FROM

MARSHLAND EMBROIDERY

TO

GLOBAL FASHION

A Short History of Textiles in Newham
featuring embroideries by

in partnership with

Eastside Community Heritage

Recording Community History & Heritage

This booklet was created as part of

Textile Tales Revealed

March 2024 – February 2026

funded by

The National Lottery Heritage Fund

and

The de Laszlo Foundation

The John Cutforth Charitable Foundation

involving

East London Textile Arts

Eastside Community Heritage

The McGrath Makers

New Social Services Adult Care

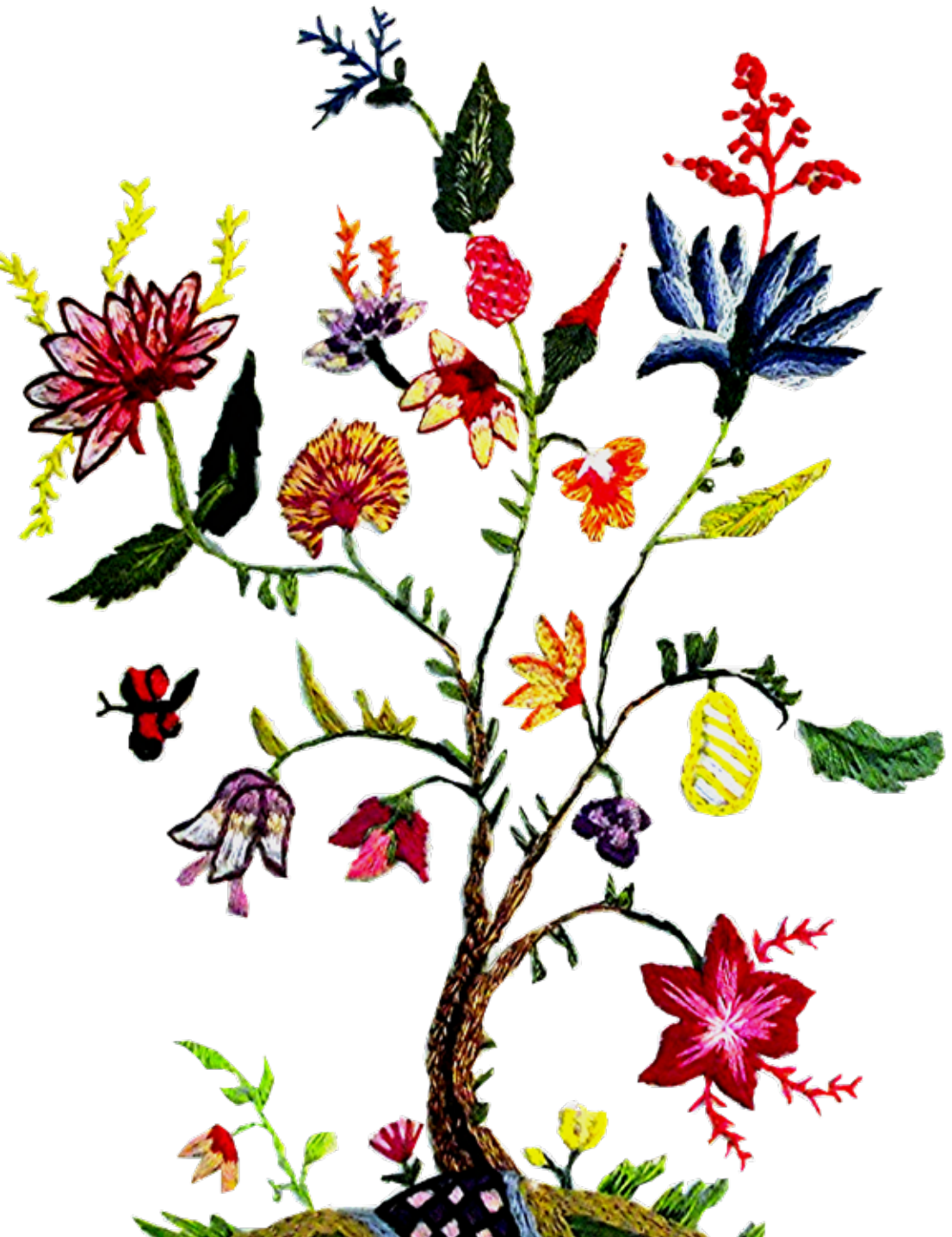
Stratford Library Community Development Team

East Ham Library Embroidery Group

School 360

Hopeful Futures CIC

Thank you to the Lottery Players
for making this project possible



From

Marshland Embroidery

to

Global Fashion

A Short Illustrated History of Textiles in Newham

by

EAST LONDON TEXTILE ARTS

in partnership with *Eastside Community Heritage*

List of Contributors

Little Ilford Textile Group

Laura Holland
Radha Rajan
Lorna Lambert
Prue Guthrie
Sameena Kazmi
Taskin Fazaldin
Sandra Elliot
Helen Gudge
Lesley Fowler
Andreen McGrechan
Jeannie Liu
Bridget Ryan
Christina Lee
Marie Chu
Janie Hui
Johura Chowdury
Vashanta
Satnam
Hilda
Margaret
Julie Gooden
Ella Mathurine
Elliejo Barret
Tara Katelia
Liz Clough
Julia Buzzbee
Nacema Degia
Neonila Grecu
Rae M
Joanne Barrett
Vernita Cooke
Marilyn
Rekha Patel
Minna

Tutor

Sonia Tuttiett

Graphic & Textile Design

Lorna Lambert

Photography

Andrew Brown
Lorna Lambert
Celia Ward

Proofreading

Sandra Elliott

Accounts

Lynn Cranfield
Mike Tuttiett

East Ham Library Embroidery Group

Rekha Patel
Laura
Halima Begum
Lewley Fowler
Ann
Meena

Tutors

Karen Harris
Lynn Cranfield
Kaushika Vaghela

Quilt Maker

Sue Haigh

Textile history reseachers

Iona Ramsay
Mouse Ward

Creative Director & Lead Textile Artist

Sonia Tuttiett

Some names of participants we were unable to collect. Their contributions are much appreciated.

The McGrath Makers

Learning disabled group

Clifton Baptiste
Halima Begum
Felicia Danqua
Donald Dunn
Ramdas Laxman
Fenella Rodriguez
Ade Adepitan
Sonia Holder
Herminio Lopez
Carina Emmanuel
Menelik Woldearegoye
Gaynor Sheekey
Hamida Ali
Olley Samba (support worker)
Tayo Awosan (support worker)

Support Workers for The McGrath Makers

Roma Titre
Anita Morton

Senior Support Worker

Eunice Odima

Tutor

Sonia Tuttiett

Hopeful Futures Outreach Group

Abdul Jalil
Abu Jubayer
Angela Hoque
Brian Mott
Chima Egereonu
Cynthia Bowling
Deborah Miller
Glory Sengo
Jonathan Charles
Leon Lewis
Mel Ali
Sonia Kaur
Stephen Battersby
Steven Brown
Xavier Azado
Tia Kaur
Paul Canon William
Sandra Matthews

Tutors

Carys Orphan
Sonia Tuttiett

Class Manager

Tolu Ashiru

Outreach Textile Tutor

Karen Harris

School 360

Aiden Kutlu
Akua Serwaa
Anum Abdul Watooth
Armaaz Baloch
Ashfaq Alameen
Ava Odili
Eliana Zekariase
Emily Blackham
Enzo Birtwistle Dowdall
Ettore Elven-Boita
Felix Gibbs
Mahir Ramool
Monty McLean
Naaima Sayeed
Peggie McCaig
Sayem Sayem
Stanley Wick
Zaiden Hussain

Tutor

Neo Grecu

This history of textiles in Newham was undertaken as part of a two year study of the roots of the lively textile culture that flourishes in this diverse borough. Our project looked at both the array of cultures from which members of East London Textile Arts came and the rich world of making that has run through the history of this area over many centuries.

The story of Newham and textiles, though much talked about by women textile makers seems to be a relatively unresearched area. Perhaps this owes partly to there having been no widespread unemployment when textile workers lost their jobs from the 1970s onwards. Factories moved to cheaper parts of the world and workers moved on to other work.

This book is decorated with embroideries made by ELTA embroiderers on a two year heritage project. Rather than telling a historical story, the embroideries celebrate Newham's rich cultrual heritage, leaving the words to tell their tales.

