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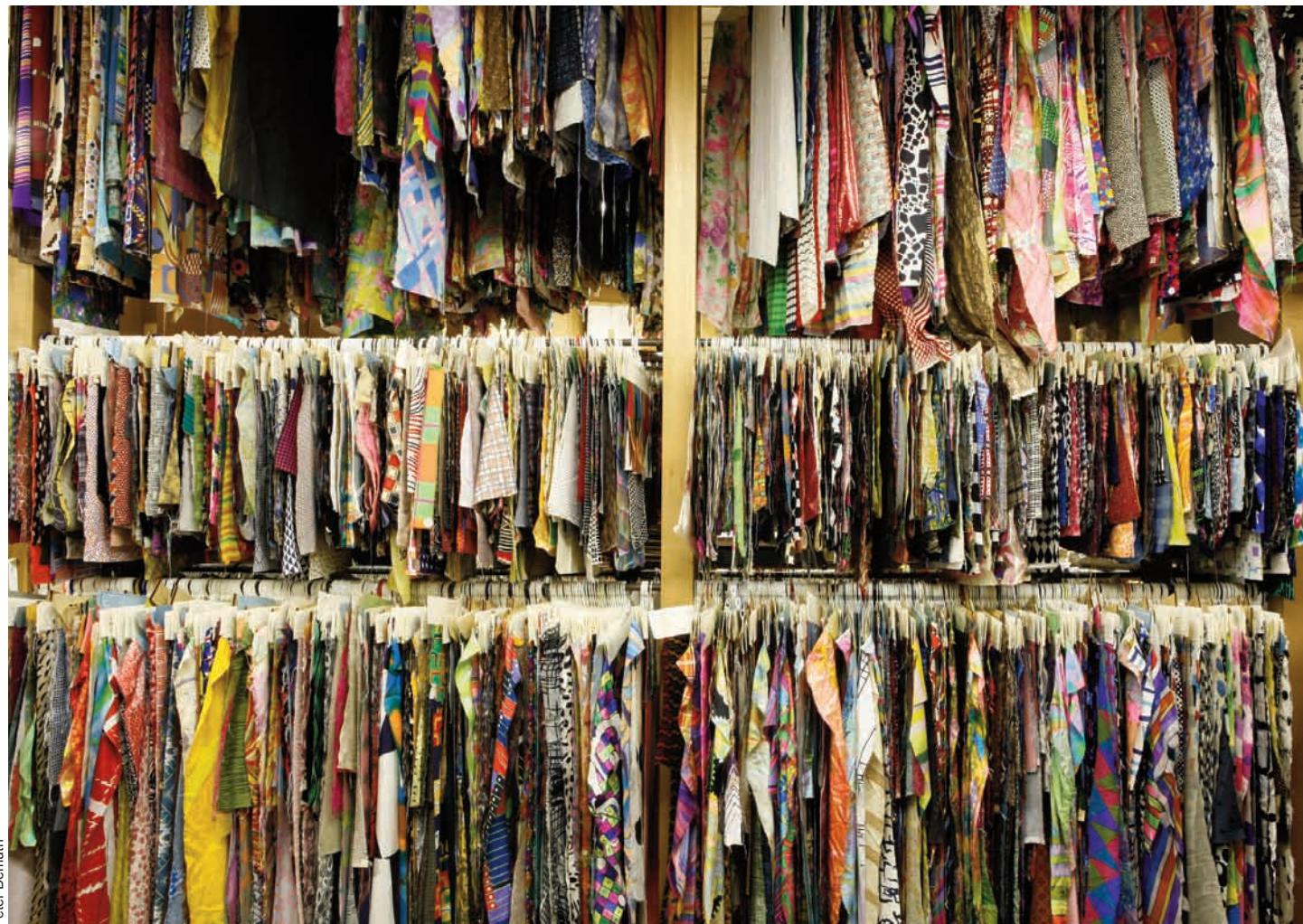


BEST TEXTILES OF THE 20TH CENTURY



INSIDE: THE DESIGN LIBRARY | SAM KASTEN HANDWEAVER
KENNETH COBONPUE | INDIAN DESIGN | OMIE BARK CLOTH

Spring 2008 £7.50 €12 \$15



Peter Demuth

Take Your Pick

Looking to find inspiration for a new textile design? **Ros Weaver** discovers the ultimate solution to sourcing ideas for fabrics at the Design Library in New York State and London

If you get a sensation of *déjà vu* when you look at some of the wild and wonderful textile prints that abound at the moment, it's hardly surprising. Many of them are exact copies, perhaps with a little colour adjustment, of the prints your mother or grandmother may have worn, or with which she could have decorated her home.

