

Special and Reflective Tribute to Althea McNish

Wednesday 22 April 2020

Welcome to our Special and Reflective Tribute to Althea McNish, as we share our heritage from Bruce Castle Museum & Archive.

Our originally-planned post from the weekend has been brought forward in honour of Althea McNish, the internationally-important textile designer and artist who was one of our neighbours - living here in Haringey, in West Green Road in Tottenham for over 50 years. It was announced on Tuesday in the [Trinidad and Tobago Newsday](#) that she very sadly passed away last week at the age of 95.

Our current exhibition at Bruce Castle - *We Made It!* - has a dedicated area for Althea's work from our collections. Many will recall we had a very special event last October during Black History Month led by Rose Sinclair, Lecturer in Design (Textiles) at Goldsmith's (University of London), celebrating Althea's life and work, her involvement in establishing the Caribbean Artists' Movement and John La Rose, as well as the prestigious commissions for Liberty, Dior, Jaguar, Heal's and Conran. Needless to say, her art was also the inspiration for a workshop we had planned for young people and families during Women's History Month back in March, which only could not go ahead because of the lock-down.

Rose Sinclair here very kindly shares her own personal tribute, in honour of Althea:

Althea McNish-Weiss

On 31st October 2019, Bruce Castle Museum held a celebration to close Black History Month. This event was to honour those in the community who in particular were inspiring to the next generation of emerging talent - but were equally an inspiration to us all.

The event was filled with song and laughter as well as members of the community and Friends of Bruce Castle who had come along to see personal treasures – such as an early *West Indian Gazette* on display in the *Windrush Legends and Legacies* exhibition – to hear the songs from Haringey's youth choir and see the art works.

Me - why was I there - I was asked to present a talk about a local woman, who was a frequent visitor to Bruce Castle during the past five decades or so she lived in Tottenham. This was none other than Althea McNish (Althea McNish-Weiss).

Althea McNish travelled from Trinidad to England in 1951 on an architectural scholarship, but ended up completing a postgraduate textiles degree at The Royal College of Art (RCA) in 1957, thus becoming the first black student to gain a Textile degree from the college and placing herself in the history books. An amazing journey if it just ended there.

From then on, there would be no stopping her.

Harper's Bazaar in December 1958 in its 'Around the Galleries' round-up noted how the Woodstock Gallery, with its steady reputation for showcasing lively

work, would be displaying *'the fabric designs of Althea McNish, a young West Indian whose brilliant compositions have already been taken up by Ascher'*.

The Ascher Design House focussed on designing fabrics for the fashion world. This would see Althea's textile designs - which she herself had envisioned for interiors - used to adorn the fashioned body, and being used by the *haute couture* fashion houses to become dresses.

Althea's design work extended beyond Ascher to other design companies such as Liberty's, Heal's, Danasco and Hull Traders. Her technical eye for colour saw her work on the super new fabric produced for the famous 'Terylene Toile' range in 1966, by Hollins Thomson. It was featured in *Harper's Bazaar* and photographed in her home country of Trinidad and Tobago.

Althea's fabrics would also be used as part of Queen Elizabeth's wardrobe, when there was a Royal Tour of the Caribbean in 1966.

It was during the 1960s that Althea became part of the CAM ([Caribbean Artists' Movement](#)), working with other cultural activists such as the poet, writer and founder of [New Beacon Books](#) (in Stroud Green) [John La Rose](#) and others.

Althea always drew and painted. It was this and her experimentation with colour that would be the mainstay in all her work, extending her skills to working with the Research Design Unit and developing designs for both British Rail and P&O cruise ships.

Her extended skills saw her designing wallpapers, as well as room settings such as those seen at the *Daily Mail Ideal Home* exhibition in March 1966. It was in that exhibition where she would create the 'Batchelor Girl Room' for the ideal girl about town.

With her design prowess established, behind the scenes Althea was an avid and resilient person, active in education and professional development. She would mentor young designers and would work across the textiles sector in positions such as Vice-President of the Chartered Society of Designers, as well as being an external examiner and tutor at various colleges.

Stories of journeys

For me, as a designer, my greatest joy was to meet Althea and sit and talk to her about her work - what inspired her and enjoying her love of cloth and fabric. But more than that, it was hearing about her attention to detail. Even though it had been a long while since she had to do the rounds of visiting textile mills where her work was produced, she still carried in her pocket an Allen key. It was the one that she said she would use to change and adjust the fittings on silkscreen frames in the mills she visited to check production. She would amend the settings if she felt technicians had not laid out her designs with accuracy. Such hands-on attention to detail.

