

# CHANNELS

## DESIGNS FOR LIVING

### Interview with Betty Jackson

**Betty Jackson, voted 'Woman Designer of the Year' in 1983, is one of a new generation of British designers committed to the promotion of good fashion design. She has a substantial following and has represented young British fashion abroad. Her styles reflect her concern for unrestricted, 'liberated' clothes for women. Her collections combine both this feeling for comfort with the bold use of print, texture and colour. Here she talks to Maria Loftus and Sally Townsend.**

*Although you're in quite a glamorous occupation now, your background doesn't seem to have been glamorous and you had no special link with the fashion world?*

I wouldn't say my life is particularly glamorous now. That's a projection people have. That image is created by the media. I was supposed to go to university and I panicked and thought I didn't want to be an academic. I would have been an English or history teacher. I had big rows with everybody at school because I wanted to go to art college which was terribly revolutionary at that time.

*How did you move from the fine arts into fashion?*

It wasn't a question of moving. It was all in the same one year pre-dip course for the diploma in Art and Design (which is now called a BA in Fashion Textiles). We just did projects in each 'creative' area and then we decided what we wanted to do. I knew I couldn't be a sculptor because I was allergic to plaster of Paris and became covered in red blotches that itched. I knew I didn't want to just draw, so the next best thing was to create with texture and the three dimensions of fashion. I never drew girls in the margins of my school books - that's what everyone thinks you do if you're a fashion designer. People think you live, breathe and die it, but I didn't. It was almost an accident that I went into textiles.

*Originally you became an illustrator?*

No, I started that when I finished the course and then went on to do a three year fashion textile course. After this I did fashion illustration, but that was only



because I had a serious car accident and it was the only thing I could do lying down. I just drew. That's why I became an illustrator really.

*You have had experience of designing clothes for both ends of the market. How did you find designing for the cheaper end of the market? Was that a challenge?*

Yes but it was great as well because of the feedback you got. It was a challenge and it was something I enjoyed very much. It set guidelines and you had to be aware of

meeting costs. Sometimes it was very frustrating, because you couldn't do what you wanted. But the brief was that you had to find a way round a particular problem; you had to find a better, easier, more simple way of working a look. But the best thing about designing for this end of the market is actually seeing lots and lots of people wearing the stuff, and that's the biggest thrill you ever get if you're a designer. I've worked at the more expensive end - *Quorum* - which was very elite really but now I would say we're somewhere in the middle. Obviously we're not mass market, we couldn't finance a mass market operation, but we're not as expensive as some designers. We use beautiful fabrics which cost that little bit more but which are usually made for us so that people know they're getting a very special product.

I don't want to get any more expensive. I don't like the idea of exclusivity and yet being available to everybody frightens me to death. I wouldn't know what to do at *Marks and Spencer's*. It's nice to be in the middle. A lot of people save up to buy an outfit and that's great because they know that they're getting special fabric, and it's made with particular care - the quality, the cut and the finishings are all cared for.

*You seem to have a large market abroad with two-thirds of your turnover of about £1 million a year now going outside this country. Are you going to continue to use that market?*

Yes. There's nothing else you can do if you live and work in England because the home market is so dire. London sales have doubled, but it's a very bad situation in the provinces. Basically people aren't that interested and the economic situation is awful. We certainly couldn't possibly exist on home sales. I'm sure an awful lot of people would say the same. Unless you do something that's a little more commercial like *Next*, or *Warehouse*.

*Or have your own retail outlet as part of the business . . .*

Exactly because that cuts out the middle man and cuts down the price immediately by one third. We don't want to do it just yet though it's a possibility in the future. It's a different ball game and you've got to get

experts in. Retailing is very different to wholesaling. We just pack the whole thing up, but with retailing you have to change your stock in the shop every six weeks or so. At the moment we really want to expand the wholesale side and do other things within the collection, like more accessories, rather than go into retail.