The source of many of these 'retro' patterns is to be found just outside New York City, a ninety minute drive up the Hudson River in the scenic village of Wappingers Falls. Inside a converted 19th century mill – once a textile bleachery – lies a treasure trove of inspiration, one of the best kept secrets in the world of textile design. If you were to lurk in the woods nearby you might spot high-profile visitors from the international fashion scene – as well as lesser-known figures from

the textile industry – looking over their shoulders as they slip through the doors in search of what they won't be quite sure until it miraculously appears before them.

The Design Library is home to an extraordinary collection of around six million textile designs dating from the 1750s to the 1970s. As well as samples of actual fabric swatches there is original artwork for prints and embroideries – drawn, painted, and even cut out. The resource was the brainchild of textile aficionados Susan Meller and her late husband, Herbert Meller, who founded the Design Library in the 1970s. Beginning with quilting fragments and extending to collections from important European archives, the Mellers amassed a vast record of Western textile design and began the twenty year project of developing the library's unique

Above: A vast selection of textile samples at the American office of the Design Library in Wappingers Falls, NY



Peter Demuth

Top: Peter Koepke amongst the collections at the American office

Above right: Sample books from the Wappingers Falls archive

Above: More textiles at the New York State office

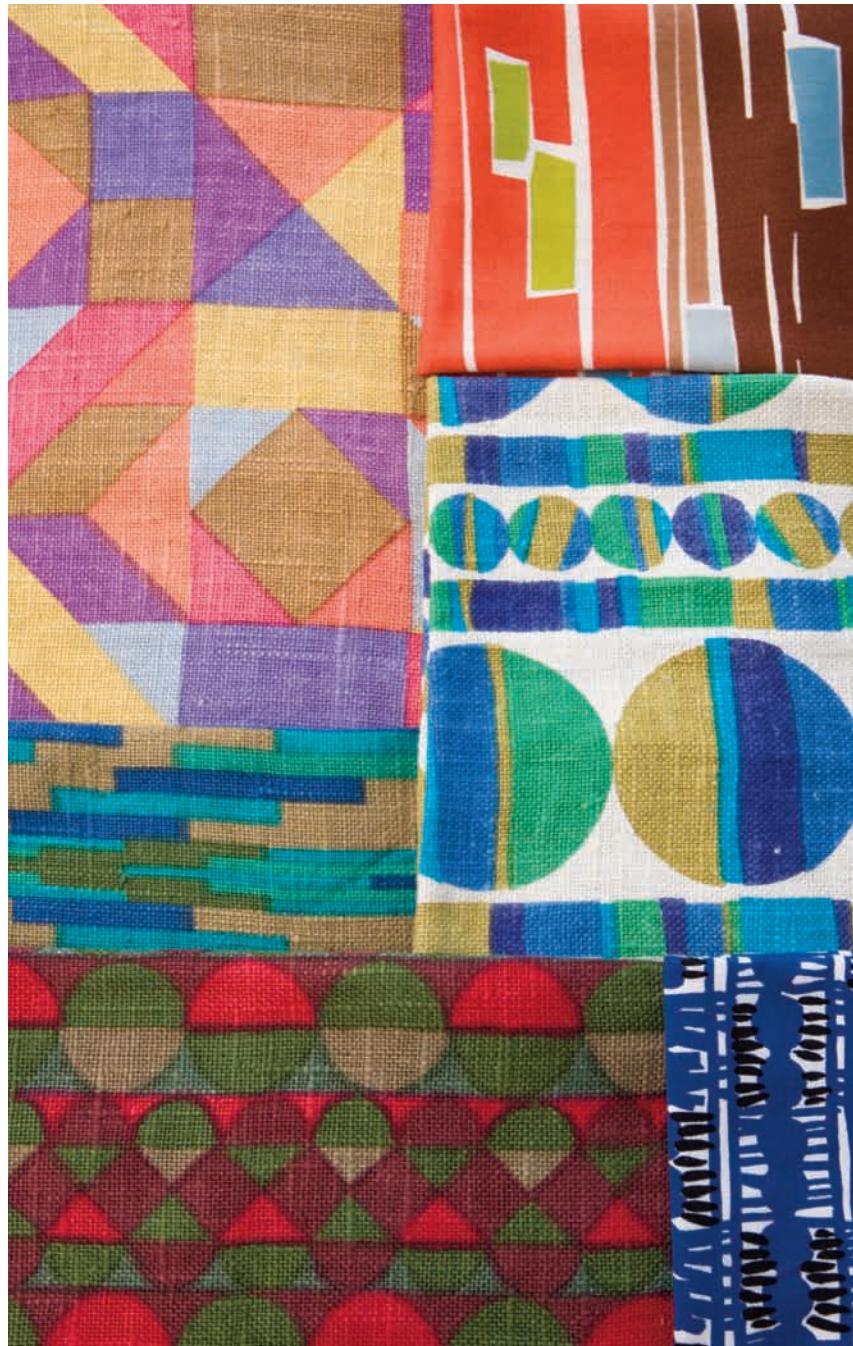
nine hundred category classification system. Susan used her practical working knowledge of the textile market to offer a resource of period designs to designers.