As I have researched more about Althea, it is ephemera such as the yearly greeting cards she made in the two images below from the archives of [The George Padmore Institute](#) in Stroud Green (which her friend John La Rose had

co-founded) that are touching. They tell of journeys and friendships she made across Europe to the various textile mills, and stop-overs at cities and places. But more than that, they capture another side to Althea. Her love of animals - especially cats, of which she had several.



From the collections of the George Padmore Institute

It is hard to begin to capture Althea's crafting genius. She herself said to me she did not like to be classified as 'just an artist'. She really loved to draw and paint, *'and what would come, would come'*. She loved colour and was not afraid to use it. She loved to experiment and use different materials. She refused to be pigeon-holed, determined - as she said - to walk her own path. And that she did.

Crafting genius



Althea (left) and Rose in 2018 © Goldsmith's, University of London

With our immense thanks to Rose for sharing her thoughts and memories about Althea.

So, we will wait until there is such a time when we can gather together again at Bruce Castle and celebrate Althea's life and her outstanding contribution. Not only did she help shape the history of British design and art, but she also [changed the world of design](#) from her studio in Tottenham. For now, let us share here images of her textiles from our collections and exhibition at Bruce Castle, alongside those from the show last summer at Somerset House - *Get Up, Stand Up Now*. We can also watch the BBC documentary film by Sonia Boyce and Brenda Emmanus where we can hear Althea herself telling her own story.



Three fabrics designed by Althea from our collections at Bruce Castle Museum & Archive, showing her famous **Golden Harvest** design (it was the best-selling fabric in the UK the year it was produced), alongside the purple and greens of her **Painted Desert**, and the sunshine of her **Sunflowers**. Designed for Hull Traders, 1957 - 1961



Textiles by Althea in the [Liberty's Archive](#), on display in the [Get Up, Stand Up Now](#) exhibition

[Here](#) is the 1 hour documentary film *Whoever Heard of a Black Artist? Britain's Hidden Art History*, introduced by Brenda Emmanus and shows her following acclaimed artist Sonia Boyce as she leads a team preparing for a new exhibition at Manchester Art Gallery in 2018, highlighting artists of African and Asian descent who have helped to shape the history of British art. (You can listen to Althea talking from 3 mins 30 secs into the film; and she appears throughout).

won international critical acclaim, will be giving readings.
 Authors Diran Adabayo, Andrea Leavey, Jean Buffon and Jane Rogers will read from their books and the student poetry society will also be contributing.
 Throughout the day an exhibition of fanzines will be on display in the student lounge and the publishers will be on hand for comments and discussion.
 The free event at All Saints Centre, Middlesex University, White Hart Lane, Tottenham, is open to the public and kicks off at 5.30pm on April 30.

TOTTENHAM Hale is on the road to becoming north London's thriving fashion centre.
 The designer talents of Fonthill Road and Vale Road will help develop Haringey's equivalent of Milan and Paris, it is hoped.
 The up-and-coming clothing resource centre, based in the former Berol pencil factory, Ashley Road, has provisionally received another £50,000 slice of Government money for next year.
 Councillors are hoping for a fashion boom now Haringey's clothing "sweatshops" have gone up-market.
 Second generation clothes sellers have been retailing their designer labels to luxu

By **DANIELLE GUSMAROLI**



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Althea's superior interiors

WHEN Althea McNish is choosing a new wallpaper she does not have to look at hundreds of designs – she just finds one in her workshop.
 Trinidad-born Mrs McNish has a vast choice of wonderful interior designs all over her West Green Road home. They have featured on carpets, wallpapers and sofas all over the world, and earned her a reputation as one of Britain's finest textile designers.
 Althea, above, has the rare distinction of being a resident of Tottenham whose biographical details are listed in Who's Who.
 Her work has been exhibited everywhere from Port of Spain to Brisbane, New York to Amsterdam. She has also produced hangings and murals for cruise liners and hospitals.
 She said: "I used to enjoy painting as a girl, and it has been my life."
 "I don't know if I have a favourite design – they are all my favourites."
 "Everything has something of me in it."

Picture: Tony Gay

From the Tottenham Journal during the 1980s, from the collections at Bruce Castle Museum & Archive

We would love to hear from anyone who might have their own memories of Althea – as a neighbour, or sharing a love of cats, or indeed anything at home that she designed or created – maybe a scarf or a card or wallpaper and curtains? We would love to build up more of a local picture of Althea and her Tottenham.

And the last word will be with Althea, as she said in the newspaper above: *'Everything has something of me in it.'* Thank you Althea for your outstanding legacy.

Take care and best wishes
From us all at Bruce Castle

Deborah Hedgecock
Curator

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