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# Evolution/Revolution: The Arts and Crafts in Contemporary Fashion and Textiles

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# EVOLUTION / REVOLUTION

The Arts and Crafts in  
Contemporary Fashion  
and Textiles

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**THE MUSEUM OF ART**

RHODE ISLAND SCHOOL OF DESIGN

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# EVOLUTION

## The Arts and Crafts

*Evolution/Revolution* brings together the textile work of designers from the U.S., Britain, Europe, South and Central America, and Japan, and draws philosophical parallels between these contemporary artists and those of the Arts and Crafts Movement of 19th-century Britain. The exhibition is organized around the themes of Storytelling, Experimentation and Materials, Collaboration, and Art and Life—key ideas that spring from the Arts and Crafts spirit.

One of the most widely influential art and design movements of the 19th and 20th centuries, the Arts and Crafts Movement was an aesthetic and political response to a world stripped of meaning by the Industrial Revolution. It sought to right this wrong by championing beauty and

Cover, left: Morris & Co., William Morris; *Honeysuckle*; 1876. Cotton; plain-weave, block-printed by Thomas Wardle. Gift of Mrs. Robert Fairbank and Mrs. Donald Crafts. 1988.096.5

Right: Cat Chow, *Red Zipper Dress* (detail), 1999. Single length of zipper (100 yards), thread; hand-sewn and shaped. Courtesy of Cat Chow, © Cat Chow

Above, left: Morris & Co., William Morris; *Larkspur*; 1875. Cotton; plain-weave, block-printed by Thomas Wardle. Edgar J. Lownes Fund. 1996.74

Right: Eley Kishimoto, Mark Eley and Wakako Kishimoto; *Flash* (blouse); 2001. Cotton; hand-screen-printed. Anonymous gift in memory of Violet M. Gagner. 2008.12.1





## EVOLUTION in Contemporary Fashion and Textiles

truth in everyday objects, and in the process profoundly changed architecture and the decorative arts. Members of the movement were especially appalled by the inhumane work conditions created by the factory system. By celebrating the honesty and authenticity of hand work and the traditional arts, they sought to reconnect the makers and users of objects through a more holistic approach to work itself.

The movement offered a model for reform: work would be more meaningful if factories did not dominate production, and life would be better if cheap machine-made goods were replaced by objects that were carefully designed and crafted. The movement abhorred badly designed goods but did not necessarily reject technology

out of hand. Rather, it sought to use it in ways that facilitated, rather than fragmented, the process of making.

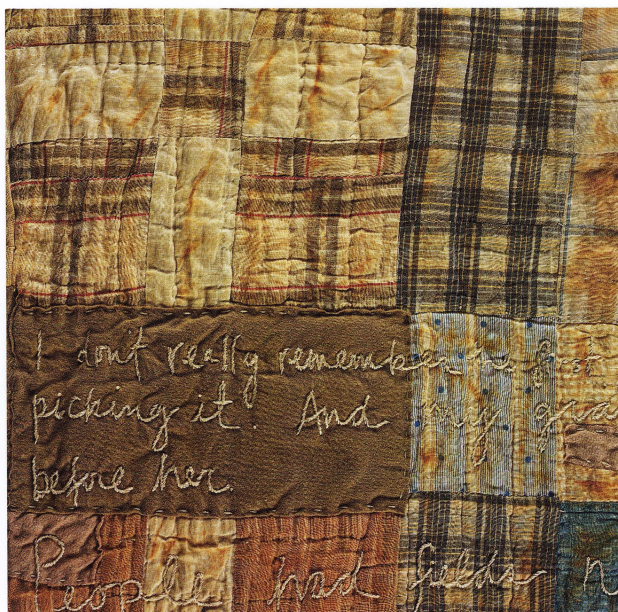
Arts and Crafts philosophy has continued to influence new generations, as we see in the work of the contemporary artists and designers of *Evolution/Revolution*. Like their predecessors, these new designers grapple with mass production and consumerism. Using state-of-the-art technology as well as traditional methods, they are redefining what “handmade” means. By developing humane and ingenious solutions to contemporary problems such as sustainability and cultural preservation, they, like the Arts and Crafts artists of the 19th century, are the creators of a new tradition. >>>



By dressing and addressing the inner self, textile designers share stories, memories, and other narratives. Tess Giberson's *A Glance Can Launch a Memory* is a collection of 10 dresses hand-embroidered with a poem by Giberson's sister, Petrova. Read together, the dresses speak of longing and a connection to nature; when the dresses are worn, their message is all the more powerful because it is recorded on women's bodies. In *Textile Stories*, Natalie Chanin gives ordinary objects extraordinary meaning, embroidering old quilts with quotes from the oral histories of former textile workers.

Right: Tess Giberson, *Feather dress* (left) and *Cardinal dress* (right), 2003. Cotton, linen, silk; hand-embroidered, machine-embroidered, appliquéd. Courtesy of Tess Giberson.