*Just recently British designers seem to have co-ordinated their activities much more with a view to selling well abroad. This year at the British Fashion Fair the designers are all together under one roof. You seem to play a particular part in that. In the late 1960s and 1970s when there was the same demand from abroad for British fashion, manufacturing industry couldn't produce the goods. Do you feel that the industry is going to be capable of responding today?*

I do, very much so. The reason is that it's at a different level now. It was the fault of the manufacturers that the whole thing went wrong before. You had people who were not particularly interested in their product. They may as well have been selling refrigerators, or stereos, or anything, so long as it took the minimum amount of cloth and money to make. Now, the people that are creating the international interest, are designer colleagues, that are in control of their own businesses, and therefore it's a designer, not just a manufacturer who's in control now, and they care a lot more about presentation, quality, cost - and especially if you're selling things with your name slapped all over them. They're going to be much more concerned, much more aware of the pitfalls whereas before, in the 60s, everyone was just out to make a quick buck. If you speak to Wendy Dagworthy or Body Map or Katherine Hamnett, they're all people who want to be around for quite a long time and are interested in what they're doing. They care a lot about the future. They think long term. People didn't care in this way at the end of the 60s and 70s. I think it's completely different.

*As well as designing clothes for your own collection you teach fashion at the Royal College of Art. How has education changed since you were at Art School?*

I think it's much better today. Certainly the Royal College of Art has a very high standard. From a fashion point of view the training has probably not changed at all.

One would go through the same motions of doing projects, making clothes, sitting at a machine, learning techniques, doing life drawing, that's what we did. The competition is definitely greater now. Therefore the involvement of the students has to be greater - you have to be totally committed. I only teach one day a week and that's on the MA course. By the time students get to that level they're very single minded people, so there isn't any problem about motivation though there's often a problem of stimulation because students get bored, or frustrated, or think they can do things better. The course is very industry-based. We're always involved with projects with industry; industry comes into the college and sets up projects. So we work with particular manufacturers for a set period of time. That's the only way to run a fashion course because it's important that students keep in touch with what's happening in the industry. Also, the manufacturers have to become involved in what's happening in fashion schools and it's shortsighted of them not to. Certainly we've staffed most of the major European fashion houses with their design teams. European manufacturers seem to be able to handle designers much better than the British. There's a big problem about British manufacturers and designers. They're frightened to death of each other and there's no communication.

*At the RCA, under Jocelyn Stephens, you've been given more scope to expand in the fashion department, whereas other departments are facing severe cutbacks. Do you feel that the Government is right in streamlining the demands of education to what they perceive are the needs of industry?*

I think it's very important. I don't see any point in churning out students who aren't going to be able to have any prospects of employment at the end of it. So in one sense students should be streamlined for industry. We are very much in touch with what's going on industrially in the fashion business in England and Europe. Jocelyn Stevens is keen on the fashion school, but simply because in the last few months since he's been there, he's seen the results. There's absolutely no doubt about that. Last year we were involved in a big project with Marks and Spencer which was very successful: we produced a collection for them that sold at a rate of knots. It was extraordinary. Now we're just starting a major project with Harrods. We're work-

ing with people so that students have the opportunity to see their designs in shops. They don't just produce drawings, and then the garments, and then they're hung in a wardrobe. These things are actually sold, it's run as a business. The problem that we have to accept is money. We are only granted so many bursaries and we have to finance five or six more students from outside sources. So providing it's not exploitation and fits in with the curriculum, it's a good thing.

*Are you conscious that you're designing for a particular lifestyle? You could describe your clothes as 'liberated'. They are generously cut and are not provocative. Are you aware of this?*

I don't think one need to be provocative by baring one's body, or showing certain bits of it. One should be provocative personality-wise and I think that should come through one's clothes. If you need help by wearing a shorter skirt, or the lowest neckline I think it's a bit of a sorry state. It's very nice if you have a beautiful body but I don't think it's necessary to show bits of it to prove a point. One's sexuality should come from within rather than be blazoned across your cleavage or your thigh. I feel quite strongly about this. If you're large you are going to look a lot less large in a bigger dress. If you're thin, you are going to look wonderful in a big dress because even with a big dress you can see that you're thin and fabulous underneath. All the skirts this year are long because I don't believe in people showing knees really. I don't think there are that many nice knees around. I don't think women are comfortable in short things. Sexuality or provocativeness is all in the way you wear things, not what you wear.