The huge variety of cultures found within Newham's communities was far too large for our project to encompass so instread we focused on a few main areas. With the adults with learning disabilities we made Indian animals and bunting using patterns of flags from the countries from which their families orignated. With children from School 360 we made puppets inspired by a traditional Moldavian folk tale. Much of the study for our Wednesday class was through tradional motifs exploring a range of cultures from paisleys to Islamic geometry, Trees of Life, and Chinese folk motifs amongst others. These motifs have flourished for centuries and are re-born everytime a community engages with them. They are easily found on the internet, simple to draw and form a bridge from timeless tradition to embroideries that relate to life in East London now.

This is not a compete history of textiles in Newham - that would be beyond the capacity of a textile community group to produce on a two-year project. Rather it is a first exploration of a rich and vibrant history that is part of what makes Newham the lively textile centre that it is now.

Overleaf
Flags of the World

Textiles and the Adventure of Heritage

East London Textile Arts (ELTA) is a community textile project that over time has become a collective. It draws together the rich heritage of Newham with its diverse global communities. Since being set up in 2010 to offer a small number of embroidery classes, ELTA has been running consistently and has expanded to teach between 60 and 120 people a week across a series of classes, all run by volunteers.

Why focus on textiles? The answer was clear from the outset: textiles are cheap, portable and universal, require little resources and storage, and provide endless creative possibilities. More importantly, the skills to make textiles are already present within communities – from women and men who have spent decades working as homeworkers to the fabric shops and tailors dotted around the borough, and the domestic and sociable spaces of embroidering, knitting, crocheting and clothes making for enjoyment. Textile art is not an activity that could or should always be taught by visiting artists and outsiders. Such practices can create a form of creative dependency. Rather, textile art can draw together existing skills within communities.

Opposite page
Embroideries inspired by Tree of Life designs
Above
Two chinese chckens
Two chinese folk animal motifs

As ELTA has established itself over the years, its place within a longer tradition of local and global textiles became clearer. Newham is a place with a rich history of textile manufacturing and global flows of people, knowledge, goods and creativity. Once an Essex marshland to the east of London, its good access to both rivers and the city helped make the area a centre for industrialised textile production from the late 17th century. This accelerated in the 19th century, and textiles occupied a central place in the area's urbanisation and industrialisation, helping to transform it into a place of local and global migration. Today, Newham remains deeply shaped by this long-term history, as well as more recent developments of de-industrialisation and demographic change. Together, this has helped generate the immense diversity of cultures in the borough.

Both Pages
Puppets of the World
Background Design
Islamic geometric designs by The McGrath Makers (learning disabled group)

ELTA has from the beginning responded to various elements of this history, from the environmental possibilities and subsequent damage brought about by industrialisation along the River Lea, the public health effects of work and life in Newham, and the diverse artistic and cultural histories from around the world present in the borough. This book brings together the story of ELTA with the longer story of textiles in Newham. It draws on existing histories of Newham, archival materials, oral histories conducted with members of ELTA, together with embroidered illustrations all completed in the last two years, to explore how textiles have been at the heart of and reflect one of the most vibrant and diverse places in Britain. By telling this story of the living textile heritage of Newham, we also seek to offer a vision of what textiles can do.

Above
Chinese butterfly and plant design
Below
Chinese fish designs
Opposite
Chinese flower designs

Environment: Marshland to Factories

Rural Textiles

Textiles have been part of Newham for as long as the area has been inhabited. They have shaped its changing landscape from a rural Essex marshland into an industrial centre 'of but not in London', and now firmly a part of post-industrial London.

For most of its early history, the agrarian land and marshes that would become Newham were already part of an international textile trade. The earliest evidence of settlement in West Ham, at the Cistercian Abbey of Stratford Langthorne, provides archaeological evidence of a 12th century wool comb and at least 800 sheep. The wool industry was a significant part of the rural economy with exports to Florence and the Low Countries. While the quality of wool from Essex was regarded as inferior to that from the west of the country, wool nevertheless continued to be a major source of trade for Essex throughout the medieval and early modern periods.

Above and Left
Kantha Birds
Opposite
Birds of Paradise

Women played a key role the international medieval textile trade, especially in the growth of embroidery. The 13th and 14th centuries marked the golden age of Opus Anglicanum, the medieval school of English needlework which became internationally renowned for its skill and luxury. These embroideries were most commonly ecclesiastical in nature, and found even in smaller power centres such as Stratford Langthorne and Barking Abbey. They often depicted holy figures with elaborate decorative foliage and animals, portrayed in a realist style that was close to painting. They were produced in workshops and convents across the country, with needlework becoming so popular amongst nuns that one Archbishop had to forbid nuns from "doing any needlework except for church ornaments". At Barking Abbey, brokering the sale of expensive embroideries between English nobility provided an income for the convent.

The villagers in the south of Moldova always wore traditional wear… When we were part of the Soviet Union, the cultural department wanted to impose a certain standard that would say 'this is your cultural wear', and it was not. It was not the colours that we would traditionally wear, the symbols weren't the same, they just gave us a parameter of botanicals, and colours, and a certain style of clothing, and they told us 'this is what you're supposed to wear when you represent your heritage.' … As a child, I knew the notion of traditional wear, because it was something that we wore on special occasions, not as family, but only when it was a performance at school or a show in the village or town. I was aware that traditional wear on stage is not really the traditional wear our grandmothers used to wear, because they were wearing that traditional wear every single day. That was the real traditional wear.
[Neonila Grecu ELTA oral histories.]

Opposite
Tree of Life design with butterflies and moths
Above
Embroidered hexagons from Islamic geometry heritage

Industrialisation

In many ways Essex escaped the radical transformations of the early industrial revolution. By the early 19th century, the area of modern day Newham was still farm and marshland, with small settlements in Plaistow, West Ham and Stratford. Only in the latter, where tidal mills could be built, had a small degree of industrialisation taken place: the Essex cloth trade that had almost entirely collapsed by the end of the 18th century was replaced by a few textile manufacturing workshops in Stratford. Amongst these were silk manufacturing and calico printing, drawing on the pool of unemployed textile workers in Essex who could be employed at lower rates than in city locations such as Spitalfields.

Broader changes in the textile trade, however, significantly changed how textiles were manufactured and traded in the region. By the 18th century the expansion of global commerce and imperial trade networks had led to the decline of the English wool trade, and the traditional cloth industry in Essex had mostly come to an end. Wool was increasingly replaced by cotton, a new material that had first arrived in Britain in the 16th century and which by the 18th century had become one of its most significant commodities. Britain grew rich off the profits of expanding empire and global trade, able to cultivate and export cotton from newly acquired colonies in South Asia.

Left
Design created from embroidery from heritage project

Right
Russian Doll Jacket with trousers made from ELTA fabric design using Russina folk motifs and traditional Russian head-resses known as kokoshniks

While much of this new globalised textile industry was connected to the north of England, the south east also began to occupy an increasingly important place in networks of production and trade. In the 1830s wealthy Lancashire cotton mills turned their attention to East Anglia as a place for investment, helping to fund the construction of rail links between Stratford and London. With the new railway links and the construction of Victoria Docks in the 1850s, West Ham's strategic location for new industrial textile production was enhanced. Land was cheap, access to rivers such as the Thames, Lea and Roding was good, labour was available, and goods could easily be transported to the nearby growing city of London.

It was the 1844 Metropolitan Buildings Act, however, which was the driving force behind the industrialisation of West Ham. Concerned to counteract the more unpleasant and unhealthy elements of urban industrialisation, this act prohibited the most polluting industries from operating within the boundaries of the City of London, thus prompting manufacturers to move beyond the city limits. The westerly winds that blew over London encouraged the dirtiest and smelliest industries to move eastwards, to avoid polluting the city.

Amongst these dirty industries were iron works, gas works, chemical production, flour mills, and soap, tallow, candle, tar and ink manufacturers. The Tate and Lyle sugar refinery became one of the longest and largest employers in the area. Textiles also played an important role in this industrial development: processes connected to textile and clothing manufacturing increased across West Ham, including dyeing, spinning mills, leather works, cotton and silk printing, fur, tailors, shirt-makers, hosiers, drapers, jute manufacturing, and others. Companies were drawn to West Ham from overseas, such as the Leather Cloth Works in Stratford, which arrived from New Jersey and began making artificial leather from woven cotton fabric.

With these new industries, the population expanded from just under 10,000 people in 1821 to over 300,000 people by 1921. Such transformation of the area was regarded by some as a form of progress: in 1881, one residential guide to "the suburban homes of London" and their "society, celebrities, and associations" claimed that in West Ham "surely it is a reason for all to be thankful that the miserable swamp has now become, not only the home of all these industries, but, in addition, contains a thriving population of 100,000 human beings."

