

PRESS RELEASE

Women in Print: 150 Years of Liberty Textiles

William Morris Gallery, Walthamstow

18 October 2025 - 21 June 2026



Print impression for *Phoebus*, by Mitzi Cunliffe for Liberty, screen-printed pigment on paper, 1959.
Design is copyright © Liberty Fabric Limited [1959].

This autumn, William Morris Gallery in Walthamstow will present *Women in Print: 150 Years of Liberty Textiles*. Conceived in partnership with Liberty Fabrics on the occasion of the design house's 150th anniversary, this major exhibition will highlight the pivotal role and contributions of women textile designers. Tracing the rich history of Liberty fabrics, the exhibition will survey the evolving influence and status of women in textiles over the past 150 years. *Women in Print* will bring together iconic patterns by designers such as Althea McNish, Collier Campbell, and Lucienne Day, alongside previously overlooked names, celebrating how women have been — and continue to be — at the heart of Liberty's creative innovations and ongoing relevance today. It will feature over 100 works, spanning garments, fabric, original designs, film and historic photographs.

Founded in 1875, Liberty began as an importer of textiles and objets d'art from the Middle East and Asia before designing its own fabrics — its floral patterns soon becoming synonymous with British design. The exhibition's opening section will foreground some of the ways that Liberty has become a household name, from its distinctive 'Tudorbethan' storefront, shown in a 1975 design for a scarf by Collier Campbell, to Liberty fabric being used for both high street and bespoke fashion. Highlights will include a BIBA trouser suit, a 1978 wedding dress, patchworked in 17 separate Liberty prints, and a contemporary Jalabiya (Mukhawar), featuring a design created by current Liberty Head of Design Polly Mason, embellished in beadwork by UAE-based company Colorful Line.

The second section will show how textiles became established at Liberty. Alongside its links to international design, the design house was also influenced by the British Arts and Crafts Movement of the late 19th century. Drawing inspiration from the natural world and traditionally 'feminine' handicrafts, the Movement provided a gateway for women to move from unpaid domestic work to paid design careers. Pioneers like Ann Macbeth, who taught at the Glasgow School of Art, were employed by Liberty. She played a key role in modernising embroidery designs, some of which were later adapted for print. This pivotal transition from stitch to surface design will be explored through rare loans from Liberty's archive, including early embroidery catalogues and a 1900s pattern book showing how original needlework motifs were transformed into printed textiles.

Growing political, educational and employment opportunities around the time of the First World War opened doors for women to enter professional textile design, and by the 1930s, nearly half of Britain's textile designers were women. Despite their growing presence, many remained uncredited for their patterns. *Women in Print* will aim to restore the names of designers to their work, focusing on five designers — Jessie M. King, Lucienne Day, Althea McNish, Mrs Stonely, and Madeleine Lawrence. Whilst Day, who played a key role in modernising textiles for post-war interiors, and McNish, celebrated for her innovative use of colour, enjoy relative fame, others such as the elusive Mrs Stonely remain largely unrecognised. Despite Stonely's designs still being printed by Liberty today, archival material is scant, and her work is only identifiable by her initials 'D.S'.

The main gallery will conclude with a display of garments featuring Liberty fabrics, illustrating how the design house's printed textiles have been incorporated into fashion from the 1930s to today. In response to 1960s developments in taste and design, Liberty embraced nostalgia, eclecticism, and nonconformity — modernising its aesthetic for a younger audience. The brand's revival during this decade laid the foundation for its continued influence in fashion today. Highlights will include a Mary Quant 'Ginger Group' floral suit, a 'Dolly Rockers' mini dress in psychedelic fabric designed by Pat Albeck, and an outfit from Wales Bonner's S/S 2025 collection inspired by Trinidadian designer Althea McNish.

In the Gallery's first-floor galleries, the show will take a close look at the iconic Liberty scarf—an item that has launched the careers of many women designers and remained a staple of the brand from the 19th century to today. Serving as a canvas for experimentation with pattern, materials, and printing techniques, the Liberty scarf showcases the design house's enduring commitment to innovation. Highlights in this section will include a 1920s batik scarf by Scottish illustrator and artist Jessie M. King, an original 1978 design drawing by abstract artist Sonia Delaunay, and a 1990s velvet scarf by textile designer Neisha Crosland.

The final sections of *Women in Print* will continue to examine the post-war decades and the resulting shift in Liberty's approach to design. In response to developments in taste and design, the design house saw the need to modernise its aesthetic for a younger audience. Notable designers employed in this period, including Mitzi Cunliffe, Pat Albeck, as well as Jacqueline Groag and Marian Mahler, both Jewish émigré designers trained at Vienna's renowned Kunstgewerbeschule, introduced new colours and international influences to Liberty design. Highlights such as fabrics created for the Young Liberty range by Colleen Farr and Hilda Durkin will show how women designers successfully maintained Liberty's balance of its established house style with artistic innovation.

By the 1970s, Liberty's textile design was dominated by the influential duo Collier Campbell. Their bold, expressive patterns—such as Bauhaus (1972) and Kazak (1974)—defined a new era of British interiors and continue to inspire designers today. The exhibition culminates in Liberty's transition into the digital age. While the studio remains deeply rooted in its heritage of hand-drawn artistry, it now embraces computer-aided design to expand creative possibilities. Recent collections from 2025 showcase the potential of digital manipulation, with designs developed in Photoshop using layering and effects that go beyond what is possible by hand.

A new film, combining archival and contemporary footage as well as interviews with designers Sarah Campbell, Natalie Gibson, Neisha Crosland, and Polly Mason, will offer an insight into the stories of women who have created Liberty fabrics — giving a voice to the designs that continue to shape the industry today.

A programme of events, including mentoring and training for local young people, will underpin the exhibition and ask the question: what does the future for women textile designers in the UK look like?

Women in Print is curated by Rowan Bain, Principal Curator of Collections and Programme and Roisin Inglesby, Curator, William Morris Gallery, with exhibition design by Simon Milthorp, Lai Couto, and Scarlet Winter.

Women in Print is part of William Morris Gallery's 75th anniversary programme.

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NOTES TO EDITORS

The exhibition will be on view from 18 October 2025 to 21 June 2026.

Gallery opening hours are Tuesday to Sunday, 10am – 5pm; Admission free (suggested £5 donation).

About William Morris Gallery

Owned and run by Waltham Forest Council, William Morris Gallery is the only public Gallery devoted to William Morris: designer, craftsman and radical socialist. Housed in the Grade II* listed building that was Morris's family home from 1848 to 1856, it displays the world's largest collection of his work. In recent years the Gallery has developed an ambitious programme of contemporary and historical exhibitions by artists including Jeremy Deller, Yinka Shonibare CBE, Althea McNish and May Morris. Other special exhibitions have explored 20th-century political posters, African textiles and the Japanese folk craft movement.

About Liberty Fabrics:

Liberty Fabrics is a true design institution and has been at the cutting-edge of design and decorative arts since it was born in 1875. World-renowned for their 60,000-strong print archive, and for the in-house design studio in Soho, London, where new artworks are painted and drawn by hand. The Liberty Fabrics offering reflects the storied heritage and century-spanning passion for art and design; from ornate Art Nouveau layouts and classic 1930s ditsy florals to bold geometrics, landscapes, and offbeat conversationals.

William Morris Gallery

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