*In putting together your collection you work closely with printers . . .*

We work with two print designers. Basically I talk about the mood and the look and they talk to me about what they feel and go away and draw something and I see it and we change it. That's how a print emerges. I do it so that we have something that is exclusively ours, which I like but which you pay more for because you have to pay the printer's time. It means that you've got something special and something that's been done *for* you and something that will fit in exactly with your

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requirements. We spend a lot of time looking for different fabrics.

*The Left has distanced itself from fashion because it's always been seen as something which could exploit women's insecurity. Do you ever feel that you're participating in that?*

No, not at all. I think it's a ridiculous way of looking at things. Everything must be designed, whether it's a pair of dirty old Levis, or a boilersuit, or if you've got it from the Army Surplus. Somebody has sat down and designed it and done the plans for it. My job is only one step further. I'm just doing a job, just like the person who designed the boilersuit. Somebody's got to design clothes. They have to start somewhere. Some people have gone too far with this line of thinking. I used to have tremendous arguments about this.

*The attitudes of women through the women's movement have changed too so that the crude rejection of fashion in the early stages has levelled out and led to a reassessment.*

But that was necessary. To start something off, you've got to start it off at the most extreme. I'm sure if you talked to most people involved particularly in the women's movement at the moment, they would say that everybody's calmed down a bit and that's helped. It was unfortunate really. It gave us a bad reputation at the beginning. But it is a ridiculous and naive argument to pursue. I'm sure everyone would agree.

*Who do you think are the interesting designers*

London is a wonderful place to be at the moment as far as fashion is concerned. There's lots of people who are doing fabulous things in their own particular way. It's on every level. That's what's so

exciting. You've got people who are falling out of college and managing to put collections together and others who have stalls in Kensington market and people who've been going for ten years. It's on every level that there's excitement. I get a bit fed up with people thinking of London as street fashion because there is an area of design that isn't that at all. Some people think we're still in the punk era. It's completely old hat, that was five or six years ago. And yet there are places where it's just happening and that's really funny. It looks so old fashioned to us. We've moved on. It's not just in fashion. It's in music, theatre and art. One thing links up to another.

*Do you feel that any of your designs are influenced by the various political movements, their ideas and images?*

One is affected by one's own experiences, and I design for modern-day life. So, one is affected by things that are going on in the world such as the economic situation. It's all fed into the brain. I don't belong to a women's group, I don't belong to a peace movement. I follow very carefully what's happening at Greenham Common, but I've never been there. So I would say that I'm not directly involved with any of them really. I could say of course that I haven't got the time, but that's rather pathetic. So it must be that I haven't got the inclination - which is a bit brutal - but I suppose that must be true because otherwise one would make time. I used to be much more politically involved than I am now. Of course I don't support cruise missiles, and I certainly think what's happening to the miners is terrible but that's very middle-of-the-road stuff. I suppose I'm not politically motivated, though I am really, underneath it all.

*And perhaps your image of politics, or the image that left politics presents, is not some-*

*thing that is attractive to a lot of people?*

Well there is this sort of stigma attached to it, because I design fashion. I'm not sure that every women's movement would accept me with open arms . . .

*Katherine Hamnett made a tremendous impact when she went to the Downing Street Young Designers' Party with her tee-shirt dress stating '58% Don't Want Pershing'. Have you ever been tempted to do anything like this?*

Certainly not, because she's very good at it and I wouldn't dream of queering her pitch. You see she's done it, and she does it awfully well, and she's very well known now. From my point of view, the minute I put anything on a tee-shirt people are going to say 'Oh rip off. Which is why I stay well clear. It is not possible for any other major designer to do that now. I admire her enormously. I think she's a brilliant designer. We have to leave Katherine to do that now. She's got a lot of publicity out of it and lots of charities have made an awful lot of money through them which is great. I admire the principle of it enormously, but one can't re-do it.

*There is a strong feeling that politics should not be about the pleasure principle. It seems to be a mixture of hostility and ignorance. It certainly means that things like perfume or glamour are taboo. Would you agree that it's all about the quality of life?*

Very much so and certainly not making it elitist. Making it as available as is possible, and getting it to as many people as is possible. But I'm very much aware of the failings in that argument. I'm very much aware that I cut myself off from the bit of the world that's unpleasant. I've chosen what I want to do, and within that structure one does as much as one can.