Left
English medieval dragon design
Right
Islamic octagon design with peacok

Environmental Crisis

The 19th century saw the period of greatest environmental transformation in Newham. Alongside heavier industry, textile industries played their part in the environmental degradation of what would become the borough of West Ham. The legal protections introduced in the 1848 Public Health Act and the establishment of the Local Board of Health, designed to protect residents and workers from the worst effects of industrialisation, were ineffective. There were few consequences for polluting industries so long as they remained away from the more genteel areas of West Ham.

The River Lea had from the 18th century been used for textile bleaching and dyeing in Stratford's small industries. However, the expansion in water usage and chemical production led to a deterioration in water quality. The growing population put additional pressure on water supplies. Textile dyes such as alizarin, an important chemical in the production of 'Turkey red' and which was produced in Silvertown, left behind contaminated water. The decline in water quality had been noted as early as the mid-1860s, and contributed to the decline of the last calico printers in the area.

Page decoration
Octagons inspired by Islamic geometry with animal and plant motifs

The environmental impact of these industries, as well as the broader problems of urbanising low-lying marshland vulnerable to both flooding and drought, led to dramatic social and political changes. In 1898, a water crisis in which the East London Waterworks Company cut off water to houses for several months during a period of drought, led to a political crisis. Inequalities between the living conditions of those in West Ham and other parts of London were exposed and strengthened growing calls for social equality. A few months later, the Labour Group won the municipal elections and West Ham became the first victory for the new Labour Party. Keir Hardie was later elected in West Ham South as Labour's first MP. Despite the vast transformations of the area in the 19th century, West Ham was never entirely industrialised, and access to nature remained a part of daily life. In contrast to the overcrowded slums of London's East End, West Ham retained something of a countryside feel, with grazing cows, market gardens, allotments and fishing in the river. Social contrasts were evident though, with factory workers living in poorer housing in industrial areas, and managers and proprietors living more luxuriously on the edges of Epping Forest.

Opposite
Octagons inspired by Islamic geometrical designs and decoration

Textile Recycling

While environmental degradation has a long history in Newham, so too do practices of reuse and recycling. From the medieval period, rags had played a vital role in the production of paper. The figures of the "ragmen" and "ragpickers" emerged and in 1588, their trade was officially recognised. Collecting waste textiles from homes or refuse piles and selling them to papermakers was famously unpleasant, hard and badly paid work. However, the necessary work of rag selling took place in markets and fairs across the country. Higher quality white linen rags were exported to continental Europe where rags were in short supply and needed for making writing paper. Lower quality rags were made into rougher papers such as wrapping paper or board, and the poorest quality rags ended up as fertilizer on fields.

With the industrialisation of textile production, the scale of textile waste also increased, prompting efforts to reimagine new products made from waste. The growth of West Ham as a site of industrial textile manufacturing also made it well placed to embrace the development of textile recycling. As well as providing cheap second-hand clothing and material for paper manufacturing, rags could be used to manufacture new textiles. Old wool and leftover materials from textile factories had started to be recycled as "shoddy" from the 1810s, and its use as a virgin wool substitute helped lower the cost of woollen clothing. By the 1950s, uniforms for the Army and Air Force were made using over 80% shoddy. Cotton rags could also be cut down into flock and used in upholstery, while "Garnett wire" was made from yarn waste. These processes of textile recycling benefitted from the industrial facilities and space of West Ham. Business-minded rag merchants such as Saul Harrison with vast washing machines were able to turn rags into industrial cleaning materials and wiping cloths.

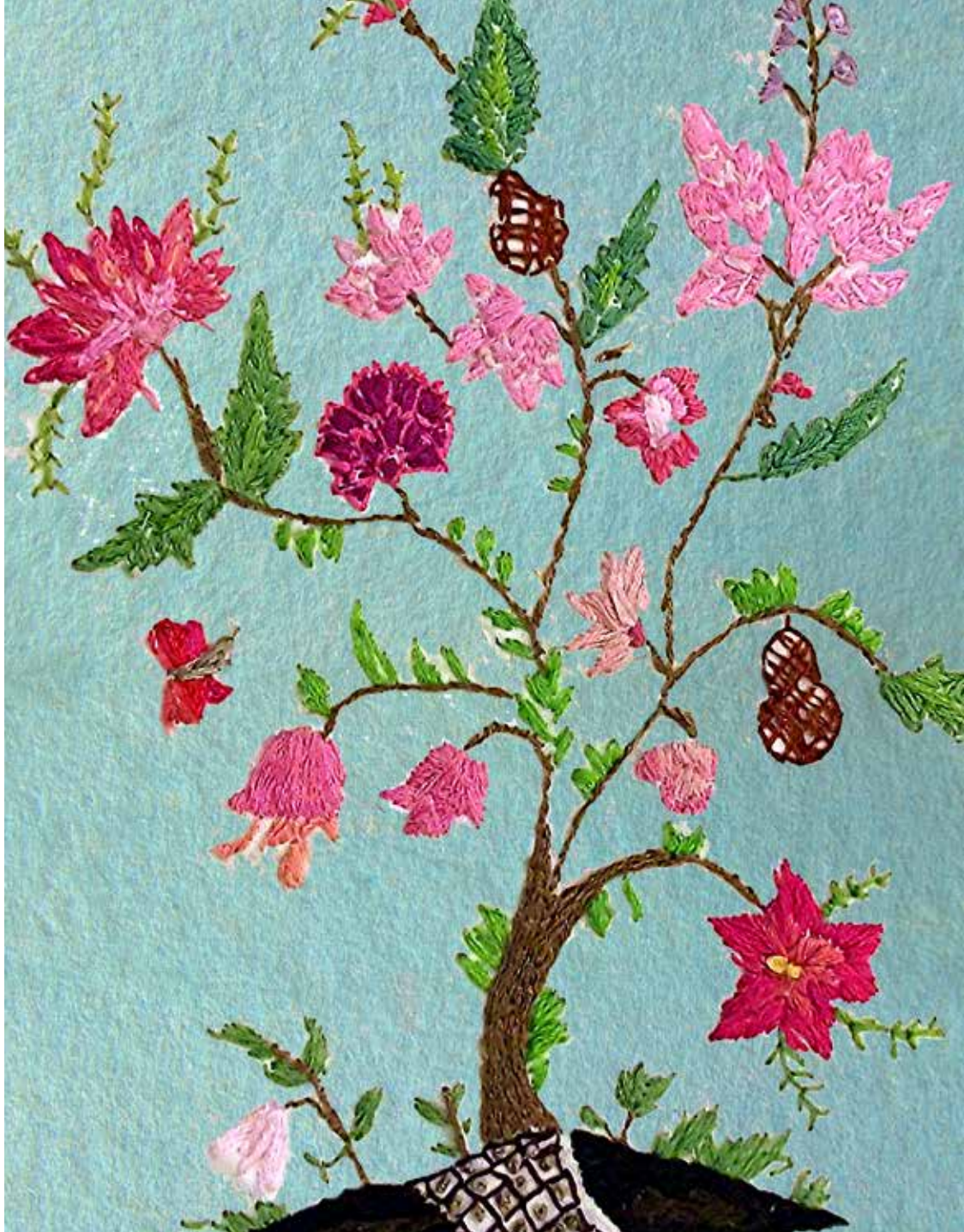
Previous page
Tree of Life designs

Both pages
Rat puppets inspired by London Pearly Kings and Queens

"Rag and bone" collectors found plentiful work in the increasingly populated streets of West Ham, and continued to operate well into the 20th century. Children would rush out to offer clothes in exchange for pennies, balloons, goldfish, chicks, "donkey stones" or even a catapult. The range of goods offered in exchange for rags was limited by the 1936 Public Health Act, which prohibited rag and bone men from offering food and drink to children under the age of 14. Concerns about the behaviour of rag and bone men nevertheless continued to be expressed, and in 1953 a court in Stratford rejected an accusation that goldfish were being used to "incite" children to bring rags to them.

