (1527–1608), otherwise known as Bess of Hardwick, had acquired a vast fortune through four advantageous marriages. The "Hardwick" portrait is so called because it was intended for Bess's palatial seat at Hardwick Hall in Derbyshire, which still stands today and where the painting has hung since 1599. Hilliard's portrait conforms with what by the late 16th century had become the standard depiction of Elizabeth as an ageless, idealised ruler, even though she was by then in her sixties.

Turned slightly to the right, Elizabeth is depicted standing beside her throne on a sumptuously vibrant Turkey carpet. Loosely clasping her elegant gloves, her right hand rests on a red velvet cushion, while in her left she holds a fan of feathers, its handle glittering with rubies. Her face is mask-like as she gazes past the viewer, her aura aloof, impenetrable and otherworldly. Befitting her exalted rank, the Queen's black velvet dress – presented to her by Bess of Hardwick – is extremely ornate, embellished with hundreds of pearls and gemstones.

Appropriating the symbolism of Greek mythology, Elizabeth made pearls her trademark.

Opposite: The "Hardwick" portrait of Elizabeth I by Nicholas Hilliard, circa 1598, was the inspiration behind Schumacher's recently launched Royal Silk Embroidery, designed by Alison Gee.

As attributes of chastity, they emphasise her virginal status and hence her moral superiority and self-sacrifice: the Queen is married to the nation. The Countess herself is believed to have had a hand in embroidering the fantastically decorated stomacher and kirtle, or underskirt. Strewn with a bizarre variety of land and sea creatures – some more or less realistic, others mythical – they wouldn't look out of place on some of today's more outlandish catwalks. However, the Queen's gown is not merely a flamboyant fashion statement: it is part of a carefully orchestrated PR campaign designed to inspire awe and quasi-religious devotion in her subjects. Elizabeth certainly dressed to impress.

Language of Symbols

ilies on the kirtle symbolise purity and virtue, while the roses are emblems of the houses of Lancaster and York that preceded the Tudor dynasty established by Elizabeth's grandfather, Henry VII. The underskirt also features irises and other typically Elizabethan flowers such as pansies. The various beautifully embroidered birds include swans – which incidentally remain the property of the crown to this day – kingfishers, and other exotic avian creatures. Sea mammals such as whales, dolphins and seals as well as reptiles, crustaceans, snakes and the odd unidentifiable monster all appear on the kirtle.

It is no coincidence that symbols of the sea are so prominently represented. By the time the Hardwick portrait was painted, England had emerged as a major naval power. In 1588, the wily English had deployed fireships to thwart the invasion of the mighty, yet unwieldy Spanish Armada launched by Elizabeth's former brother-in-law, Philip II of Spain. The Queen's magnificent apparel thus underlines her claim to dominion of the seas. Yet however outwardly serene and above reproach she may have appeared, the sovereign was well aware that her seafaring subjects were not above bolstering that claim by plundering Spanish ships at every opportunity. The painting is thus designed to show England as a force to be reckoned with on the world stage.

The late 16th century also saw England's first attempts at colonising the New World. Established

in 1607, just four years after Elizabeth's death, the State of Virginia – named after the Virgin Queen – was the very first English colony in North America. The United States gained independence towards the end of the following century. Yet this captivating painting will for ever portray Elizabeth as Empress of the Seas. More than 400 years on, her dazzling sartorial style continues to exert an influence on both sides of the Atlantic – and now the favoured few will be able to enjoy a piece of it in their own homes ■



Royal Silk Embroidery features all manner of exotic sea monsters, such as this fierce, unidentifiable fish with a coiled, shimmering green tail. Its form is beautifully reflected in the waters beneath.



This boldly dappled toad or frog, its compact form heightened by white markings, looks as if it is about to leap off the surface of the fabric.



Another fanciful marine creature looks like a cross between a seahorse and a dragon. Its red, flipper-like front legs contrast with the delicately rendered blue-green waves of the sea.



