

A Tropical Eye: The Lush Textiles of Althea McNish

Description



Althea McNish working on a mural

Textile designer and artist Althea McNish holds a significant place in history, as the first designer of African-Caribbean descent to find international success. Her lively, exuberant textiles were a breath of fresh air in postwar 1950s Britain, injecting the cultural landscape with great swathes of lush, tropical colour. Turner found the inspiration for her fertile patterns from her native Trinidad, as well as reimagining British flora and fauna through her tropical lens, as she explains, â??Everything I did, I saw it through a tropical eye.â?•



McNish was born in Trinidad in 1924 to a creative family; her mother was a dressmaker and designer, and her father was a writer and publisher. From a young age she showed artistic promise, becoming a junior member of the Trinidad Arts Association in her adolescence, followed by her first exhibition of paintings at the age of 16. On leaving school McNish initially considered studying architecture in London, but she shifted track at the last minute, enrolling in a printmaking degree at the London School of Printing and Graphic Arts, now the London College of Communication. In her final year of study, McNish was taught by renowned artist Eduardo Paolozzi, who encouraged McNish to focus on adapting her art into textile design. From here, McNish studied a postgraduate in printed textiles at the Royal College of Art (RCA).



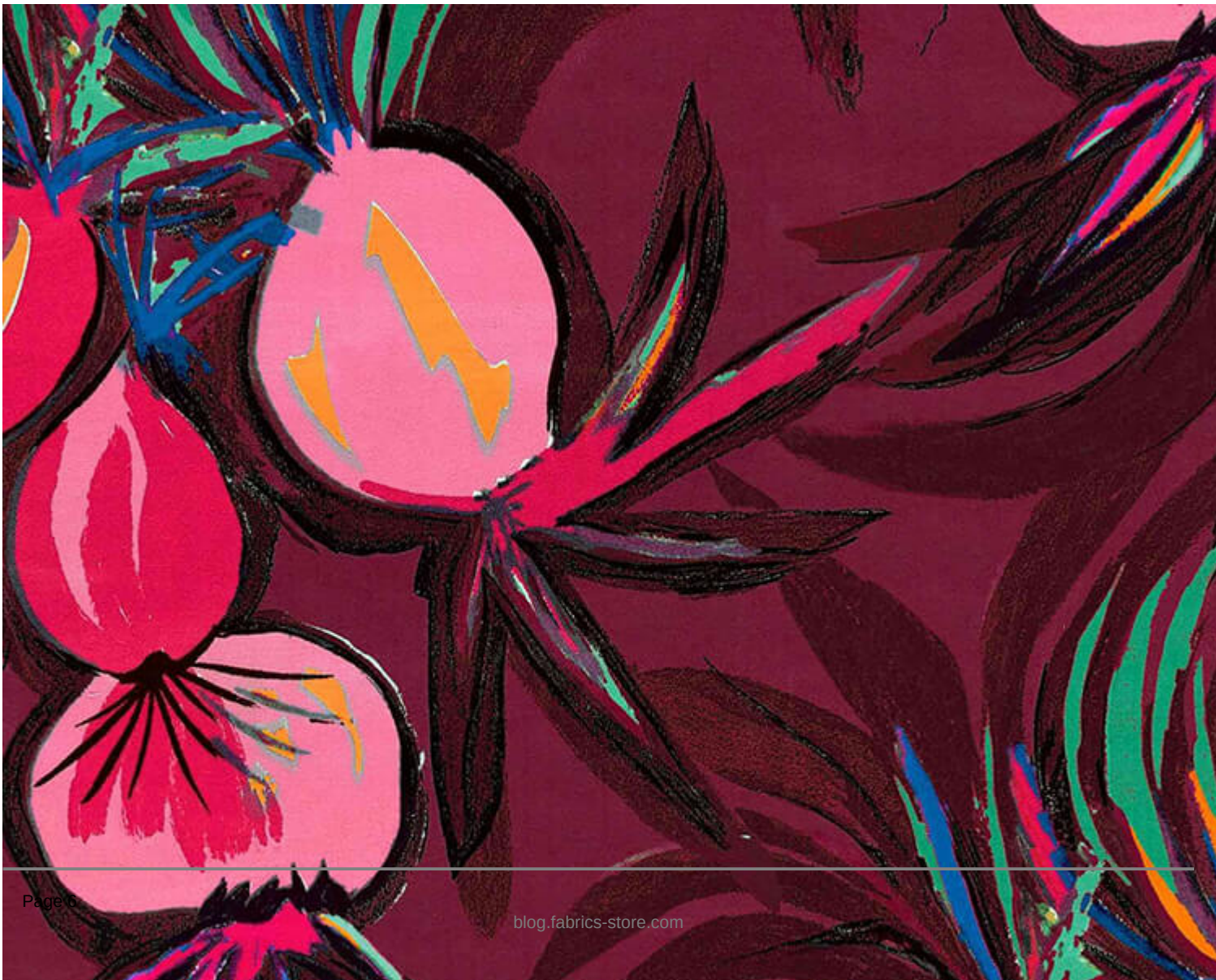
Painted Desert, 1958

In her final year as a postgraduate at the RCA, McNish visited the Essex home of her tutor, artist Edward Bawden and his wife Charlotte, a potter. During this visit McNish encountered a wheat field, which conjured up childhood memories of sugar cane plantations in Trinidad. She later recalled, â??It was a wonderful experience. It reminded me of when I used to walk through sugar plantations and rice fields while growing up in Trinidad. I seemed lost in all that wheat. The sun was beginning to shine and I just let my imagination do the rest.â?• The experience led McNish to create her breakthrough vibrant and expressive textile design Golden Harvest, which, following production in four colourways by commercial design company Hull Traders, became a bestseller until the 1970s.



Golden Harvest, screen printed cotton, designed by Althea McNish for Hull Trad

McNishâ??s degree show at the RCA immediately caught the attention of Arthur Stewart-Liberty, chairman of Londonâ??s Liberty department store, who commissioned her to produce a series of furnishing fabrics. Rising to the challenge, McNish created a series of groundbreaking designs featuring bold, vividly coloured floral motifs against stark backgrounds that broke away from 1950s traditional tiny florals or polka-dots. Work with textile manufacturer Zika Ascher followed, leading McNishâ??s designs to be adopted by Ascherâ??s couture clients, including Christian Dior. Such was McNishâ??s success, she even designed fabrics for Queen Elizabeth IIâ??s wardrobe during the 1966 Royal Tour of Trinidad and the Caribbean. During these years, McNishâ??s widely accessible fabrics brought vibrancy and life into postwar Britain at a pivotal moment in history, as she observed, â??People needed more colour in their lives and I decided to give it to them.â?•



Cebollas Garden fabric for Liberty London

In recent years several exhibitions, including *Get Up, Stand Up Now: Generations of Black Creative Pioneers* at the West Wing Galleries of Somerset House in 2019, and *Althea McNish: Colour is Mine* in 2022 at Londonâ??s William Morris Gallery have resurrected McNishâ??s work so it can be enjoyed by a new generation. Reflecting on her desire to change the fashion landscape for women through liberating pattern, she said, â??I wanted to change all those little dots that women were walking around with on their skirts. I wanted to create something for women that was more in sympathy with their bodiesâ?¦ I think thatâ??s what took me into textiles.â?•

CATEGORY

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