I was born in Pakistan, close to no big city… There was no college or training centre. They sent me to a local tailor. They were making shalwar kameez, and I started learning shalwar kameez. He looked after us, he taught very well. I did two years … Then I moved to Lahore and I found an industrial job. We made for a Western company, making for "New Look". That time I had no idea what "New Look" is. It was big – more than 400 or 500 people. There were different areas – overlocker, packing. I was stitching as a machinist…. I came to East London. Someone said to me, "In Commercial Road there is fashion garment making". I got a job in Commercial Road, I'm making dresses and skirts, those kinds of things. The clothes went to different parts of Europe. When I finished at Commercial Road, I went to Carpenters Road. It was a totally different world. There were 250 machines. 100 machines just for stitching. These clothes were going to Marks and Spencer… I did two years [in Ilford Ley Street] making high ranking officers' suits for the army, the queen's regiment. Our boss measured the soldiers in the office and he brought the measurements and we cut the garments. . .
[Aslam, ELTA oral histories]

Opposite
Tree of Life Design



Global Textile Trades in Newham

The growth of textile production in Newham did not take place in isolation. Rather, textiles helped connect the area to globalised production and trade networks, and embodied the multiculturalism and international connectivity that has today become so characteristic of the borough. Newham's location on the edge of London and access to rivers came to play a valuable role in these larger networks. Such globalisation has tended to be seen as a modern phenomenon, yet the history of global textile trade and migration in Newham is older than might perhaps be imagined.

Early Globalisation

Anglo-Saxon and medieval English textiles went to places such as Florence and the Low Countries, and English embroideries were found across Europe in the medieval period. At the same time, silks from the Byzantine, Islamic and Chinese worlds, and later Italy, were imported to England and used as symbols of wealth and power. By 1559 silk fabrics were the sixth most commonly imported good. While these early examples of textile importing were largely the preserve of the wealthy, other forms of globalisation helped transform textile manufacturing in Britain. Amongst the most significant was the arrival of skilled textile workers from Europe. Silk weavers from the Netherlands arrived in the late 16th century with new processes for manufacturing cheaper forms of silk. The arrival of Huguenots in Spitalfields in the 17th and 18th centuries, and of Jewish populations in Whitechapel, played key roles in transforming British textiles. These groups helped establish East London as an important site of textile manufacture and trade by helping to develop a larger market for lower grade silks, and the eventual export of British made luxury silks. But this transformation was slow, relying on successive waves of refugee communities who provided a continuous supply of skilled labour. The skills of silk weaving only developed amongst British manufacturers in the late 17th century – some of whom later moved to West Ham in the 18th century in search of new manufacturing space.

Left and right *Chinese folk flower designs*

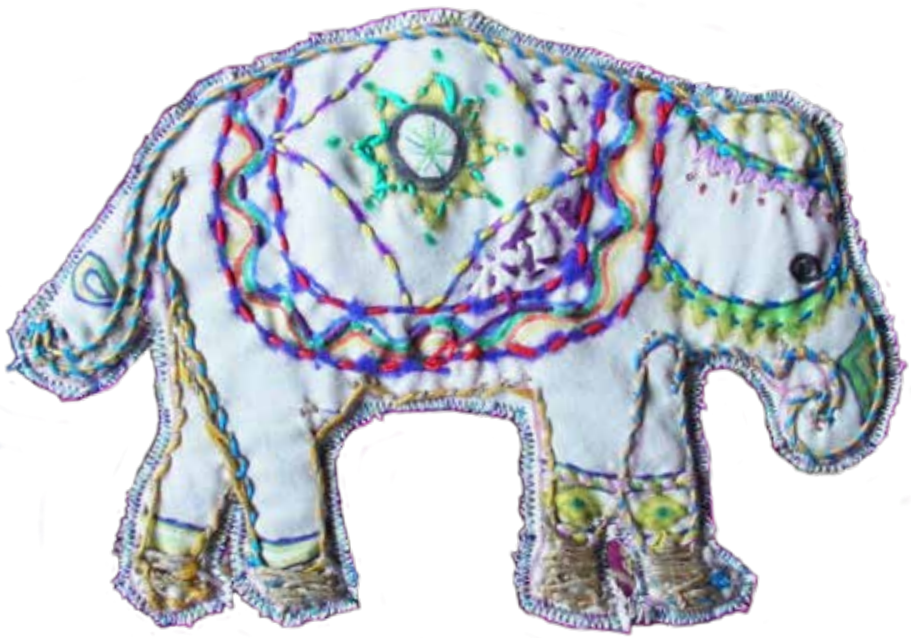
Learning from Indian Printing

The greatest expansion of global textile networks in Britain came in the 17th century with the rise of Western European colonial trade routes. Fabrics from South Asia could now be transported more quickly and directly by boat to Britain by companies such as the East India Company, and resulted in a new taste for cotton fabrics and for the "wild and monstrous" designs of South Asian cloths. Indian printed and painted decorated fabrics were more technologically advanced than in Europe, where decoration continued to rely on more labour intensive and expensive embroidery techniques. The dyes were brighter and more colourfast, and European textile manufacturers lacked the knowledge to reproduce such fabrics. Fearing that this desire for higher quality Indian textiles would harm British manufacturers, the importing of Indian printed calicos was banned in 1701, and European manufacturers worked hard to learn from and learn these new printing techniques.

Once Western European manufacturers had obtained knowledge from travellers to India, Turkey and other countries, they began to industrialise these techniques in new ways. In Britain, the first patent for calico printing was given to William Sherwin in West Ham in 1676, around the same time that the technique was developed in Amsterdam, where Armenian printers had provided expertise alongside Huguenot printers, who later moved to East London. West Ham likely became the site for the development of calico printing because of its proximity to the Huguenot silk printers of Spitalfields, its extensive outdoor space, and access to the River Lea which was needed for the bleaching and dyeing of the fabric, grinding the madder, indigo and alum, driving the washing stocks, and polishing the copper plates used for printing. For a few years Sherwin's business had a monopoly on British produced calico prints, but the technique rapidly spread across the country. While textile manufacturing would shift its centre to the north of England, West Ham remained an important site of manufacturing throughout the 18th century, with acres of land along the River Lea valley becoming known as 'calico grounds'.

Right
Islamic hexagons with rabbit design

By the 1740s, European calico printing still lagged behind its Indian counterparts. As the London Tradesmen put it in 1747, "We have gathered of late some of the principles of this art, but fall short of the Indians in striking their colours. Ours come short of theirs both in beauty, life and durableness. They exceed in all dyes, but especially reds, greens and blues". However, by 1760 there were 20 calico printing firms in London and imitation Indian printed calicos were taking over in popularity from the originals, as their quality had improved and, being closer to their market, they were able to respond to changing fashions more quickly.



Newham and Empire

The development of more efficient industrial techniques for calico printing, such as the shift from wooden blocks to copper plates, and then the invention of the rotary printing machine, marked a wider shift in global textile production: the emergence of a Western European textile industry that was able to take over and put out of business textile producers in Asia. To do so, it relied on the large scale extraction of resources and redistribution of labour. West Ham and its newly developing docks played an important role in this process. Goods from Britain's colonies arrived at the Silvertown docklands, as they did in ports around the country, and raw materials were processed into finished products. These would then be sold at home and abroad, including back to the territories from where the raw materials had been sourced, thus undercutting local artisanal textile producers through the supply of more cheaply, industrially manufactured and lower quality goods. This process mirrored colonial practices towards other materials such as, most famously in the case of West Ham, "gutta-percha" or rubber.

The transformation of West Ham into a site of import, manufacture and export for this colonial market led to a growing assertiveness in the Borough's identity, and by 1936 it was advertising itself as "London's Industrial Centre and Gateway to the World". Although something of an overstatement, this claim nevertheless reflected recognition of the deep ways in which West Ham's industries and life had become embedded in Britain's systems of global capitalism.

Opposite Page
Decoration from embroidery made on heritage project
Embroidered elephant by The McGrath Makers (learning disability group)
Right
Elephant by The McGrath Makers
Overleaf
Dorest button fabric design

I've always loved history… It's a shame they only taught you the World Wars or the Tudor age, when there's more to history. Some things probably were not a subject at the time – colonization, the Empire or slave trade – which unfortunately had links to the British Empire at the time. It was more about what the British did and what they were proud of – and never what they weren't proud of. So it was always not talked about until you get older and see the television programmes and whatever.
[Nacema Degia] ELTA oral histories]

Above
Tree of Life inspired designs

Orientalism

For the wealthy, the importing of luxury textiles such as silk and dyed cloth had always been important. Such goods were not only admired for their beauty, but also became status symbols. Access to and interest in global – and especially oriental – textiles began to increase with the development of European overseas empires. In particular, the large scale importing of Indian calicos and the subsequent efforts to imitate such textiles marked a wider growth in popularity of textiles from China, India, Turkey, and other countries in Asia and the Middle East. English travellers noted that "the artists of India out-do all the ingenuity of Europe", and back in England fashions began to shift in response to these highly coloured and finely printed fabrics. New floral and botanic motifs were adopted and adapted in clothing and furnishings, coinciding with the growth of scientific studies on flora – but also trading on the allure of the exotic "foreign" nature of such fabrics.
As British manufacturers set about developing their own workshops and factories to produce cheaper imitations of these popular imported fabrics, orientalist designs continued to dominate fashion and were able to reach the masses. Newham was transformed into an experimenting and production ground for new orientalist textile cultures. Amongst the fabrics and clothing produced in West Ham with orientalist aesthetics were those such as Liberty's Japanese-inspired textiles. Liberty used fabrics printed at West Ham (Stratford Langthorne) Abbey, shortly after William Morris had established a printworks in nearby Waltham Abbey and helped popularise printed papers and textiles.