Below: Alabama Chanin, Natalie Chanin; *I really don't remember the 1st time I smelled cotton* (quilt), 2007. Recycled cotton quilt; pieced, appliquéd, embroidered by Mae Grisson. Courtesy of Alabama Chanin, © Alabama Chanin



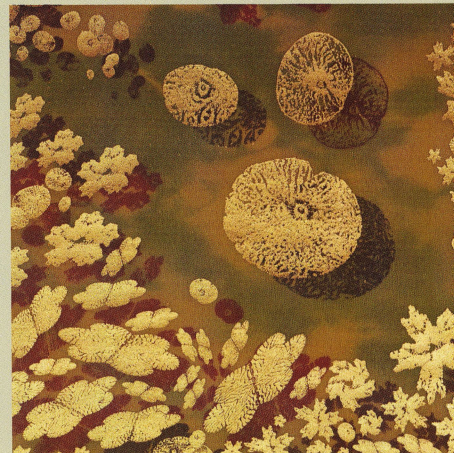
## Storytelling

Artists are unique in the stories they tell and how they tell them, and this section highlights works layered with meanings drawn from universal and deeply personal narratives. Clothing is, by its very nature, psychologically charged. We choose our wardrobe for idiosyncratic and sometimes even secret reasons, yet the act of wearing clothing invites the people around us to participate in this very personal exercise. Narratives become more pronounced with handmade or one-of-a-kind pieces that link the maker, the wearer, and the audience. In the midst of a vacuous and infinite sea of consumption, pieces that tell a story, whether figuratively or literally, offer a reprieve from the generic and indistinct mass-produced fashions that have long dominated the marketplace. >>>



Collaborations often occur between textile and fashion designers. The HaaT line for Issey Miyake by Makiko Minagawa combines innovative fabrics from Japan with the hand-worked cloth traditions of India, enriching contemporary fashion with a global perspective that is neither exploitative nor derivative. The same can be said of the work of Mexican artist Carla Fernández, who developed an environmentally responsible workshop/fashion laboratory/fair-trade network to produce one-of-a-kind couture-level clothing that embodies the soul of the community.

Below and top right (detail): Haat, Makiko Minagawa, Issey Miyake, Inc.; *Woman's ensemble*; 2006. Cotton, silk net, silk, polyester, nylon, cowhide; embroidered, appliquéd. Courtesy of Makiko Minagawa for HaaT, Issey Miyake, Inc.



Above: Hesperides Research, LLC, Joan Morris and Michèle Ratté; *Animation 4* (detail); 2007. Silk gauze, 23-karat gold; shaped-resist, hand-screen-printed. Mary B. Jackson Fund. 2007.82

## Collaboration

Collaborations create a sense of community. The Arts and Crafts Movement responded to the anonymity of industrialization with work guilds and workshops. One example is Merton Abbey, established by William Morris (1834–96) as a place where artists lived and worked communally. At Merton Abbey, Morris sought to revive block printing, the use of plant dyes, and other traditional textile arts that he feared would otherwise be lost to the next generation.

The idea of working together is significant to this new arts and crafts movement as well. By shifting the dynamic from one in which individual designers work in isolation to one where strength comes in numbers, some of the challenges of the textile and fashion industry today are best and most creatively addressed through small-scale collaborations.

Problem solving is a recurring theme within the collaboration story, with problems as diverse as the designers in the exhibition. Ecological concerns and the environmental landscape are addressed in the work of the Campana Brothers, Becky Earley, and Kate Goldsworthy, all of whom repurpose a variety of humble materials that would otherwise be destined for the trash heap. The designers at Molo Design Ltd. needed more flexibility in the way they used a tight workspace and in response created the moveable honeycomb-structured *Soft Wall*. Artists Joan Morris and Michèle Ratté have tirelessly pursued the art and science of permanently printing high-karat gold onto textiles; their thorough and thoughtful experiments are documented in *Animation 4*. >>>



Below: Alyce Santoro, *Silent* (dress), 2007. Cassette tape, cotton ("Sonic fabric"); plain-weave, sewn by Jeannette Santoro. Courtesy of Alyce Santoro with Jeannette Santoro, © Alyce Santoro

Right: Flocks, Christien Meindertsma; *Grey sweater*; 2005. Merino and Shetland wool; hand-knit. Courtesy of Christien Meindertsma, © Christien Meindertsma



Slow Fashion is a movement that makes transparent the resources needed to create a textile from start to finish. Taking its cue from the Slow Food movement, Slow Fashion rejects the disposable fashion paradigm in favor of practices that support sustainability and livable wages. This form of social activism is found in the work of Christien Meindertsma, creator of the knitwear design company Flocks, who breaks the pattern of globalization and mass production by making a sense of place key to her work. Every sweater Meindertsma produces comes with a "passport" that records the birth and breed of the sheep whose wool was used to make it.

In *Sonic fabric*, made from pre-recorded cassette tape, Alyce Santoro literally weaves sound and memory into cloth.

