

PRESS RELEASE

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**The Whitworth is pleased to present *Althea McNish: Colour is Mine*, a major retrospective of Althea McNish (1924 – 2020) on tour from William Morris Gallery, Walthamstow. McNish was the first Caribbean designer to achieve international recognition and one of the most influential and innovative textile designers in the UK. Drawing on extensive and continuing research, this exhibition explores McNish’s extraordinary career and her transformative impact on mid-century design, along with her enduring influence today.**

**“Everything I did, I saw through a tropical eye.”**

**“The flowers of the English countryside, I transform into Caribbean flamboyance.”**

**“My designing is functional but free, you can wear it, sit on it, lie on it, stand on it.”**

The exhibition in Manchester is an opportunity to reveal the Whitworth’s unparalleled collection of fabrics and wallpapers McNish designed on display together for the first time as well as unseen works from the McNish Family Archive.

This show will also feature works by McNish’s friends and contemporaries including: fellow member of Trinidad Art Society Sybil Atteck, tutors Edward Bawden and Eduardo Paolozzi alongside contemporary designers Barbara Brown and Shirley Craven, fellow members of the Caribbean Artist Movement Ronald Moody and Winston Branch and protégé Leslee Wills, creating a display of the very best of post-war British design.

### **Early life and career**

Born in Port of Spain, Trinidad, Althea McNish moved to the UK with her family in 1950. She later went on to gain a scholarship for a postgraduate degree in textiles at the Royal College of Art.

At McNish’s RCA degree show, her work captured the attention of important design world figures. Zika Ascher, founder of Ascher Ltd bought her graduate collection on the spot. Her talent was also noticed by Arthur Stuart Liberty, chairman of Liberty London who commissioned her to create new designs. McNish would go on to design best-selling furnishing and fashion fabrics for iconic firms including Liberty, Dior, Cavendish Textiles, Heal’s and Hull Traders – examples of which will all be on display, including items from Liberty’s archive.

McNish created her most famous pattern, *Golden Harvest*, in 1959 for Hull Traders after seeing a wheat field for the first time while visiting her RCA tutor Edward Bawden in

Essex. The field reminded her of the Trinidad sugarcane plantations of her childhood, and she was inspired to capture it using what she described as the 'tropical eye' through which she created all her work. *Golden Harvest* went on to become Hull Traders' best-selling design and stayed in production until the late 1970s. Examples in two colourways will be on display alongside McNish's best known designs created for Heal's: *Trinidad* (1961) and *Tobago* (1960) and designs created for Liberty including *Marina* (1957), McNish's first for the brand, *Osiris* (1962) and *Hula Hula* (1963). Also on show are floral designs such as *Tropique*, printed in 1959 for Ascher Ltd, known for its experimental approach to fashion fabric production and for commissioning prominent artists of the day including Lucien Freud, Celia Birtwell and Henry Moore.

While taking night classes in the mid 1950s at the Central School of Art and Design, McNish was taught by Eduardo Paolozzi who recognised her skill as a draughtsperson and printmaker and encouraged her to switch to the textile design programme at the Royal College of Art. Her background as a painter and printmaker became integral to her success as a textile designer and McNish continued to exhibit her paintings throughout her career. She described herself as an artist, ignoring the perceived boundaries between fine art and manufactured textiles. McNish's painterly textile designs took natural botanical forms to the edge of abstraction, with a riotous colour palette that overturned the staid rules of British post war design. Her technical mastery of the production process and direct involvement in manufacturing and design gave her the freedom to create ever more technically complex prints, further setting her apart from her contemporaries. 'Whenever printers told me it couldn't be done, I would show them how to do it' she said. 'Before long, the impossible became possible.'

On display will be examples of McNish's wallpaper screen-print designs including those created in the 1960s for Lightbown Aspinall's Palladio range, a series of lavish artist-designed wallpapers aimed at architects working on large-scale interiors. The range helped launch the careers of many young designers including McNish and Terence Conran. The Whitworth houses the most comprehensive collection of Palladio designs and archive within its dedicated wallpaper collection, and McNish's wallcoverings will be on display together for the first time.

Throughout her career McNish continued to experiment with pioneering techniques and new materials. On display is a prototype for a mural she created for the restaurant of the SS Oriana P&O cruise ship, showing an innovative technique McNish devised for printing her designs directly onto panels of Wareite plastic. In 1963 she was highlighted as a new face of British Design by British Vogue.