Below
Pattern made from embroidery created on the heritage project

The Rise of The New Asian Bond Street

As this history suggests, the story of textiles in Newham cannot be understood without the story of the migration of people and material over the centuries. These processes of migration continued and increased in the 20th century. Post-war migration from newly decolonized countries in the West Indies, South Asia and Africa brought a new wave of residents to Newham, which became one of the main sites for refugee resettlement – while many former white residents moved eastwards towards Essex. This would help make Newham the first borough in the UK to have no single majority ethnic population.

I lived on an estate called Holly Street Estate [in Hackney], and I can only compare it to the American version of the Bronx. It was scary. It was full of unfortunate, unsavoury characters, a lot of muggings going on. You couldn't come out of your house after four o'clock. I personally had my bag snatched twice back in those days. But it toughens you. In the early days, when I was about seven, I think, when I lived there, we grew up with a lot of racism, which was very hard. Laws were not around to deal with that. So it was good, bad and ugly, I would say. But we had nice neighbours, and there was a very nice community, and, like I said, a few bad apples in there as well… We came from various backgrounds. We had English neighbours, West Indian neighbours – very few Asian, South Asians. So you find that you all have something in common. You all lived, not hand to mouth, but we were working people. Unfortunately, my father died when I was young, so my mother was a single mother of five children, so our neighbours were like our support group. If we ever needed anything, they'd be there for us as children. We had a really great childhood, because behind the garden there was like a little green plot and a little playground.
[Nacema Degia, ELTA oral histories]

Right and left
Indian elephants with traditional saddles and harnesses and decoration

Textile production and businesses in Newham became an important source of employment for many of these people.

> *I came to England the 29th of February 1952 on the Jamaica Producer, and landed in Tilbury, and I've been working every day since my first wages. I came Monday, I got a job Tuesday, which was three pounds 20 a week, and I was happy, and I am working till today. I'm a skilled machinist. I can make technically any clothes, and I do alteration for neighbours. I don't want no money. I put away any money in a charity jar for somebody.… my job was in a clothes factory, tacking the pleats at the back of your jacket or the back of your dress… I asked the factory if I can learn the overlocker … So when you go for a job, you say you're a special machinist, not sewing stitch, but you can use the ordinary machines doing things, and that's where I persevered upward.*
> [Vernita Dulcita Cooke, ELTA oral histories]

One of the most noticeable transformations was the arrival of South Asians expelled from Uganda, Kenya and Malawi and subsequent transformation of Green Street into the "new Asian Bond Street" for fashion and jewellery. Shops opened which sold both ready-made saris and Islamic clothing, as well as the fabrics and materials to make these at home. Fabric and clothing shops were part of the infrastructure sustaining migrant cultures and ways of life. Shops such as Choudhary Fashion on High Street North in East Ham, for example, opened selling clothing alongside Islamic books. Fabric shops, tailors and small workshops in places such as Queens Market helped enable local textile and clothing manufacturing to continue. However, a significant amount of clothing was also imported.

Right
Harlequin Jacket

In Nairobi we lived with lots of people from Gujarat. Like Green Street – many Gujaratis. It was very sociable in Nairobi and that continues here where the same traditions go on. We have Gujarati communities in Forest Park, Upton Park, Wembley, and Leicester… I go shopping in Green Street and there are some lovely shops in Wembley. Now that Divali has gone and Navriti has gone, the sales are up to 40% off. These clothes are mostly made in India. Clothes are half the price in India, though the colours are different, but the patterns the same. Leicester has good clothes – it is full of Gujarati people. Some really big shops that can cope with designer wear. I've not been there for decades. If people can't go home for a wedding they go to Leicester for clothes. The factories in East London are all gone. Lots of clothes are still made in Leicester. Whitechapel was full of factories. My dad's friends worked in these factories making jackets, coats, school uniforms. Also home-working was done, but that has gone now. Now no factories and work for young mothers. Some factories were owned by Indian people. Crafts used to be the second biggest industry in India– but not now.
[Kaushika Vaghela, ELTA oral histories]

Right
Firebird costume inspired by the ballet first performed by the Ballet Russe in 1911

Left
Embroidered diamonds with Bob Marley, flowers and harlequin cat, made for the Harlequin Jacket

Clothing **Clothing was also brought to Newham informally through both national and international travel. Travel between Newham and the countries that families had come from helped sustain international links in this textile and fashion world.**

My mum embroidered my wedding dowry for 1981. My mum also took 6 plain saris to India to be embroidered – 3 for me and 3 for my sister. A friend of my mum's suggested she got our saris embroidered in India. "Look what I have got done" and she showed them to my mum and she thought, "How nice, I'll do that for my daughters". They were taken to a particular house and family where they embroider for money. Factories were recent, before all embroideries made in homes. A lot of men are now work in embroidering factories – a majority doing machine embroidery – a similar story in Pakistan. Each area has its own stories… I still wear the saris. If they would be made now they would cost two or three hundred pounds. My in-laws all liked the red sari so that was the one I wore. I have worn them over 40 years and they look as new even now.
I treasure them because they were from my parents.
[Kaushika Vaghela, ELTA oral histories]

Work and Wellbeing

Textiles have, for the most part, been a source of industry and employment in Newham. While never industrialised to the same extent as the north of England, areas close to London were important places for serving the needs of the rapidly growing city. Working conditions for textile workers in Newham have often been poor, although for some people nevertheless satisfying, and ranged from low to high skilled work. At the same time, textiles have also long been a source of enjoyment and pleasure..

Both Pages
Islamic octagons and hexagons
Dorset button designs

I got very interested in needlepoint and sewing embroidery, and I taught myself a lot, and then I got involved in a charity that was doing well. They were creating work opportunities for people who wanted to get into industrial sewing. There's a big trade in Newham, you probably know, all the sweat shops and that kind of thing. It was really a big thing in Newham. And somebody in one of the churches wanted to start an ethical charity that would pay people good wages to do this and train them in pattern cutting and all that kind of thing. I was working part time in music, and I was very interested in joining this because I really love that kind of teaching and the ethical element to it. And also I wanted to train a bit in dress making and I was very interested in that side of design. And so I joined that for about five years, I think it was. And I helped to run the business, so I had to do the books and do pattern cutting and sewing and all kinds of things. It was a really great experience. And from that, I developed a screen printing project because we were doing a bit of a niche market for cheerleaders' costumes, and we needed to have some T-shirts printed and we could only get small dockets done, and nobody's really interested in that. So I trained to do screen printing and design, and then broadened it out into a community art thing, so that I introduced some other local mums into screen printing. And yeah, we had a lot of fun with that. But it got quite big. We got quite successful. But it cost a lot of money to run a workshop. We were hiring premises to do the screen printing. And when I looked into costs to get a business going, it just was too expensive, because none of us could do it full time.
[Sonia Tuttiett, ELTA oral histories]

Above
Embroidered pattern created on heritaage project
Right
Paisley embroidery


Life
Love

Skilled Trades: Guilds and Apprenticeships

The abbey at Stratford Langthorne was the earliest known textile employer in the area. Having its own supply of sheep, the abbey employed tailors and shoemakers to provide clothing for the local population. From the medieval period, a number of textile trades were formalised through a system of guilds. Most of these were based within cities, with apprentices often travelling in order to receive their training. Once trained, guilds served as a centre for sharing knowledge, skills, materials and personal connections. Such guilds, however, largely served the needs and interests of men, and faced problems such as high drop out rates.

Work was far from confined to this type of early professionalisation, however. Other, more domestic spaces of textile production were more common and provided spaces for female labour. Individual entrepreneurs employed home workers to complete one stage in the textile manufacturing process, before passing them onto other workers for the next stage. Over time, merchant entrepreneurs were able to concentrate power, enabling them to rent out equipment such as looms to weavers and oversee all stages of production.

