



# Threads of INSPIRATION

Lucy Goffin's intricate and colourful work in textiles has graced the stage and London's Victoria and Albert Museum. What inspires her to create such intricate and colourful masterpieces? *Lorraine Harrison* visited her to find out. Photographs by *Laurie Evans*.

**I**T IS IMPOSSIBLE to categorize the career of the renowned textile artist Lucy Goffin. The scope and range of her work defies easy classification but whatever she produces is always characterized by scrupulous attention to detail, joyful use of colour and a seemingly insatiable appetite for experimentation.

She is represented in the 20th-Century Textile Collections of the Victoria and Albert Museum, London and in the Art Institute of Chicago, yet the term 'textiles' seems rather a limited one when applied to her output over the years.

Lucy originally trained in ceramics at Harrow School of Art. However, early in her working life she found herself combining the making of pots with her first love, sewing (a legacy from her mother), working as a freelance theatrical costumier for many opera and ballet productions at Covent Garden. The creation of costumes is akin to sculpture and proved the perfect vehicle for Lucy's varied talents, allowing her to exploit both her feel for the three-dimensional and her appreciation of surface, pattern and colour. Few who saw Glyndebourne Opera House's groundbreaking production of *The Rake's Progress* (with

sets by David Hockney) will forget the corsets in the Bedlam scene, all created by Lucy.

The costumes led to one-off commissions for distinctively individual waistcoats and coats, things she still regularly makes for appreciative customers. During the 1980s, Lucy enjoyed a fruitful association with the revered fashion designer Jean Muir, producing hand-made embellishments for her fashion house's couture collections. Alongside such intricate work there were also large-scale installations for public buildings, such as the massive window-hanging she created for Chester



LEFT All of Lucy's creations are elaborate constructions made from multiple layers of cut fabric. Each element of a design is painstakingly cut, arranged, pinned and stitched into place. This is precise and exacting work.



BELOW LEFT Careful machine stitching is applied alongside hand-stitched areas, creating rich and densely patterned surfaces.

RIGHT Lucy's latest series of stitched collages are based on flowers, picked from her garden, which she carefully arranges into posies known as 'Tussie-Mussies'.



ABOVE Lucy in the inspirational garden at Marchants, with some of her home-grown crop of indigo.



LEFT The dominance of blue threads in her cottons drawer reflects Lucy's recent work for the current 'Indigo' exhibition.

Library. Then came the highly prestigious commission for Advent and Trinity vestments and Bishop's copes for Winchester Cathedral. More recently, Lucy extended the range of her work yet again by producing an innovative installation at Glyndebourne, entitled *Slate and Fibre Optic Tondo, 2005*, a collaborative project with lighting designer Paul Hastie and stone carver Chris Elsey. As Lucy explains 'We chose to carve and gold leaf the words "Wisdom, Reason, Nature" around the tondo of slate. These appear above the temple door in the second act of Mozart's *Magic Flute* and we felt gave food for thought to the opera audience in a wider context.' White fibre optic piping provided an exciting extension to Lucy's repertoire, the intricately-woven material creating an ever-changing play of light.

One of the most influential periods of Lucy's career was her long association with the large Indian

textile company Anokhi (which, appropriately, means 'unique' in Hindi), an enlightened company committed to reviving and continuing traditional textile skills such as hand block printing and the use of natural vegetable dyes. Lucy spent regular periods working with Anokhi's highly skilled craftspeople, both at their factory in Jaipur and further afield in outlying villages. Her main involvement was with what are termed 'handworks'; beautiful items such as waistcoats, jackets, bags, furnishings, all of which have intricate detailing applied, quite literally, by multiple hands. This is an area Lucy feels passionate about: 'One of the most important responsibilities when working with the families of embroiderers and block printers in this region is to implement practical ideas that create a sustainable living, a constant supply of work which transcends the whims of fashion trends.' Lucy's happy association with

Jaipur continues. Both this year and last she held textile workshops at the Jaipur Heritage International Festival, which occurs annually, in January. These trips provide a welcome change, as she moves from the stark beauty of the English countryside in winter to the warmth, colour and exuberance of India, influences that all feed into her work when she is back in her workshop.

Lucy's experience of working with traditionally-dyed Indian textiles stimulated an interest in the art of dying fabric using indigo. For thousands of years, beautiful and varied blue dyes have been produced using indigo plants, the most usual method requiring natural fermentation. However, traditional dyers in Japan used just water and the fresh leaves from the plant, a technique that only works with the protein-rich fibres of silk and wool. Lucy now collaborates with Jenny Balfour-Paul (an authority on indigo) to dye metres of fine silks

and wools using the harvested leaves of Japanese indigo grown in Jenny's own garden, combined with rainwater. The result is a totally natural, organic and very beautiful product. Just outside Lucy's backdoor now grows a patch of *Polygonum tinctorium*, from which she plans to create her own home-grown indigo. The fruits of Lucy and Jenny's labours are on display at a major touring exhibition simply entitled 'Indigo', which features artefacts from around the world. Currently at the Whitworth Art Gallery in Manchester, it later moves to Plymouth and Brighton. A selling exhibition, 'The Spirit of Indigo', is also planned for the Devon Guild of Craftsmen in Bovey Tracey later in the year.

It is perhaps especially fitting that Lucy is now working so closely with plant-derived materials, as this dovetails so nicely with her other persona. When not in her workroom Lucy can be found with her partner, Graham Gough, lovingly tending their very

successful and influential nursery and garden, Marchants Hardy Plants. Framed by the dramatic backdrop of the South Downs in Sussex, Lucy's love of texture, colour and movement is everywhere evident in the planting at Marchants. The relationship between her work and the garden is completely symbiotic: each feeds the other. Indeed, her latest creations are stunning collages based on direct observation of flowers picked in the garden. 'I see the collage pictures as imaginary flowers, which indeed they are. However, they are directly inspired by the structure, texture and colours of the plants that Graham and I grow here at Marchants, and the Tussie-Mussies [posies of carefully selected flowers and foliage] I gather for the house or give as gifts to friends.'

In 2000, under the auspices of the Arts Council of Great Britain, Lucy was Artist in Residence at Great Dixter, in East Sussex. This is the garden of the great plantsman the late

Christopher Lloyd and it is perhaps not surprising that the artistic association between Lucy and this environment proved particularly stimulating. The idiosyncratic Lloyd was famous for wearing a range of sweaters and waistcoats in colours that would not seem out of place in his Exotic Garden. Lucy laughs as she fondly recounts this story: 'For his eightieth birthday I made Christo a special tie that was based on the drawings I had made in the garden at Dixter. Shortly after, he told me that he had begun his recent lecture in New York by announcing that he would like people to take notice of the tie he was wearing, as it was inspired by his Long Border!' A fitting example of the way that Lucy's life and work have been, and continue to be, intricately linked. **BB**  
Lucy Goffin can be contacted at 2 Marchants Cottages, Mill Lane, Loughton, East Sussex, BN8 6AJ. Telephone: 01323 811737.