

Media information

For immediate release



thea porter

70s Bohemian Chic

6 February – 3 May 2015



Moyra Swan in a sheer abaya. Topkapi Palace, Istanbul. Photograph by Barry Lategan
British Vogue, November 1971 pp.126-127. © The Condé Nast Publications Ltd

- **First-ever exhibition on the fashion and interior design of Thea Porter**
- **Features Porter's seven signature looks: the Abaya & Kaftan; the Gipsy dress; the Faye dress; the Brocade-panel dress; the Wrap-over dress; the Chazara jacket; and the Sirwal skirt**
- **Showcases outfits worn by some of the world's best-dressed women, as well as important fashion photography from the pages of *Vogue*, *Harper's Bazaar* and *Women's Wear Daily*.**
- **Explores the influence of Middle Eastern and North African textiles and culture on 20th century fashion design through the work of Thea Porter**
- **The retrospective covers Thea Porter's life (1927–2000) and career from her early years in Jerusalem and Damascus, Soho in the 1960s, and New York, Los Angeles and Paris in the 1970s**

'Entering Thea's shop was an experience I will never forget. I had never seen such sumptuous and exquisite clothes and fabrics before. It was my first taste of real adventure in fashion.'

Sir Elton John, 2014

From Syria to Soho, Thea Porter's glamorous designs introduced 'bohemian chic' to 1960s London, New York and Paris. Her shop in Greek Street opened in 1966 and instantly drew a rock and film star crowd of clients: from the Beatles and Pink Floyd to Elizabeth Taylor, Faye Dunaway and Barbra Streisand. For nearly two decades, Porter created interiors and clothes from luxurious textiles that drew much of their inspiration from an exotic view of the Middle East. Often combining antique fabrics with richly patterned silks, her creations were exotic, alluring and highly personal.

Guest curator, Laura McLaws Helms said:

'Thea Porter's ambition was to create clothes that were intrinsically beautiful, and that would last. Today, they are appreciated by not only the customers who have treasured them, but also by a new generation of devotees who continue to seek out her designs: Kate Moss, Julia Roberts, Nicole Richie, Ashley and Mary-Kate Olsen – the appeal of a unique and original Thea Porter dress endures today among some of the most fashionable women in the public eye.'

The exhibition 'Thea Porter Bohemian Chic' opens at the Fashion and Textile Museum on 6 February 2015 and presents over 150 inspirational textiles, garments, artwork and photographs that chart her career. Accompanied by a major new book, the exhibition explores the evolution of her designs, from interior to fashion, as well as the dramatic rise of interest in her work in America – she was promoted by Diana Vreeland and stocked by Giorgio Beverly Hills – and the opening of her shops in New York and in Paris in the late 1960s and early 1970s.

Head of the Fashion and Textile Museum, Celia Joicey said:

'This is the first exhibition to explore Thea Porter's work in detail, to look at her sources of inspiration and to give insight to the multi-cultural influences she brought to fashion design in the second half of the 20th century. 'Thea Porter 70s Bohemian Chic' will not only recreate the feeling of a Thea Porter shop and her groundbreaking interiors but also demonstrate the creative impact of her style on the media and individuals, which places her achievement at the heart of British fashion history.'

The exhibition has involved sourcing, identifying and securing garments from across Europe and North America. The collectors who have loaned to the exhibition range from major museums and archives to many generous private individuals.

Exhibition Structure

The exhibition tells the story of Thea Porter in eight sections:

- The Lure of the Exotic
- The Story of Greek Street, Soho
- Seven Key pieces
- Fantasy, Exoticism and Romance
- London • New York • Paris
- Hollywood and High Society
- Art, Textiles & Collaborations
- Thea's Legacy

The Lure of the Exotic

Born in Jerusalem in 1927, Thea Porter was brought up in Damascus and Syria from 1933. The exhibition starts with an exploration of family life in the Middle East in the 1930s and 40s – Porter's nostalgia for Syria remained with her throughout her life – her years as a student in London after the Second World War, and her time in the cosmopolitan city of Beirut during the late 1950s and early 1960s.