Previous Pages
Tree of Life design

Below and RIght
Pattern made from embroidery created on the heritage project

Our evidence for what workers wore before the early modern period is less clear than that of richer classes. Since they were rarely preserved, the cheaper clothes made of locally produced wool and linen have not survived well in cultural memory and archaeological records, in contrast to their more expensive counterparts. From the 13th century onwards, the increasing availability of metal accessories such as buttons, pins and brooches helped facilitate more elaborate, shapely forms of clothing – a trend that was quickly regulated by the introduction of sumptuary laws that dictated what materials, colours and dress styles different ranks of people could wear. These laws, however, failed to restrain people's dress effectively, and despite the recurrent reissuing of such laws, they served only to stimulate innovation in fashion. By the early modern period, sharp social divides in clothing had begun to blur.

The Rise of Ready-to-Wear Clothing

In the early modern period textiles continued to provide employment. Former textile workers of the Essex wool trade had been re-employed by Spitalfield silk merchants, who noted that they could employ silk workers in Essex more cheaply than in London. By the early 19th century, however, with silk production pushed out by competition with French silk and changing fashions, the largest textile employers in West Ham were in spinning mills, printing works, and clothing manufacturing. In 1861, around a quarter of all clothing workers in England and Wales were employed in Greater London, and by 1951, the figure was just under a third. This generated an oversupply of labour in textile manufacturing.

The ever-expanding, and often poor, urban population in London needed quick, readily available clothing, and Britain's technologically advanced textile industry helped make it the first country to shift to majority pre-made clothing, which had developed in the East End in the 1840s. This shift was possibly due to changes in how clothing was made: by separating the manufacturing process into different stages, work became less skilled, faster and cheaper. Wholesale markets declined, and clothing manufacturers needed to remain within close access to retail outlets. By 1890, there had emerged a clear divide between the more skilled tailoring of the West End, and the less skilled work of the East End. There remained a national and international market for more high quality clothing, while the clothes produced by less skilled labour were made largely for working class and colonial markets. This deskilled labour, often performed by women, children and immigrants who became caught in a cycle of poverty through this form of employment, was easy to exploit, and these workers were often blamed for a shortage of work. This type of work was different from more heavy industries which relied on larger factories and workshops. Although many were employed in large spinning mills, clothing manufacturing was outsourced to smaller workshops. This opened up the work to a new class of workers: the "shabby-genteel", daughters of poor clergymen and ministers, the elderly, ill, widows and wives of unemployed husband. In 1907, a survey of homeworkers making clothes in West Ham found that over half were the wives of builders, general labourers and dock labourers, who suffered from irregular employment.

Left
Tree of Life
Right
Elephant inspired by Indian elephant decoration, West Bengal kantha and Sainsbury's Bag for Life elephant

Female Enterprise and Women's Work

The development of these light industries in the area also provided important spaces for female employment. In the 19th century, female workers could be found in small, crowded domestic work rooms, with a large proportion of these women under the age of 20. In 1865, one book noted that poor middle-class needlewomen from London gradually shifted eastwards to follow work and cheaper accommodation. Use of such domestic female labour helped to justify lower wages. Alongside home-based work, women were also employed in factories. William Ritchie & Son's jute factory in Carpenters Road, for example, was employing around 1000 women in 1876. Women were particularly important to the manufacture of clothing: by 1904, the majority of the 1,475 people employed in workshops were women, while another 1,100 were recorded as homeworkers. This concentration of female labour in West Ham was also accompanied, however, by an entrepreneurial spirit: by the early 20th century, around 20% of businesses in the borough were run by women. Women were trained to be skilled textile workers in trades such as shirtmaking, where they began by learning to turn collars, mark up button holes, and eventually stitch on machines. With certificates of training, women were able to find employment in companies, or to set up their own business. Magazines such as Women and Work, which were aimed to help middle class women find work, advertised hire purchase Singer sewing machines. There was also a growth in services that cared for the clothing of Londoners such as dry cleaning. One of the largest dry cleaning businesses, founded by the Frenchman Achille Serre who imported French methods to Britain in the late 19th century, at its peak employed 1,700 people in its Walthamstow premises, most of whom were women. The company even developed its own female firefighting unit.

Left
Pattern made from embroidery created on the project
Right
Bear puppet

It was early 70s, and I was working, like a lot of people in Newham, down Carpenters Road… One day, a colleague wanted a new job, and she asked me to go with her. She was offered an interview for a job, and they asked me what I could do. And when I told them, they said, "Oh, a job here for you. It's 20 pounds a week, and would you like an interview?" And as I was only earning 15 pound a week, it was a huge rise. So I had the interview and got the job. And so started my introduction to the rag trade. I was working in the office of a factory making shirts. It was on Chandos Road, but behind some terraced houses, so it's not visible from the street. About 70 people worked there, mainly women, and they were either in their early 20s or in their 50s. So I think the other age group was staying at home, minding their children.
[Bridget Ryan, ELTA oral histories]

I remember when the Soviet Union broke down and people were struggling to make ends meet, every single market was littered (in a good sense) with home-made textiles, rugs, tablecloths, these long table runners, we call them stergare – like towels, but they weren't used as towels traditionally. They would be used mostly in rites, in cultural traditions. I remember my mum had tens and tens of these and she never did anything with these. … People used to sell them, they were very, very cheap. They were underrated, underappreciated. I remember when cheap synthetic Persian rugs came into the market and people began replacing their woollen rugs with cheap Persian ones. I remember seeing beautiful wool rugs where they were raising young chicks, to keep them warm, and to see them in a horrible state was heartbreaking. Even for me as a child, from an early age I remember seeing the importance of traditional textile heritage of our country.… Later towards the early 2000s, people started appreciating them more. I remember there were groups of people travelling up and down Moldova and buying textiles. These transformed into private collections and Museums also did some buying.
[Neonila Grecu ELTA oral histories]

Right *Pattern made from elephant and Islamic geometry embroidery created by adults with learning disabilities.*

Improvements and Decline in Textile Manufacturing

West Ham's position as a periphery of London meant it played an important role in providing the labour for the development of London and Britain's economy, while receiving only limited benefits. For textile workers in "sweated industries", their employment remained precarious and badly paid, yet the practice was widespread and by the turn of the 20th century there were around 100,000 homeworkers in London. Such homework, largely done by women, had become an important part of the textile trade, but was cramped, badly paid, irregular, and not covered by legislation designed to protect workers in factories: costs such as heating and lighting had to be borne out of workers' own wages, while mistakes or spoiled work came out of wages.

These conditions and crises attracted attention. In 1907, two social reformers conducted an inspection of home workers in the textile trade in West Ham, and concluded that, contrary to new legislation designed to protect workers, employment lists of workers were inadequately maintained, and homework was often done in unsanitary conditions. These were the conditions that had, from the late 1880s, made West Ham an important site in the emergence of new union movements and Keir Hardie, leader of the newly-formed Labour Party, was elected as MP for West Ham South in 1892. In the 1900s, West Ham Borough declared its political independence, a move that enabled it to exert more control over living and working conditions within the borough, and the 1909 Trade Boards Act brought in tighter controls of wages nationally, bringing to an end to ubiquitous homeworking practices in late Victorian light industries.

Below
Pattern made from embroidery created on the project
Right
Various costumes and puppets made on ELTA projects

The decline of these textile industries in West Ham was brought about in part by the Second World War, when targeted bombing caused significant damage to factories and workshops. After the war, many production sites were demolished. The creation of the Borough of Newham in 1965 coincided with the wider de-industrialisation of Britain. Newham's last big industrial textile site to close was the Leather Cloth Works, which went out of business in the 1960s. The docks closed in the 1970s. New forms of technology such as washing machines helped put the large cleaning companies out of business, while in the 1970s textile manufacturing shifted overseas. Like other parts of London, there was a shift from a city dependent on manufacturing to one dependent on services. The 1980s and 1990s were decades of change for Newham, as new industries such as finance became the driving force of growth in East London, often at the exclusion of those who had been involved in earlier industries.