After the death of her husband, Susan took on an assistant to help her run the business. Her choice was not an obvious one. Peter Koepke had spent the previous seventeen years dealing in and collecting pottery and textiles from the Peruvian upper Amazon. "In the 70s I was out of college and travelling in South America. I had a ticket on a plane that never left and got stuck in the Peruvian jungle for a month," he explains. "I thought that by bringing Amazonian art to the west I could bridge the divide between incredibly disparate



worlds. I could never have imagined that I would get involved in Western textiles – in the world of tribal art we considered anything representational as degenerate. But Susan Meller made me see the beauty and the power of these textiles. While I'll always be in love with the tribal world (Koepke has played his part in broadening the ethnic collections of the Design Library) I now also love 18th and 20th century pieces. I find the 19th century too blousy."

Koepke was such a willing convert that, when Susan Meller decided to move to California, he took over the company. His travels now take him to the rather safer territories of dealerships and archives to renew and replenish



the Library's resources. When I visit the London office the table is strewn with painted designs for Parisian couture fabrics of the 1920s and 30s. These are from Koepke's recent acquisition of collections from influential French textile studio archives. There are gorgeous Art Deco patterns from silk weavers François Ducharne, suppliers to the likes of Elsa Schiaparelli, Givenchy and Chanel and one of the first to commission artists to produce designs. Other simple and striking designs painted in gouache are attributed to Fauvist painter Raoul Dufy (1877-1953) for influential textile producer Bianchini-Ferier. Dufy pioneered a 'discharge printing' technique to achieve densely coloured patterns –

often with black backgrounds. Although produced for the fashion market, many of these would look highly effective as furnishing fabrics.

Hanging on racks and stacked on shelves around us are papers and textile samples that make me utter involuntary 'oohs' and 'aahs'. There are Lucienne Day-style prints and bold designs by French interior textile designer Cuvelier from the 1950s, delicate patterns cut out of mulberry bark from Japan, stripy ikat silks from Afghanistan – an endless array of designs. "It's sometimes hard to part with them," says Kate Denham who heads the London office. "But when they're gone, they're gone." I'm puzzled by a collection of seventy-odd

Top left: One of the Raoul Dufy gouache painted designs for Bianchini-Ferier

Above: A selection of 1950s textiles by French interior designer Cuvelier from the London office

Above left: Kate Dedham amongst the many textile samples in London



versions of polka dots, just a small selection of those kept in Wappingers Falls. Surely these are so easy to dream up nobody would buy them, but I'm assured they do.

Most of the pieces are for sale, together with the rights of reproduction. To satisfy a growing international client base the Library has offices in Manhattan, London and now Florence. These are regularly refreshed with samples from the latest collections acquired. Prices range from \$100 for a small sample of simple printed fabric to thousands for original painted designs. Pieces not on sale can be taken out on loan for a two-year period.

Because the pieces are organised from the point of view of design, rather than historically, the Library constitutes an invaluable resource for designers of every discipline employing pattern. Staff with expertise in both fashion and the interiors market are on hand to guide clients through what could otherwise be a completely bewildering, if mouthwatering, array of carefully preserved fragments. "Early 20th century silks used for dressmaking are now



inspiring home furnishings. The crossover is interesting," says Koepke, who confesses to be more at home with home furnishings. "It's about being useful to people. We pride ourselves in being extra good at putting out what people would like to see. It's about the nest from which your design is chosen. You say the kind of thing you are looking for and we will pull out a thousand from which to choose and then help you to focus." www.design-library.com

Above left: A pile of antique

furnishings at Wappingers Falls

Above: Rows of even more samples at the American office

The Design Library offers a digital resource for designers based on Susan Meller's book *Textile Designs: Two Hundred Years of European and American Patterns*. The Textile Designs Digital CD collection contains a total of 1763 period patterns from the collection of the Design Library with a license agreement granting the right to reproduce the designs royalty-free. The DVD of 203 royalty-free designs from Susan Meller's new book *Russian Textiles* is now also available.