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The Simple Things

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FABRIC OF LIFE

WHEN WE TOUCH, WE FEEL, SAYS RENOWNED DESIGNER, MAKER AND WRITER CASSANDRA ELLIS. THAT'S WHY NATURAL TEXTILES CAN NEVER BE BETTERED

Photography: CATHERINE GRATWICKE

Whether it's a bolt of liquid silk, a rough antique feedsack or an Indian cotton ralli quilt, cloth moves us. Its tactility and three-dimensional nature seems to bring out a passion in everyone.

We hunt and gather precious pieces and scraps without knowing what to do with them, but have them we must. Sometimes, we might buy a piece of fabric just because of the way it looks, sometimes because it captures a memory as heady as any photograph or postcard. A piece may have a personal or historical significance; it may be new but special, or something made in an ethically sound way.

STORIES, HISTORY AND HANDS

As well as being emotionally evocative, cloth is a palpable delight – and when we touch, we feel. You instantly know the difference between silk and polyester through your fingertips – it almost feels like you can touch the maker's hand within natural cloth. No matter how hard technology tries, man-made fibres can't truly replicate the feel of handmade textiles.

Touch connects us – it's the first sense we develop as a baby and is always engaged when buying fabric. Our eyes may fool us, but our hands can't deceive. Everyone (including animals) loves natural materials. From babies wrapped in sheepskins to cashmere shawls draped around our grandmother's shoulders, each stage of life

NEST

LOVE YOUR HOME INSIDE AND OUT WITH THE SIMPLE THINGS



Hippy hippy shake

Far too pretty to end up on the compost heap, ruby-red rose hips' simply beg to be salvaged from your seasonal pruning session and turned into a rustic bouquet. Formed around roses' seeds when the petals fall off at the end of summer, they reach plump, juicy, bird-attracting maturity in the autumn. They're useful too, their high levels of vitamin C deployed in health supplements for both man and beast. It's enough to put you off deadheading forever.

PHOTOGRAPHY: © GAP PHOTOS / FRIEDRICH STRAUSS

* Whatever you do, don't tell the kids – the little hairs inside rose hips are used to make joke shop itching powder.



is enveloped in a fabric made of natural fibres that's full of tactile promise.

Scraps of cloth can give you clues about a different life or place – and, in that way, transport you to somewhere else. Travels to distant shores or local markets can provide a cornucopia of visual and tactile delights. You may be shopping with a completely different purpose in mind, when a piece of cloth just speaks to you. A ream of cloth has the potential to change everything – how you look and how you live. It can be the starting point for a quilt, a room or the way you dress. Cloth is also a storyteller. It speaks of travels near and far, people you've loved and some you've lost. It's a reminder of key points in your life, or sometimes just a simple, lovely shopping experience.

Cloth can also open up the world to you. Every continent and most countries have their own unique textile history. From the khadi cotton of India to the linen of Ireland, you'll find more stories, more history and many hands in the making. We're globally connected through the fabric that we can now buy and use.

In the past, fabric was used as currency (and, in some places, still is) as well as packaging for food and other goods – for instance, linen feedsacks to hold grains and cotton sacks to hold sugar and flour. It has visually defined the difference between rich or poor, and provided a route to commercial riches through industrialisation. It has made some countries

*“Scraps of cloth can give you **CLUES** about a different life or **PLACE** – and, in that way, **TRANSPORT** you to somewhere else”*

specialists in their field and has crippled others by the same process of industrialisation. A few select nations, such as India, have been reborn politically through producing their own cloth, while other third-world countries have been literally sickened by the demand for cotton. On the upside, many textile industries that were only recently in steady decline are now being rejuvenated through the ambition of young entrepreneurs and investment in craft skills rather than mass production. Fabrics that were almost lost through lack of interest and disappearing skills are now valued once again. It's an exciting time, when old traditions and a new set of skills are coming together to lift fabric production back up as an artisanal industry.

COTTON

White gold – this is how history refers to cotton. Of all the cloths in the world, cotton is the behemoth. Traded on the stock exchange, cotton is still the world's most important non-food agricultural commodity. No other fibre has created such wealth or, conversely, brought such damage to countries and people. It's also a relatively »

- ❶ Old or new, plain or patterned, found locally or on your travels, every piece of cloth tells a story.
- ❷ Cassandra Ellis has always been obsessed with fabric: “I'm happiest in a cloth shop, looking, thinking and crumpling.”
- ❸ Wool isn't just about knitting. Instructions for this sturdy, wool fabric bag can be found in Cassandra's book *Cloth*.