The Story of Greek Street, Soho

Thea Porter settled permanently in London in 1964 and sought to establish herself as an interior designer. After a variety of jobs and commissions, she rented a first floor showroom on Berwick Street in London in November 1965, followed by the opening of Thea Porter Decorations Ltd', at 8 Greek Street on 27 July 1966. Set in the midst of Soho, Porter's early fashion designs were in menswear and three members of Pink Floyd wore her embellished jackets and printed shirts on the cover of their first album, *Piper at the Gates of Dawn*, released in August 1967. The Beatles were her 'first big spenders' when they came in to buy hangings, curtains and glass paintings to decorate their fashion and accessories shop, *Apple Boutique* (1967–68), in Baker Street. The location of Porter's shop helped to mix the worlds of art and fashion, and she was a regular at the *Colony Room*, London, the Soho drinking club also frequented by artists Lucien Freud, Francis Bacon and George Melly. The exhibition will include a reconstruction of the Soho store interior.

Seven Key pieces

Porter showed her first official collection to the press and clients on 28 June 1968, and although primarily menswear she included full-length evening gowns and mini-dresses. Her womenswear rapidly grew and the following seven garments represent Thea Porter's best-selling styles: the Abaya (Porter reworked the Abaya or Kaftan into each collection); the Gipsy dress; the Faye dress; a brocade dress with sheer side panels; the Wrap-over dress, the Chazara jacket and a Sirwal-like skirt. Although Porter is best-known for her exotic and Middle Eastern-inspired fashion, her designs took on a more classically European form during the 1970s in parallel with a general shift in fashion towards 1930s and 40s 'retro'-styled designs.

Fantasy, Exoticism and Romance

Porter was part of a cultural renaissance in British fashion design in the 1960s that was spearheaded by a group of designers, including Zandra Rhodes and Bill Gibb, who found inspiration in other cultures and history. Yet Porter's designs and influences were singular and distinctive. She was inspired by the work of two earlier designers, Paul Poiret (1879–1944) and Mariano Fortuny (1871–1949). The exhibition will include elements from Thea Porter's exquisitely decorated Mayfair apartment.

London • New York • Paris

After opening a concession in 1969 at Henri Bendel, the high-end Manhattan women's store, Porter's growing business enabled her to open her New York shop in May 1971. She was now firmly established in the wardrobes of the city's best-dressed women. At the same time she reached an agreement to produce ready-to-wear, although this proved too competitive with her couture line. The exhibition showcases both lines.

Hollywood and High Society

A trip to Los Angeles led to a new group of clients as well as buyers in Giorgio Beverly Hills and I.Magnin. Marylou Luther, fashion editor of the *Los Angeles Times* saw Porter's exotic designs as the 'apotheosis of a new type of at-home Hollywood dressing' and the exhibition will profile the women who embodied this style.

Art, Textiles & Collaborations

Porter's use of antique and world textiles in her designs stood out from trendy mass-market examples. Her knowledge of and passion for world textiles also inspired her work, in particular Islamic textiles such as the *suzani* embroideries and the *ikats* of Central Asia, Ottoman velvets and the embroidered textiles and brocades of Damascus. Often unable to source textiles that were unique or exotic enough for

her garments, Porter began to commission exclusive textile designs. The collaborative process was key: she would often draft a sketch, or give the textile designer something to inspire or adapt that was then translated into a pattern and then cloth. These designers included Katharine Hamnett (b.1947; who designed for Porter while she was still a student at Central Saint Martins), and Sandra Munro (b.1948), who produced Porter's most famous textile in 1968 – the 'Peacock' print.

Thea's Legacy: During her lifetime Thea Porter won huge acclaim, and her place in the history of British fashion was recognised by the award of Designer of the Year by the Clothing Institute in 1972. Yet despite being included in landmark 20th century fashion exhibitions such as the Glass of Fashion, curated by Cecil Beaton at the Victoria & Albert Museum in 1971, Porter's name has been gradually forgotten. This exhibition seeks to reclaim her reputation and act as inspiration to a new generation.