### **Trinidad Art Society and Caribbean Artist Movement**

McNish had been active in the arts scene in Trinidad from an early age and her work was exhibited with the Trinidad Art Society between 1948–53. She would later be invited to become a member of the Caribbean Arts Movement (CAM) in London along with other notable artists, such as the writer John La Rose, sculptor Ronald Moody and painter Aubrey Williams. Significant works by former members of the Caribbean Artist Movement such as Winston Branch and Ronald Moody, as well as photographs by Vanley Burke capturing the interior spaces of Caribbean homes of the 60s also place McNish within a wider context of Caribbean artists in Britain. A newly acquired portrait of McNish by her friend and fellow member of both the Trinidad Art Society Sybil Atteck will be on show at the Whitworth for the first time.

### **The Bachelor Girl's Room**

In 1966 McNish designed a 'Bachelor Girl's Room' for the influential Ideal Home Show, creating a studio-like space for a creative woman much like herself that reflected the newfound freedom afforded to women during the period. The Whitworth has

commissioned The 'Bachelor Girl' of Today, Studio NYALI's spatial reinterpretation of Althea McNish's 1966 Bachelor Girl's Room. Studio NYALI is a London based architectural practice whose work aims to centre peripheral identities, cultures, and people developing narratives towards a more inclusive understanding of the built environment.

## **Carnival**

Included in the exhibition are photographs showing McNish's award winning 'Fiesta' display for the 1969 Ideal Home Show, featuring a costume from that year's Trinidad carnival. McNish was also closely involved in London's Notting Hill Carnival, serving as a patron on the organising committee in 1958 and on the selection panel during the 1980s. On show at the Whitworth are textiles for Notting Hill Carnival by Leslee Wills, another artist/designer of Caribbean heritage from Guyana who was mentored by McNish.

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The exhibition is curated by Rowan Bain, Principal Curator at the William Morris Gallery and Rose Sinclair, Lecturer in Design Education at Goldsmiths, University of London. *Althea McNish: Colour Is Mine* is part of a three-year research, exhibition and archiving project generously supported by the Society of Antiquaries through its Janet Arnold Award.

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**For further press information and images please contact** Catharine Braithwaite on 07947 644110 or [cat@we-r-lethal.com](mailto:cat@we-r-lethal.com)

## **Notes to Editors**

Image credit: Photo: Hodder/ANL/Shutterstock Design: Mark El-khatib

## **About the Whitworth**

The Whitworth is proudly part of The University of Manchester, operating as a convening space between the University and the people of the city. It was founded in 1889 as The Whitworth Institute and Park in memory of the industrialist Sir Joseph Whitworth for "the perpetual gratification of the people of Manchester" and continues this mission today in new contexts. In 2015 the gallery undertook a £17 million redevelopment by architects MUMA, which doubled the public space, creating new facilities to house the collection of over 55,000 works of art, textiles and wallpaper. Along with expanded gallery spaces, a study centre, learning studio, and collections care centre, the gallery reconnected with its park, with communal gardens and outdoor programmes. The gallery is driven by a mission to work with communities to use art for positive social change, and actively address what matters most in people's lives. This new vision has been developed as part of an international dialogue about how to evolve and adapt museums to a constantly changing world. This work is underpinned by three key concepts: learning together, through making and doing; creating a place of care, consideration, and community; taking action.

[www.manchester.ac.uk/whitworth](http://www.manchester.ac.uk/whitworth)

Gallery opening times:

Tuesday to Sunday 10am-5pm, Thursday late opening until 9pm

**Rowan Bain** is Principal Curator of the William Morris Gallery, London. She is co-curator of 'Althea McNish: Colour is Mine' and curated numerous exhibitions including 'Kehinde Wiley: The Yellow Wallpaper' and 'May Morris: Art & Life'. She is the author of *William Morris Flowers* (2019) and co-author of *May Morris Arts & Crafts Designer* (2017)

**Rose Sinclair** is a Design Lecturer (Textiles) and Design Education in the Design Department at Goldsmiths, University of London, where she teaches Textiles and Design related practice at Postgraduate level. She has passion for textiles and the stories that can be told through cloth, especially the stories of those often absent from the design discourse. Her PhD doctoral research focuses on Black British women and their crafting design practices, through textiles, through the lens of textiles networks such as Dorcas Clubs and Dorcas Societies, through which she discusses migration, identity and settlement. Rose has authored several textile books, her most recent being '*Tracing back to trace forwards, What it means/takes to be a Black Designer*' in (2021), in Igoe (Ed) *Textile Design Theory in the Making* and forthcoming *Design do Race* (Dec 2022) in Hardy (Ed) *Debates in Design & Technology Education* and *Textiles and Fashion, Materials, Design and Technology*' (2015). She is a member of the International Advisory board for *Textile: Journal of Cloth and Culture*, and Co-Editor of the *Journal of Textile Research and Practice* and is a member of the AHRC Stitching Together Network. Rose is the current Chair of the Global Majority Action Group (GMAG) at the Crafts Council, and A Heritage Crafts Ambassador for Heritage Crafts UK.

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