How long did I work there? For probably seven or eight years. There was a thriving rag trade in East London and the whole of the UK. The workplace was buzzing. If you didn't like your job or wanted more money, there was always another job for the taking. Sadly, these jobs have been exported now… I worked in another factory at the Abbey Arms, and that was also on piece work. I worked in the office there. It made jeans, and I loved that job as well. But that closed down. I can't remember why that closed down. Probably importing clothes from abroad… The boss went on a trip to Hong Kong and visited a shirt factory and found out about importing the garments. And that eventually took over, and suddenly the factory closed.
[Bridget Ryan, ELTA oral histories]

Both Pages
Puppets of the World

Above
Tree of Life
made with early stages Alzeimer group
Right
Kantha jacket, hat and bag
modelled by the maker

The Return of Homeworking in the 1970s

Textile piecework nevertheless continued to play an important role in Newham in the second half of the 20th century, providing work which was often regular and profitable, but without the advantages of long-term employment. Many newly arrived workers from former British colonies, particularly from the Caribbean and South Asia, found employment in these declining textile industries. Bangladeshi workers in particular arrived to work in British textile manufacturing, just at the time when British manufacturers were looking to outsource work to Bangladesh. In the 1970s and 1980s, this largely male workforce was enlarged by the arrival of more women and children, who also found employment in textiles and clothing. Driven by Thatcherite economics and the recession of the early 1980s, textile manufacturers in Newham drew on lower-wage and more flexible labour, leading to a return to homeworking practices of the late Victorian period, largely done by women, ethnic minorities and disabled people – many of whom in fact preferred, or found it easier, to work at home.

Materials would be delivered to and collected from workers at home, where they could make up to 50 items of clothing a day. Husbands and fathers often acted as agents, sourcing work for their families. Such practices – used by clothes shops such as Marks and Spencer, Debenhams, C&A and Next – helped reinforce insecure and low paid employment in the area.

Both Pages
Details of Islamic geometry inspired embroidery

At the same time, they also provided a degree of flexible and safe employment in a period when racist insults, discrimination and attacks were commonplace both within places of employment and other public and private spaces.

> *I did sewing at home for eight, seven pounds a week, and I wanted space for my sewing machine. And that time you got a bag of clothes, about two yards wide, one yard high, and they brought the clothes cut. It's ready cut, and you just machine it… Me and the neighbour, we earn seven, eight pounds a week, not a day. And also I sold for Marks and Spencer, but Marks and Spencer demanded double quality… So I change, I got a new supplier. And at that time, in the 60s, Marks and Spencer had in the window, 99% of our goods are made in England. So society change, and they go to Bangladesh, India, Morocco and making the stuff cheaper. Yes, but we the English, we do not earn the money to buy the stuff. So the ordinary man is poorer, while the businessman gets richer off our back…*
> [Vernita Dulcita Cooke, ELTA oral histories]
>
> *There was also about 20 outdoor workers… some people have a machine at home, an industrial machine, and the works taken to them one day, brought back the next day. So it was quite good for people who couldn't go out to work. The wages were calculated on the work they did, so they all worked at a tremendous rate to make their money.* [Bridget Ryan, ELTA oral histories]

Reimaging the Rag Trade in Newham

The redevelopment of Newham that began around the 2012 Olympics has sought to build on the long textile heritage of the area and to revive it as a major site for fashion. This redevelopment has at the same time eradicated elements of Newham's heritage by characterising it as a transformation of post-industrial "wasteland" and demolishing gypsy and Traveller community sites. The focus on high-end fashion design and technological innovation in the vision of East London's new "Fashion District" marks a shift away from earlier traditions of textile manufacturing in the area. However, new opportunities for textile training and heritage preservation have appeared through the relocation of the London School of Fashion and the V&A East's textile collection to Stratford, and Newham College's acquisition of Zandra Rhodes's London Fashion and Textile Museum.

Left
ELTA chiffon scarf and jacket
Below
Embroiderers between shots at ELTA fashion shoot

Textiles as Hobbies

As the industry in Newham declined, cheap clothing became more readily available, and textiles took up less time in people's working lives, they became an increasingly important part of leisure time and hobbies. While the division between work and leisure has not always been clear cut when it comes to textiles, especially embroidery, there was a growth in purely social sewing and craft groups. Overall levels of home sewing declined, but for a significant number of people (mostly women) it developed into a hobby that ranged from the traditional to the radical feminist. Knitting, crocheting, patchwork, quilting, embroidery and clothes making became especially popular. Magazines emerged to provide advice and instructions for home sewers, and later the internet and social media would become one of the most important sources of information and inspiration for people.

Above
Coat with ELTA dorset button design and with puppets in the background

Right
Japanese Temari balls and embroidered peacocks and elephant from learning disabililty group

When I retired, I've always loved sewing, any craft thing… Funny enough, my mum – I never saw her sewing the button on, sewing a hem up, but with all them kids, she's excused. But, I learned – my grandma was a dressmaker, and from what I've heard of different people, I strongly believe what you work in, or your talents does come from your grandparents or great-grandparents. So, that's not saying my mum didn't do nothing, but when she got a bit older, she started knitting scarves to sell at the Church Bazaar, and she made hundreds of them. And eventually my sister said, Mum, I think you've made enough scarves. She still kept knitting scarves, but my sister used to sew them together for blankets. So I've always known how to knit and crochet and sew, and now I go to ELTA. At night, if I'm sitting there embroidering, you just go to another place. It just clears your mind... I used to [make my own clothes], but I think there came a time it was cheaper not to make your own clothes. I can alter clothes and things like that – useful it is.
[Bridget Ryan, ELTA oral histories]

There's more, like underworld of crafting going on in East London that you wouldn't know about. It's not readily publicized. So it's kind of people go to the government and take other people along with them. Happening in our area for many, many years.
[Pru Guthrie, ELTA oral histories]

Previous page
Puppets inspired by Moldovan folk tale created by Children at School 360

Above
Chinese folk motifs
Right
Embroudered octagons inspired by Islamic geometry and decoration

My mother used to do embroidery… She was around kids all the time. She never had free time, but when she did, she'll do this embroidery of flowers on her pillowcases. And I fell in love with it, but she never had time to teach us. I used to watch it in absolute fascination. There was never any classes to do it. It was something was passed down, but unfortunately, my mother didn't. And coming across the class was like, wow, I've got to get a chance to do what my mother did… it's like you have another chapter of your life, and you have a chance to do the things you can do when you're younger, travelling, hobbies, finding new things, making new friends. And these avenues are opening up, and you don't want to stay in just work, community, friends. You want to have friends in other places... who have different interests, like you, like myself. And this was giving me the opportunity to make new friends, and I like that. And of different age groups. It doesn't have to be like everyone comes in with a different experience, and you learn from each other.
So making things yourself, being proud of it, and being proud of yourself that you can do it, and showing your family members – look! Oh, wow! you actually made that! And when you have the backing of your family, when you learn a new skill, it's really nice – they say well done... it's an amazing feeling.
[Nacema Degia ELTA, oral histories]

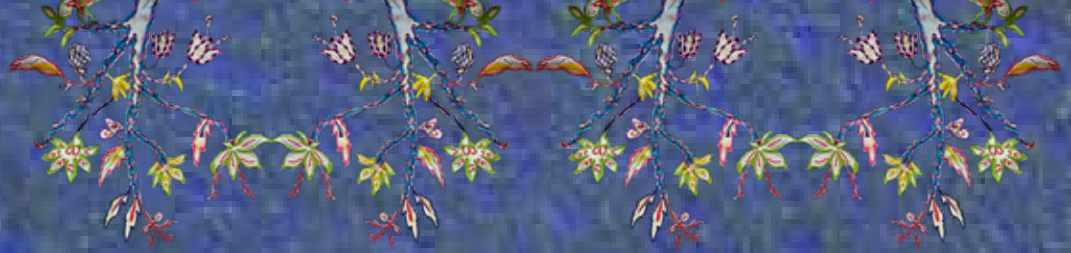
When I was back home in Malaysia, I took up sewing machine embroidery, and I got a diploma in that. And then I did dress making as well. I don't do a lot of dress making and machine embroidery, because it was one of the old, step sewing machines. I think I was there for almost two years, and I completed the whole course. And I got my diploma there. But I didn't take anything seriously, though, because after coming here, life was different. With two kids and the house, looking after them, work, I had no time for hobbies. It was only after I retired that I became fully engaged in doing things for myself.
[Radha Rajan, ELTA oral histories]

Styles of clothing in Newham have become more diverse and fluid, not only reflecting cultural traditions from around the world, but also bring them together in new and creative ways. This textile environment became the home for a new and diverse generation of fashion designers, such as Alexander McQueen who grew up in Stratford and took a tailoring course at Newham College, and Mani Kohli, who moved to Newham in the 1980s, opened a shop on Green Street and has become a global designer of fusion fashion.

The Creativity of Everyday Life

Newham has a long history of creativity. The area has been home to making and mending for centuries. This has taken place not only in factories and commercial workshops, but also in homes and domestic spaces. Sewing skills have been learnt and passed on in families and between colleagues and friends. Salaries have been earnt, and imaginations have flourished. With this history, it is no wonder that the area that became Newham has become such a dynamic place of textile production and art.