Notes to editors

1. The exhibition is organised by the Fashion and Textile Museum and Newham College. It is curated by Dennis Nothdruff, Curator of the Fashion and Textile Museum, with guest curator Laura McLaws Helms and exhibition adviser Venetia Porter.
2. Exhibition dates **6th February – 3rd May 2015**.
3. The Fashion and Textile Museum is at 83 Bermondsey Street, London SE1 3XF.
www.ftmlondon.org #TheaPorter  Fashion and Textile Museum  @FashionTextile  @FashionTextileMuseum  FashionTextile
4. Opening times: Tuesday–Saturday, 11am–6pm; Thursday until 8pm; Sunday until 5pm last admission 45 minutes prior to closing. Monday closed. Ticket prices: £8.80 adults, £6.60 concessions, £5.50 students. Under 12s are free. Booking information: Online at www.ftmlondon.org or in person at the Museum.
5. The Fashion and Textile Museum is the only museum in the UK solely dedicated to showcasing developments in contemporary fashion, as well as providing inspiration, support and training for those working in the industry. Founded by iconic British designer Zandra Rhodes, the museum is owned by Newham College London – one of Europe's largest further education colleges. The Museum is located in the only building in Europe designed by award-winning Mexican architect Ricardo Legorreta (1931–2011).
6. The exhibition is accompanied by a fully illustrated publication *Thea Porter Bohemian Chic* by Venetia Porter and Laura McLaws Helms. For press information about the book, contact Julie Chan on 020 7942 2701 or email j.chan@vam.ac.uk
7. Dennis Nothdruff is the curator of the Fashion and Textile Museum, London. His exhibitions include *POP! Design, Culture, Fashion, Zandra Rhodes Unseen* and *The Glamour of Bellville Sassoon*. Laura McLaws Helms is a fashion historian, writer and design consultant. She has worked on exhibitions at numerous museums and was the Assistant Curator for 'Beauty CULTure,' Annenberg Space for Photography in Los Angeles. Venetia Porter is Assistant Keeper of Islamic and Contemporary Middle East Art at the British Museum. She is the author of numerous publications including *Arabic and Persian Seals and Amulets in the British Museum* (2011), and has curated two major exhibitions at the British Museum, *Word into Art: Artists of the Modern Middle East* (2006) and *Hajj: Journey to the heart of Islam* (2012). She is Thea Porter's daughter.
8. The exhibition press and private view are supported by EAST. Virginia James, EAST Creative and Design Director, says: 'EAST is proud and privileged to be supporting the Thea Porter 70's Bohemian Chic exhibition, celebrating the legacy of her pioneering international aesthetic which characterised her influential designs, with its contemporary development of 'Premium Bohemian' style for a modern audience.'

For press details and images contact: Alison Lowe, Press Officer, Felicities Ltd, representing Fashion and Textile Museum, Tel: + 44 (0)20 7377 6030, **Email: Alison@felicities.co.uk**

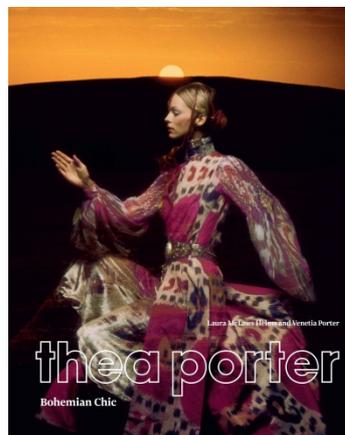
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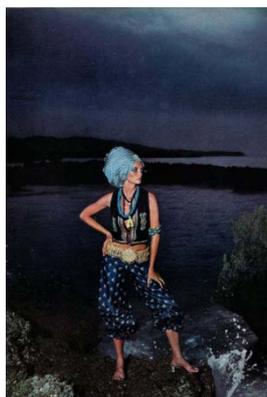
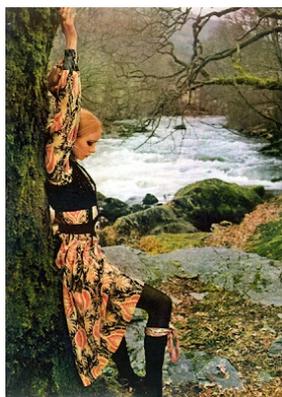
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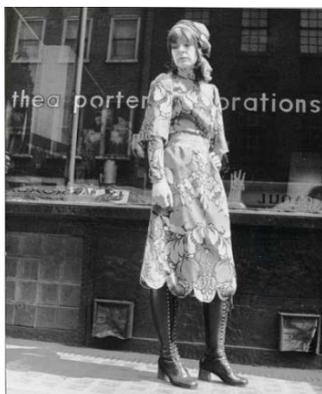
Exhibition images