## Experimentation + Materials

Individuals associated with the 19th-century Arts and Crafts Movement would have judged an object's "authenticity" largely by the degree to which it was fashioned by hand. In the last 150 years, advances in technology have fundamentally changed what we mean when we say something is handmade. The contemporary movement is characterized by experimentation, with many designers using computers and traditional and sometimes ancient techniques together in one piece. Machines serve textile artists in a variety of processes, including printing, weaving, laser cutting, and knitting.

Today's movement is marked by a shift not only in the way we think about technology, but about materials as well. The symbolism of materials has become a *raison d'être* for many designers, with some following eco-agendas with a main goal of using reclaimed or organically produced fabrics. A designer's choice of material can communicate a message, whether it is a statement about cultural traditions, recycling, consumerism, or a commentary on brand identity. Mary Ping of Slow and Steady Wins the Race replicates high-ticket designer handbags in simple cotton muslin or canvas, reinforcing the power of the icon while turning the status of ownership on its head. >>>





The smock holds special significance as a work-a-day garment and is also symbolic in nature: followers of William Morris adopted smocks as their uniform of social protest and a symbol of the simple life. Creating a smock through Smockshop validates the creativity of “ordinary” individuals who might not otherwise see themselves as artists. This empowerment is part of the appeal of the current do-it-yourself craft scene, which also has roots in the Arts and Crafts Movement.

Left: A-Z Smockshop, Maude Benson; *Smock #0097*; 2007. Cotton; plain-weave, screen-printed, appliquéd, machine-sewn. Georgianna Sayles Aldrich Fund. 2008.10.1

Below: Morris & Co., William Morris; *Borage*; 1883. Cotton; plain-weave, indigo-discharged, block-printed. Gift of Mrs. Gustav Radeke. 15.079



## Art + Life

Arts and Crafts reformers, rejecting a marketplace filled with inappropriate and poorly designed objects, believed in establishing a fundamental harmony between art and life. When William Morris was asked what he considered the most important art form, he replied, “A beautiful house.” Morris was committed to producing functional, well-designed, and appropriate furnishings and decorative arts for a new way of living that sought truth and beauty in the everyday.

A contemporary project that seeks truth through a new way of living is Andrea Zittel’s A-Z Smockshop. Smockshop is part of Zittel’s ongoing Concepts for Living project, through which design, fashion, function, and commerce are experienced and questioned by all

who participate. The men and women affiliated with Smockshop sew from a basic pattern but personalize each smock they make by using any materials they find suitable.

Smockshop is similar in organization to a community quilting or knitting circle, but the traditional aspects of the experiment are subversively overwritten by Zittel’s suggestion to wear one smock every day for an entire season. If it were widely embraced, this idea would topple an established fashion system where new clothes are frequently bought, often thrown out, and rarely valued beyond their trend factor.

### —Joanne Dolan Ingersoll

Curator of Costume and Textiles  
The RISD Museum



## STUDIOS + ARTISTS

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Fernando Campana (b. 1961, Brazil)  
Humberto Campana (b. 1953, Brazil)  
[www.campanas.com.br](http://www.campanas.com.br)
- > Alabama Chanin  
Natalie Chanin (b. 1961, U.S.)  
[www.alabamachanin.com](http://www.alabamachanin.com)
- > Cat Chow (b. 1973, U.S.)  
[www.cat-chow.com](http://www.cat-chow.com)
- > Liz Collins (b. 1968, U.S.)  
RISD BFA '91, MFA '99; Textiles  
[www.lizcollins.com](http://www.lizcollins.com)
- > Taller Flora  
Carla Fernández (b. 1973, Mexico)  
[www.flora2.com](http://www.flora2.com)
- > Catherine Hammerton (b. 1980, England)  
[www.catherinehammerton.com](http://www.catherinehammerton.com)
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Issey Miyake, Inc.  
Makiko Minagawa (b. 1947, Japan)  
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Mark Eley (b. 1968, Wales)  
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- > Hesperides Research, LLC  
Joan Morris (b. 1954, U.S.)  
Michèle Ratté (b. 1956, U.S.)  
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Hil Driessen (b. 1963, Netherlands)  
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RISD BFA '96, Apparel Design  
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- > Shelley Fox (b. 1966, England)  
[www.shelleyfox.com](http://www.shelleyfox.com)
- > Kate Goldsworthy (b. 1973, England)  
[www.kategoldsworthy.co.uk](http://www.kategoldsworthy.co.uk)
- > Eugène van Veldhoven (b. 1963, Netherlands)  
[www.dutchtextiledesign.com](http://www.dutchtextiledesign.com)

- > B. Earley  
Becky Earley (b. 1970, England)  
[www.beckyearley.com](http://www.beckyearley.com)
- > Molo Design, Ltd.  
Stephanie Forsythe (b. 1970, Canada)  
Todd MacAllen (b. 1966, Canada)  
[www.molodesign.com](http://www.molodesign.com)
- > Sophie Roet (b. 1969, Australia)
- > A-Z Smockshop, Concepts for Living Project  
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- KnitKnit*, [www.knitknit.net](http://www.knitknit.net)
- Selvedge*, [www.selvedge.org](http://www.selvedge.org)
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