

Audio Guide Transcript

Bolts of Color: Printed Textiles after World War II

November 8, 2024–April 20, 2025
Carolyn C. and William A. McDonnell Gallery 100

SAINT LOUIS ART MUSEUM

STOP 1

McDonnell Gallery 100

Introduction

Speakers

Genny Cortinovis

Andrew W. Mellon Foundation Associate Curator of Decorative Arts and Design

Saint Louis Art Museum

This is Genny Cortinovis, the Andrew W. Mellon Foundation Associate Curator of Decorative Arts and Design at the Saint Louis Art Museum.

Welcome to *Bolts of Color: Printed Textiles after WWII*. With a focus on Great Britain, Italy, and the United States, this exhibition highlights textiles made during the height of the experimental screenprinting era of the 1950s, '60s, and '70s. It also features several recent acquisitions making their debut in our galleries.

The fabrics on view respond to aesthetic and social trends of the postwar decades. From the late 1940s, textile designers explored abstraction, reflecting modern art and architecture as well as growing interests in nature and science. In the 1960s, huge, graphic designs influenced by Pop and Op Art movements reigned.

Throughout, advances in screenprinting allowed designers to realize patterned fabrics with an incredible depth of color, texture, and precision. Whether hand-printed in small studios or mass-manufactured, textiles of this era bubble with a creative energy shared by a growing consumer base who embraced bold interiors and fashions.

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Spatial Concept (Concetto spaziale)

Speaker

Genny Cortinovis

Andrew W. Mellon Foundation Associate Curator of Decorative Arts and Design

Saint Louis Art Museum

You are standing in front of a textile designed in 1954 by Argentine-Italian artist Lucio Fontana for the textile producer Manifattura Jsa. The screenprinted pattern features irregular spirals of what appear as pierced holes in paper. Physical and yet otherworldly, the print's photographic source employs raking light to dramatize the puncture marks, bringing dimension to the flat surface of the fabric.

Born in Rosario, Argentina, Fontana worked as a sculptor before establishing his *Spatial Concept*, or *Concetto spaziale*, series in 1949. Responding to contemporary scientific leaps with an equally radical artistic approach, Fontana disrupted the picture plane, puncturing and slashing monochrome canvases and blurring the boundaries between painting and sculpture. This textile translates his perforated surfaces onto a smooth cotton satin, further complicating the boundaries between two- and three-dimensional artwork.

In the postwar decades, Italian textile companies sought collaborations with artists to elevate their products, following a trend of combining fine art and design. Manifattura Jsa led this trend, connecting with artists such as Fontana to produce avant-garde fabrics for modern homes. Artist and writer Gio Ponti, another frequent collaborator, wrote in 1957 about Jsa's textiles: "They embody skill, they are color, the artists' poetic

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writing is printed in the house.” *Spatial Concept*, which was used to upholster fashionable chairs, sofas, and beds, represented for Jsa the viability of this strategy. Displayed at the X (10th) Milan Triennale in 1954, it quickly gained widespread renown and popularity as an art textile and placed Jsa on the cutting edge of modern design.

Jsa later held its own textile competition at the XI (11th) Milan Triennale, garnering an astonishing 5,000 design submissions. First prize was taken by *Cirrus Clouds*, by the sculptor Gio Pomodoro, displayed nearby. This fabric features jagged, almost topographical, bands that striate a jade-blue cotton-rayon sateen. Evoking earth, metal, sea, and sky, Pomodoro’s design joins Fontana’s in bringing a distinctly artistic hand to fine Italian textiles.

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Rivers

Speaker

Genny Cortinovis

Andrew W. Mellon Foundation Associate Curator of Decorative Arts and Design

Saint Louis Art Museum

In 1972, Austrian design duo and married couple Gretl and Leo Wollner developed their *Three Meter Prints* series, named for the sheer size of the screenprinted designs, produced only in three-meter lengths. Four textiles were made: *Rivers*, *Roads*, *Sails*, and *Trails*. Intended to be displayed from floor to ceiling, the striking fabrics featured nonrepeating patterns printed using oversized screens, which needed four people to successfully maneuver them.

Rivers exemplifies the impact of such a large pattern. Thick streams of color travel down a length of white velvet, bleeding into each other and defying the clear boundaries between the organic strips. *Rivers* was produced in five colorways, and in each example, dyes were mixed during the printing process to give the bold pattern a painterly, soft touch.

Gretl and Leo Wollner shared a strong design ethos—one that prioritized functionality, favored experimentation, and saw design as a form of fine art. Through the 1950s and '60s, they quickly became recognized for their eccentric but sophisticated designs in fabrics and rugs. Their works were often produced by the Germany textile company Pausa AG, their trusted collaborator and Leo's employer.

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The Wollners were active across Europe and the United States: winning awards at the Milan Triennales, participating in craft exhibitions at the Museum of Modern Art in New York, and teaching in Germany. *Three Meter Prints* highlights the peak of their international reach. They had been tapped by Barbara Rodes, the head of design and development at Knoll Textiles, to produce the collection of ambitious designs. In accepting Rodes's challenge, the Wollners became a connecting hinge between Knoll and Pausa AG, whose experienced printers produced all four fabrics.

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Golden Harvest

Speaker

Sarah Berg

Research Assistant, Decorative Arts and Design

Saint Louis Art Museum

Hello, I'm Sarah Berg, research assistant for decorative arts and design at the Saint Louis Art Museum.

The artist and designer Althea McNish was born in 1924 in Trinidad's capital, Port of Spain. Moving to London in 1951, she studied architecture and then printmaking. In addition to her keen eye for design, she had an affinity for the technical ins and outs of printing textiles. Throughout her career, she would frequently show printers exactly how to achieve the correct results. According to her husband, the artist John Weiss, "Once printers realized that she knew their business almost as well as they did, then suddenly, they could do what they had said five minutes earlier was impossible."

In the final year of her studies, McNish visited her tutor in Essex, where she encountered England's wheat fields for the very first time. The sight reminded her of sugarcane fields back home. Combining English wheat and Trinidadian sugarcane, McNish produced this vibrant, rhythmic textile titled *Golden Harvest*. Printed in four colorways on a heavy cotton, it was released in 1959 by Hull Traders, a commercial press that specialized in hand-printed textiles. It quickly became a best-seller, and for many, it symbolized McNish's multicultural English-Trinidadian identity.

Painted Desert, nearby, was also produced for Hull Traders—McNish released, in total, eight designs with the company. This richly colored fabric reflects McNish's close

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observation of natural forms and her commitment to color. After the drab postwar years, her vivid designs intimidated and inspired British designers.

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