l to r: Thea Porter reflected in the mirrored dining room table at her flat in Bolton street, Mayfair. *Sunday Times*, 7 March, 1971. Photograph by Jim Lee: this portrait gave inspiration to artist Andrew Logan who created a mirror portrait, which features in the exhibition. Changing Faces (featuring Thea Porter Decorations Ltd cushions), *Harper's Bazaar*, October 1969 p.83. Anne Schaufuss in a long antique silk ikat tunic over a chiffon ikat blouse and velvet knickerbockers. The setting sun effect was achieved by layering two negatives in the darkroom. *Vogue*, December 1970. Photograph by Clive Arrowsmith.



Maudie James wearing Thea Porter by Norman Parkinson, *Vogue*, July 1969; Brightest Sun Travellers, Jan Ward and Norman Parkinson by Norman Parkinson, *Vogue*, January 1971. Jan Ward by Norman Parkinson, *Vogue*, October 1968; All three images © Norman Parkinson Ltd / Courtesy Norman Parkinson Archive Thea Porter fashion illustration, c.1971. A devoré velvet open-fronted version of the abaya, 1977. Illustration by Duthy © Thea Porter Archive.



l to r: Claudia Bruce outside Thea Porter Decorations Ltd. Greek Street, London, 1970. Photograph by Aubrey Powell. Thea Porter's London shop 'thea porter decorations ltd', opened at 8 Greek Street on 27 July 1966 originally selling interior decorations. Front window of the shop and model posed inside wearing a silk chiffon dress with an Iraqi carpet print by Sandra Munro, c.1976. 'On the line ... bound hips, slits, great coat' Kimono-style jacket wrapped around the body and worn with a matching pink-sashed skirt. *British Vogue*, December 1976. Photograph by Norman Parkinson. © Norman Parkinson Archive

Seven key pieces



1. Gipsy dress



2. Faye dress



3. Wrap-over dress

l to r: **Gipsy dress** in a Liberty print cotton voile, part of the ready-to-wear collection Autumn/Winter 1971. The keyhole was stitched closed, but was opened by a later owner to allow for more of a décoloté (Private collection); Thea Porter Gipsy dress in floral cotton voile photograph by Willie Christie, 1969; **Faye dress** in ikat silk, designed by Sandra Munro, with a bodice of Damascus brocade (Private collection). Introduced in 1974, the **wrap-over dress** was often made in spangled fabric that shed its glitter. It became one of Porter's most successful designs. Jan de Villeneuve collection.



4. Abaya



5. Chazara jacket



6. Brocade dress



7. Sirwal skirt

l to r: This **abaya** synthesizes an oversized print based on Persian tiles designs with Damascus brocade patchwork corners. Mid-1970s. Lauren Lepire collection. Patchwork **brocade gown** by Thea Porter, 1970s, as worn by Veronique Peck the wife of actor Gregory Peck. Porter introduced the brocade panel dress in 1971. The **Chazara** jacket, which Porter launched in 1975, became an instant hit, beloved for its flattering cut and intriguing mix of textures and patterns. **Chazara** jacket in silver lace with antique silver braid. Laura McLaws Helms collection. The final key Porter piece was her **sirwal** skirt. Drawing on the traditional sirwal (baggy pyjama-like trousers) worn in Lebanon and the Arabian Peninsula,⁵⁷ Porter reinterpreted them into a tightly waisted skirt with voluminous draped folds that fell either to the knee or the ankle. Draped sirwal skirt, from Porter's Autumn/Winter 1982 collection.



l to r: One of the first publicity photos for Thea Porter Decorations Ltd features the actress Fenella Fielding posing in a paisley kaftan on a matching Chesterfield couch in the shop. Photographs from this series ran in every major tabloid. Greek Street, London, October 1966. Photograph by William Lovelace; Joan Collins in a Gipsy dress, with her sister Jackie in a robe with trailing sleeves over trousers, in two versions of Sheila Hudson's butterfly print, at the opening of the musical 1776 in 1970. Elizabeth Taylor in The Blue Bird photograph by Milton Greene, 1975; Kate Moss wearing Thea Porter on the day before her wedding to Jamie Hince, Lechlade, England, June 2011.