Right
Dress made from ELTA fabric design with folk animal motifs
Far Right
Jacket with Russian Doll design



East London Textile Arts celebrates the creativity of everyday life. Drawing on Newham's many histories, we work with the materials and skills that people have available and in ways that fit alongside their daily life. We particularly work with older people, celebrating the creativity of later years – creativity that has been made possible through the invention of glasses, public transport and improved healthcare. This brings a wealth of stories and memories around textiles from around the world. Many of our members have learnt to sew or knit from their relatives, have worked in the textile trade, and buy clothing and fabrics abroad while travelling. Fabrics, stitches, and designs have accompanied them throughout their lives and have been a way to sustain and create new relationships with other people.

I remember really early on deciding I would make a pair of shorts. And I think I just cobbled some bits of material together, which completely didn't work. You know, it was just a disaster. But I didn't seem to mind. I think I was very, very young. And then the only other memory was at school, being given a piece of hessian and some embroidery wool, and we were doing birds – embroidering birds with the wool. And I remember doing chain stitch, and I loved it – I absolutely loved it. But then there has been a gap with me from that point right up until I was about 64 when I went to the classes… Both my sisters are really talented with sewing, all sorts of types of sewing… I think I threw myself into cooking, actually, probably once I got a family. I've always loved food, so I think that was my creative outlet to try out. I've got a ridiculous amount of recipe books and many, many, many more upstairs.
[Prunella Guthrie, ELTA oral histories]

Textiles, we believe, can improve everyday life not only for its makers, but for all people of Newham. ELTA focuses on creating artworks for community spaces. Public textile art resonates with many, whether they have been born and bred in Newham or have only just arrived, because so many of these traditions have been shared and are familiar.

Right
Puppets of the World
fabric design

Different parts of the world, different cultures, religions. Everyone has something to put in. It's like a pot just for old ingredients, and you stir it and what you come up with is so absolutely wonderful. We are in a mixed culture, and in London. We are a melting point... and we learn to live together. Whether we like it or not, things have changed, and since my childhood to now, you are more accepted and treated more equally with more laws there to protect you, whichever background you're from, which is good. It shows the respect we all have for each other and learning to learn about each other's backgrounds and what we're experiencing. And it doesn't matter if we all connect in different ways. We all interweave with each other like a textile…We are all cut from this cloth, but a different part of the cloth, but we're all sewn together… You cannot see the cloth because it is in a roll. So when the roll opens, you can't see what's on the end. They might not be your kind of fabric, but they are part of us. We all have DNA. We all have blood. We need oxygen. We are all going to grow old and die, and that's inevitable. But we are all from the cloth...
[Nacema Degia, ELTA oral histories]

Right
Harlequin jacket and Hat with pom-poms and bag with ELTA Islamic inspired design

Left
Kantha bird and paisley designs

Heritage Traditions Illustrated

Kantha from West Bengal and Bangladesh
Tree of Life
Islamic Geometry
Romanian and Moldavian egg painting designs
Moldavian Folk Tale
Timari from Italy
Chinese folk symbols
Paisley designs
Dorset buttons
Pearly Kings and Queens
Flags of the World
Indian Animals

Right
Detail of Kantha
Landscape with lion

Acknowledgements

This book has involved the work of many people and organisations and we thank them all. The oral histories, a major part of our heritage project, were undertaken by *Eastside Community Heritage.* We are indebted to them for making the initial suggestion of a heritage project and their help with fundraising and project planning. We enjoy the partnership with *School 360* which provides us with a base for our activities, and space for our growing textile archive. We have been fortunate to have developed a most enjoyable longterm partnership with Newham Adult Social Services with whom we have created *The McGrath Makers*, a group of adults with learning disabilities who make textiles. *Little Ilford Baptist Church* has long provided the premises for our advanced embroidery class and now also for our new afternoon class in partnership with *Hopeful Futures*. The London Borough of Newham supports our work through the Community Development Teams at Stratford and East Ham Libraries longterm basis. The *de Laszlo Foundation* and J*ohn Cutforth Charitable Trust* have provided longterm support plus partnership funding for this project. These private trusts are doubly important for believing in what we do.

However this project could only have succeeded with the untold hours generously and joyously given, in every aspect of our work, by so many people within ELTA.
We thank them all.

Left
Firebird Costume with embroidered kokoshnik

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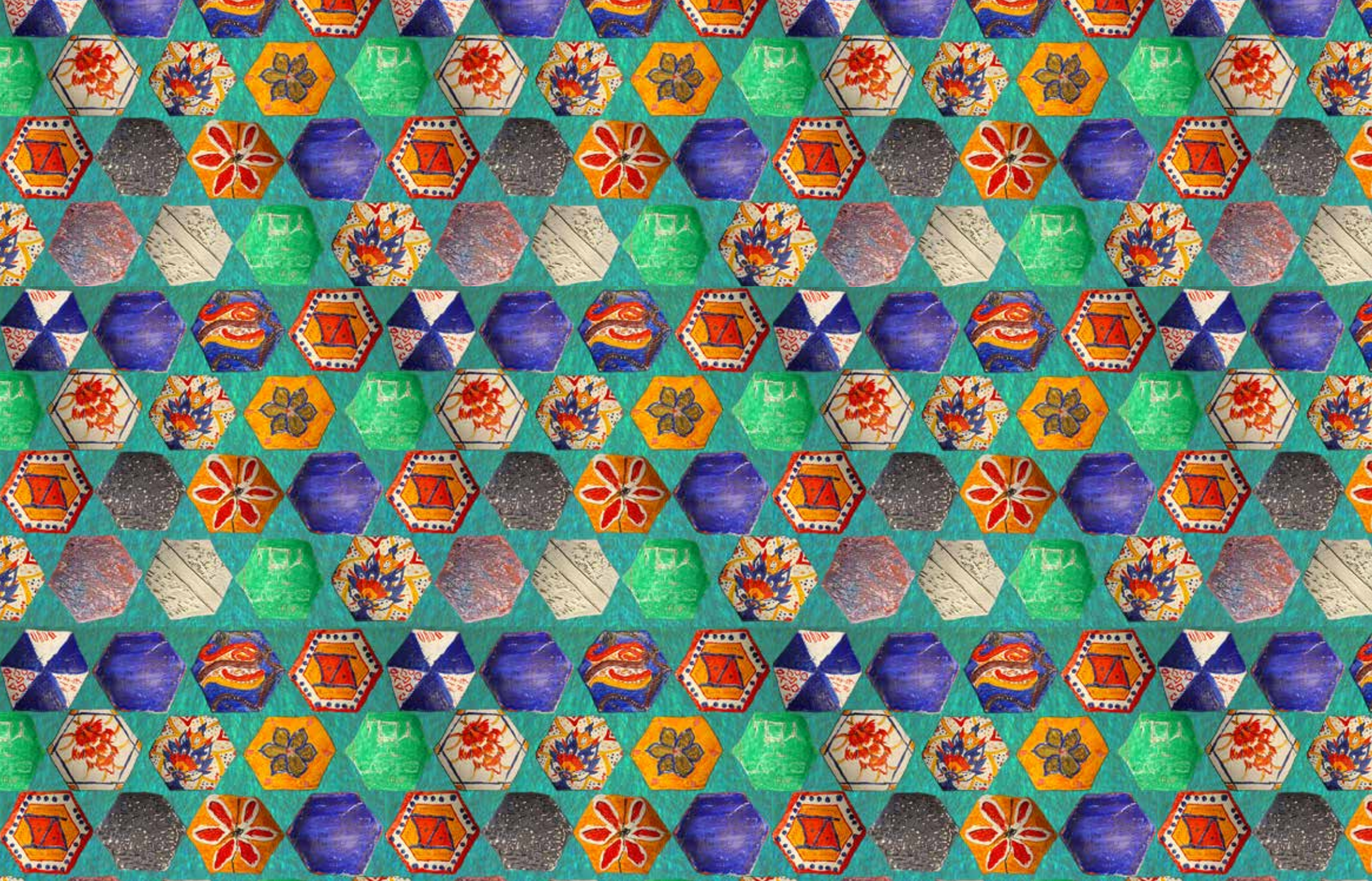
Overleaf Left
Dress made with ELTA
Firebird fabric

Overleaf Right
Jacket made with ELTA
Heritage Patchwork Design fabric
with Puppets of the World
and embroidered Kokoshnik

Final Double Page Spread
Pattern made from painted tiles inspired by
Islamic Geometry
created by Hopeful Futures group



Made possible with
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