

ICONS

STITCHES
IN TIME:
A HISTORY
OF FABRIC

BY STEFANIE COHEN

IN 2005, during a Matisse exhibition at the Metropolitan Museum of Art, American Decorative Arts curator Amelia Peck was asked to help explain the origins of a particular piece of blue printed fabric depicted in many of the master painter's works.

The fabric swatch had long been a mystery to textile scholars. All the known pieces of its type—variations of a blue and white printed-floral design—were in museums in America, and scholars had for years assumed it was an early example of American printed fabric. When a British excise label was found on one such fabric swatch in the 1950s, scholars decided it had been made in England and exported, although no piece had ever been found in the U.K. Now a swatch had turned up in France, where Matisse had bought it, and she was intrigued.

Ms. Peck began researching the fabric. In the Met's library, she found a book about Indian fabrics brought to Europe by the Dutch East India Company and realized that the blue and white patterns had been made in India for a European or American consumer.

"I'd been an American textile specialist for 20 years, and I'd never thought about them in the context of the bigger world," she says. Most schol-

ars had assumed colonial American textiles had come from England.

"Following this one piece of fabric around the world made me wonder what else was coming into America," she says. "Then I got intrigued by fabrics from China and India."

Although the spice trade has been long studied, and the porcelain trade is well researched, no one had spent any significant time looking at the textile trade to America, she says. Even though the Met has vast textile holdings from around the globe, the pieces had never been the subject of a show.

Now, Ms. Peck, along with curators from five other departments at the museum, have mounted "Interwoven Globe: The Worldwide Textile Trade, 1500-1800" that will look at fabric design from a global perspective and attempt to tell a story of international global trade through three centuries of fabric. The show opens Sept. 16 and runs through Jan. 5.

"Interwoven Textiles" will display wall hangings, upholstery, tapestries, clothing, quilts and other artifacts that "tell the story of trade and economic history in a visually beautiful way," says Ms. Peck. The stories aren't all beautiful—the textiles were often used as currency to trade not just for spices and other goods, but also for slaves, who were also treated as commodities for export and sale.

"Interwoven Globe" is divided into nine galleries organized by theme and geography. It begins with a focus on the Portuguese maritime trade and its dealings with China and India. China had



INDIAN INSPIRATION
A cotton Wenztec coat from mid-18th century Netherlands

century, as the shipping routes grew with Portuguese and Spanish advances in shipbuilding and the growing spice trade, Europeans began clamoring for them.

"It must have been amazing to suddenly have all these beautiful colors and fabrics explode into the market," she says. "Who would want basic wool or linen when they could have a relatively inexpensive floral print? There were colors coming out of India no one in Europe had ever seen before."

Often European traders would request particular designs that would be popular back home, and then the Chinese and Indian merchants would like them and incorporate them into their domestic styles, so the motifs and designs go back and forth between the continents. That also explains why the origins of many fabrics, like the Matisse print, which had a European print created in an Indian style, have been so hard to track down.

Other rooms in the exhibit are devoted to religious fabrics, the Spanish and South American trade textiles, "exotic" imagery, tapestries that depict European domination, the slave trade and imported textiles in colonial America.

"It's amazing how much a small object will tell you about the world," Ms. Peck says.

The Brooklyn Museum of Art

luxurious silks and embroideries and India had beautiful cottons and special dye printing techniques. In the 1600s, the rest of the world hadn't yet discovered. Europeans knew there were textiles in the East, says Ms. Peck, but in the 17th

HIDDEN TRUTH IN AN ETCHING

BY ANNA RUSSELL

WHEN IS a work of art finished?

"Self-Portrait," by Chuck Close, comes in many different forms and lacks one definitive version. In 2009, Mr. Close had a photograph of himself, bearded and wearing round glasses, transferred to copper etching plates using a technique called photogravure. He then had several different impressions made from the same foundational image, struggling to find the one that worked.

In one, patches of his face appear tinted yellow, pink and blue. There's one with realistic coloring and a later study for a progression print. On display at the National Gallery of Art in Washington, D.C. from Sept. 1, the experiments that make up "Self-Portrait" provide a record of the artist's decision-making process on a project he ultimately decided not to pursue.

"Yes, No, Maybe: Artists Working at Crown Point Press," explores the methods artists employ to make creative decisions through 125 prints from 25 artists. The works, which will be exhibited until early January, were primarily made between

1972 and 2010 at Crown Point Press in San Francisco, a traditional printmaking studio that uses labor-intensive etching techniques that date back to the 1500s. The workshop has played host to such artists as Richard Diebenkorn, John Cage, and Mamma Andersson.

Etching is an ideal medium for charting the progress of a work, says Judith Brodie, who

'We looked at the artistic process as a sequence of decisions.'

curated the show along with Adam Greenhalgh. In etching, artists will make a "working proof"—a print of their work in progress—periodically, to evaluate the composition and coloring of the piece. Unlike in painting or sculpture, in which the artist's decisions are concealed by the finished work, etching produces a physical record of the process.

"Instead of just celebrating the role of the imagination in making art, we looked at the artistic process as a sequence of

decisions," said Ms. Brodie. The exhibit is organized around this concept, with case studies of individual artists and "Yes," "No," and "Maybe" galleries. Finished prints are displayed alongside their associated working proofs. The proofs are often revealing. In the early versions of Diebenkorn's "Touched Red," for instance, a large mushroom-like form appears in the top left corner. By the later proofs it has disappeared, replaced by a white rectangle. In Cage's work, developments are dictated by chance—he consulted the Chinese divination system, the I Ching, for most of his creative decisions.

Founded in 1962, Crown Point Press still operates out of San Francisco, inviting artists to spend a few weeks at a time at the studio learning the time-consuming printmaking process. Many of them return again and again. "It's always been about working—the action of the artists working with materials," said the workshop's founder Kathleen Brown.

"You could never really do art with an artist here in printmaking if you didn't think honestly it could fail," said Ms. Brown. "We never know for sure if it's going to happen."



DECISIONS "Keith," a mezzotint by Chuck Close. In the upcoming show at the National Gallery.

DON'T MISS: AUG. 24-30



True to Form
Miroslav Gromet, *Ala-Modo*, Providence, through Oct. 13
The Great Studios of the South of France from Cézanne to Matisse focuses on ideas about form that developed in the region that played host to some of the most prominent artists of the 20th century. Left, Amedeo Modigliani's "The Little Peasant," from 1918.



When in Rome
Michael C. Coles Museums, Emory Univ., until Nov. 17
"Architetti, Testi, Magellifici: Renaissance and Baroque Images of Rome" features maps, books and other renderings of Rome from the 15th to 18th centuries. Above, a 1761 etching by Giovanni Battista Piranesi.



Dutch Design
Museum of Fine Arts, Boston, through Feb. 23
Forty-five works by Dutch artists, including Pieter Mondriaan and Bart van der Leek, from the 1930s through the turn of the century, are on display in "Holland on Paper: The Age of Art Nouveau." Left, an 1895 poster by W.D.J. Neuenkamp.

Top: Tate; Left: Michael C. Coles Museums; Emory University; Photo: M. W. H. Coles; Middle: Museum of Fine Arts, Boston