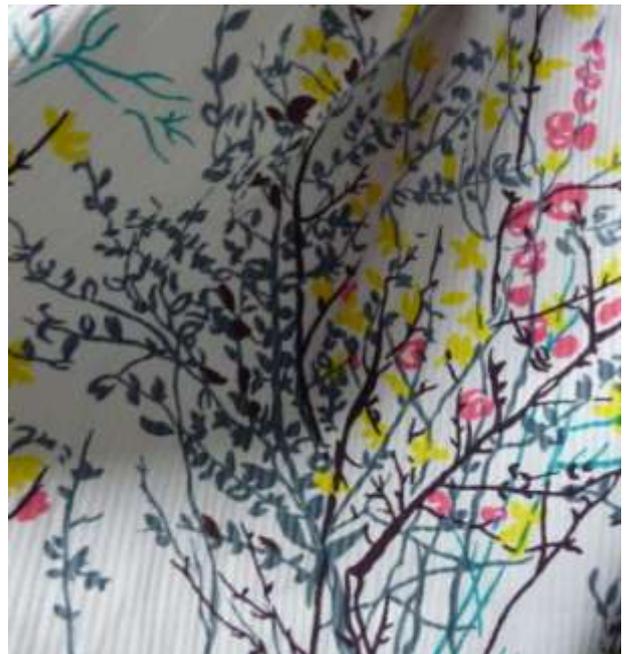


The Textile Society - A presentation by Dr Christine Boydell  
25 September 2010 at the Fashion and Textile Museum, London  
Horrockses Fashions Off-the-Peg Style in the '40s and '50s –

Earlier this year I heard that England was looking for a new patron saint. The frontrunner for the job, it was suggested, was Stephen Fry and it was a photograph of him that looked majestically down on us at this presentation by Christine Boydell. Having walked through the exhibition, glancing at the text and swooning at the garments and textiles on display, we arrived in the pleasant conference room. In front of us were three Horrockses frocks on dress stands. Although there was no glass or rope to stop us, we were all well behaved and resisted the temptation to touch. That was until the end of the presentation when we were told we could unleash our enthusiasm. These frocks, although in relatively good condition did reveal signs of wear, with some seams being a little stretched. The cotton was soft and smooth just as past wearers of Horrockses garments suggested, making it more comfortable to wear than the crisper alternatives. However, this simply revealed that women wanted to wear them. Indeed, Christine's introduction reflected what the audience had been reminiscing about beforehand: memories of their own, or their mother's Horrockses dresses, or ones that resembled them. Christine explained that she would bring together the history of a Horrockses dress through the textile manufacture, fabric design, dress design and its consumer.



Figs. 1 & 2  
Textile design by Joyce Badroke from 1950  
With kind permission of the owner, Rita Cowan  
Photographs by J E Goodliffe, September 2010.

Horrockses was originally a cotton fabric and goods manufacturer based in Preston, deciding just before the outbreak of World War Two, in 1939, to enter the realms of high fashion. Not surprisingly the launch of the enterprise, namely Horrockses Fashions, did not occur until 1946. This formed one of a number of subsidiaries that built on Horrockses reputation for reliability and quality, having previously produced sheets and fabrics for home making.

All elements of production and design were controlled by Horrockses Fashions. The cotton fabric was produced in its Preston factory. Not usually held in high regard, cotton accounted for 80% of Horrockses Fashions output, yet the company was praised by the press. Known for their sun dresses and shirt-waisters they also produced house-coats, beachwear and, as the exhibition demonstrated, some evening wear. In order to keep the factories employed year round, Horrockses also worked with other textiles, such as rayon, wool and silk. Dresses were designed in its London, Hanover Square headquarters, where two samples would be made. One was used to show buyers and the other sent to the factory in Manchester or Congleton, where garments were generally made up.

Horrockses Fashions fabrics were renowned for their vibrant, colourful prints. The example above (Fig. 1) formed part of Joyce Badrocke's diploma art show in 1950. It was purchased by Horrockses and so Badrocke became an in-house fabric designer for the company. Betty Newmarch and Marta Pirn, who also produced the bright and revolutionary prints, came from a small group of Northampton designers. Often based on fruits and vegetables, the representational or abstract designs were regularly referred to as 'florals', a term to which the Horrockses designer, Pat Albeck, still objects.



The designs for both the fabrics and dresses, were a collaborative process according to Albeck, who produced the lobster motif, shown left (Fig. 2). Albeck began her employment as a Horrockses designer whilst she was still a second year student at the Royal College of Art in 1952. Other designers included Alistair Morton, who left full time employment with Horrockses to pursue his interest in fine art, although he continued to work under contract. Other artists, including Graham Sutherland, Eduardo Paolozzi and Louis de Brocquy, also provided designs.

Fig.3 Textile design by Pat Albeck from 1952  
With kind permission of The Fashion and Textile Museum  
Photograph by J E Goodliffe, September 2010.

The firm's success seems to have been largely due to having the right people in the right place. The death of the design director, Leslie Brown, could have ended this but his replacement, James Cleveland Belle, propelled the company forward and it continued to succeed. John Tullis was taken on by Belle and his couture background and connection with the Molyneux family further aided Horrockses image within the fashion industry and beyond. Yet the designers were not Horrockses selling point; indeed when Tullis was singled out in a Vogue article, Horrockses Fashions parent company complained about such publicity.

Although, the garments were mass produced, with up to one thousand in a run, they were marketed with an air of exclusivity. Only a limited number of shops were allowed to sell them within a town. Harvey Nicholls and possibly some other outlets had designs exclusive to them. The spring/summer and autumn/winter collections consisted of 150-170 styles produced in 70-80 different fabrics. Top models of the day were used to advertise the garments, and Horrockses dresses appeared in several films. Notably in the 1951 film *Where No Vultures Fly* the lead actress, Dinah Sheridan, wore Horrockses fashions throughout.

Records show that garments for celebrity clients, such as the actress Vivien Leigh and the Queen, were made to measure. Designs chosen by the Queen could not be made available to the public before she had worn them, so helping to build anticipation for the release of some collections. Apart from the publicity provided by such clients, they also led Horrockses to encourage the development of *Qunitafix*, a product that minimised creasing, so ensuring the wearer's smart appearance.

As part of her research Christine interviewed some wearers of Horrockses frocks, revealing how desirable they were. Although expensive, costing between £4 and £7 (£80-£100 in today's terms), they were bought by a range of women including school teachers and those on even more limited incomes. The expenses could be explained as they were often bought for particular special events, such as garden parties. Two photographs presented by Christine pictured the Duchess of Kent and a member of the public wearing the same dress, for which a sketch, advertisement and swatch of material also exist. This neatly demonstrated Christine's exploration of a Horrockses Fashions dress through its design and production phases, to its wearer.

As the event came to a close it was clear that the audience had enjoyed Christine's interesting and well presented talk. Although Christine made it clear that she had studied Horrockses over many years, made evident by her depth of knowledge, she remarked that she was moving on to new interests, yet the presentation was generously given and warmly welcomed.