Schumacher's spectacular embroidery (above) was designed by Alison Gee (far left).

To ensure an attractive, usable repeat, the textile designer added various historically appropriate elements such as the peacock and the leopard to her original artwork (left).

To view Alison's own collections visit www.alisongee.com

Mother of her People

On a more intimate scale than the Hardwick portrait, Nicholas Hilliard's "Pelican" portrait of 1575 also pays tribute to the Queen's virtue. Besides her trademark pearls, the impassive Elizabeth is wearing a striking brooch in the form of a pelican – one of her favourite symbols – pinned to her bodice. In the Middle Ages, it was believed that in times of need, mother pelicans would pluck their own breasts to feed their dying young with their blood to save their lives, themselves perishing in the process. The pelican thus gradually came to represent Jesus sacrificing himself on the cross for the good of mankind. By association, Elizabeth presents herself here as the loving, self-sacrificing mother of her people.

In her right hand she holds a sumptuous fan of dyed ostrich feathers, in her left what appears to be a soft leather pouch. We can only speculate on what it contains. Beneath her jewel-encrusted red gown – surely not the most comfortable of garments – the Queen is wearing a fine linen shift adorned with delicate blackwork embroidery. The Tudor rose motif echoes the emblem seen in the upper left-hand corner of the painting. A combination of the red rose of the House of Lancaster and the white rose of the House of York, the Tudor rose was created by Elizabeth's grandfather Henry VII when, Richard III having been killed at the Battle of Bosworth in 1485, he diplomatically married Elizabeth of York, uniting the two warring families and thus creating a new dynasty. The crowned fleur de lis in the upper right of the painting alludes to England's centuries-old claims to the throne of France – particularly poignant here as Calais, England's last outpost on the continent, had been retaken by the French in 1558, just a few months before Elizabeth's accession to the throne.



(Top) Nicholas Hilliard's "Pelican" portrait of Elizabeth I (Walker Art Gallery, Liverpool) makes reference to one of the Queen's favourite symbols, presenting her by association as the mother of her people. The brooch on her bodice (above), is surrounded by pearls - symbols of purity and virtue.

All Eyes and Ears

There is something altogether more sinister about the splendid "Rainbow" portrait (circa 1602) attributed to Marcus Gheeraerts the Younger (1561/2-1636), which hangs at Hatfield House. Roy Strong suggests that it may have been inspired by the work of the poet John Davies, whose *Hymns to Astraea* honouring the Queen use much of the same imagery, and that the portrait was commissioned by Robert Cecil as part of the décor for Elizabeth's visit to his grand residence at Hatfield in 1602, when a "shrine to Astraea" featured in the entertainments.

Somewhat improbably holding a rainbow – symbol of hope – an ageless Elizabeth, dripping with her signature pearls, her hair virginally loose beneath a fanciful headdress, appears attired for a masque. Her linen bodice is embroidered with spring flowers, and she wears a cloak draped over one shoulder. The richly bejewelled, coiled serpent on her sleeve symbolises wisdom. Meanwhile, the orange cloak embroidered with dismembered eyes and ears reminds us that the Queen is omniscient and therefore omnipotent. There are definite overtones of Big Brother here, since Cecil maintained a ruthless spy network to underpin the monarch's authority. Anticipating Louis XIV's image campaign by 150 years, the motto *Non sine sole iris* ("no rainbow without the sun") implies that the Queen herself is the sun – and therefore the nation's hope.



(Left) The "Rainbow" portrait (circa 1602, Hatfield House), attributed to Marcus Gheeraerts the Younger, is an oblique reference to the Queen's omniscience and therefore omnipotence. The dismembered eyes and ears embroidered onto her cloak (detail, above) hint at the spy network maintained by her minister Robert Cecil - who commissioned this portrait - to underpin her authority.

Toby Alleyne-Gee is a freelance writer, editor and translator specialising in the arts. www.manuscript.ch