“The deity of the FABRIC world must surely be silk. It’s beautiful and LUXURIOUS, and CREATED without the intervention of man”

- ❶ Silk is a natural protein fibre, very similar to human hair and comes from the cocoons of the mulberry silkworm.
- ❷ Bedding should be a daily delight, says Cassandra. Natural fabric is best. Cool, everlasting linen is best of all.

‘cheap’ crop, which means cheap fabric. Which is probably why over 40 per cent of the world’s textiles are made from cotton.

WOOL

Kingdoms have been founded on it, fortunes made and lost because of it. Wool is the original cloth created and traded by man. Of all the textiles in the world, wool is the most versatile, the most commercial and the longest storyteller of people and their nations. Navajo Indians wrapped themselves in brightly coloured woollen blankets, and the gentlewomen of the 17th century found knitting to be a most suitable pastime. It has expertly clothed our war heroes (and villains) and ensured the ancient Greeks had comfortable and warm helmets.

Our grandparents’ suits were skilfully crafted from beautifully woven cloth and it’s testament to the quality that they’re often still in pristine condition today.

The wool industry was the economic force behind many towns, cities and even countries, but it has waned from its historical peak. Farmers are switching from wool to meat farming to make their flocks financially viable. But there are glimmers of hope, with the Campaign for Wool (www.campaignforwool.org) raising awareness of the versatility and quality of this particular textile source. Rare breeds are being



revitalised and small, specialised industries coming back to life.

This is the passionate work of a few, so I think it’s worth seeking out these artisans and makers and using their wool, which has resonance and provenance.

SILK

The deity of the fabric world must surely be silk. It’s both beautiful and luxurious, but also created without the intervention of man – divine indeed. No other cloth seems to garner as emotive a reaction as silk.

It has clothed royalty since 27BC and has been used in the making of everything from currency and curtains to tapestries to ties to parachutes.

Spun into existence by the silkworm, silk is so delicate that it needs to be twisted into stranded lengths before it can be woven into cloth. It’s also temperamental under sunlight and doesn’t respond positively to mankind’s perspiration.

Silk was discovered in China and was a closely guarded secret for centuries. Folklore says that silk finally left China in the hair of a princess promised to a prince of Khotan, an ancient Buddhist kingdom set on a branch of what would later become the Silk Route. She refused to go without the fabric she loved, thereby delivering silk and its secrets to the world.

PROUDLY HOMEMADE

MAKE A START ON YOUR HOMEMADE CHRISTMAS GIFTS THIS MONTH AND THEY'LL BE READY IN TIME FOR THE BIG DAY



Everyone loves the person who gives them a pot of homemade chutney. This Christmas, you can be that person.



LINEN

Linen is the oldest textile plant cultivated in Europe and is so much part of our history that it's referred to as the 'fibre of civilisation'. When starched, it lives up to this claim in the form of fine dining napkins but, when thickly woven, it's outstanding and extremely comforting as upholstery.

To be a spinster was no bad thing in the 17th century – it simply meant you were an unmarried woman who earned a living by weaving this wonderful cloth.

Up until the 17th century garments made from linen were historically bequeathed in wills. Its place in homes was gradually usurped by cotton, especially during the 19th century, when cotton mills became prevalent and cotton was far cheaper. However, for those who could afford it, linen was still preferred for its fineness, usefulness and durability.

HIDE

Prehistoric man used leather for almost everything – holding water, bags, harnesses, shelter and footwear. Before he figured out how to shear the sheep, he preserved their skins by using smoke, grease and bark extracts, and wore them on his back.

Wall paintings and artefacts found in Egyptian tombs circa 1,300BC show that leather was used for sandals,

clothes, buckets, bottles, and shrouds for burying the dead. Greeks were using leather around 1,200 BC. Large quantities of leather clothing and footwear have been found in England in excavated Roman sites. The main armour of the Roman soldier was a heavy leather shirt, and leather goods were often prized as highly as jewellery.

Most countries developed their own technique for transforming skins into leather, with the processes closely guarded secrets passed down from father to son. In medieval times most towns and villages had a tannery on the edge of the residential area near a stream or river. **S**

S Versatile, expensive leather: the most ancient of fibres but not embraced by everyone. Ethically farmed and tanned hide is a must if you don't subscribe to the 'it's a byproduct of meat' school of thought.



This is an extract from *Cloth* by Cassandra Ellis (Kyle Books, £25), which explores the history and significance of natural fabrics and contains more than 30 beautiful projects for wool, linen, cotton, silk and hide. To read our interview with Cassandra Ellis go to www.thesimplethings.com/cassandraellis.