

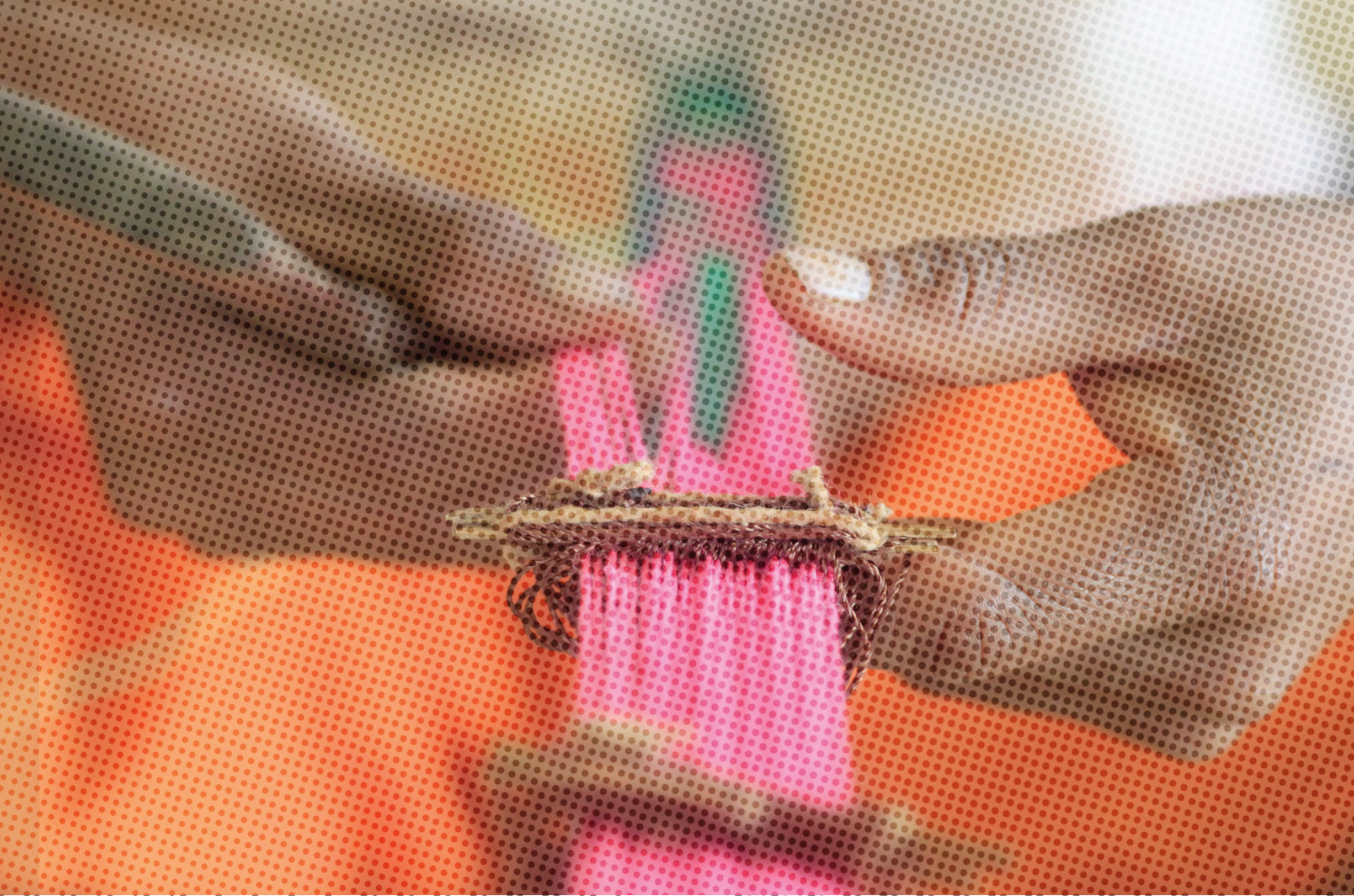


CRAFTING FUTURES: Discovering your Craft Heritage

**FASHION
REVOLUTION**

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What do we mean by 'craft heritage'?

Does your family or local community have a craft story? Is there a thread that has been handed down from generation to generation? Do you want to learn artisanal skills that are unique to your area or simply finish your grandmother's abandoned crochet blanket?

Unravel your understanding and creativity by discovering your personal artisanal heritage.

Why is it important?

At a time of mass extinction we look at loss of life as a critical point in our evolution. But as well as animals, plants and earth's species, we are also rapidly losing parts of the cultures that formed us, our skills and our ability to make with our hands.

“Traditional crafts are as much a part of our shared heritage as our wonderful historic landscapes, beautiful buildings, rare breeds of native farm animals and varied museum collections”

FROM PRINCE CHARLES' FOREWORD TO THE UK'S HERITAGE CRAFT ASSOCIATION'S
FIRST RED LIST OF ENDANGERED CRAFTS REPORT

As well as re-learning skills to keep passing them down to future generations, there is a huge need to **record the ones that are already in extinction and formulate new ways to keep them alive**, academically, commercially and personally.

Who is this resource for?

This resource will inspire you to reclaim your time and travel back in history, to better navigate the future.

Whether you are an educator wanting to take your students on a journey to understand and record their geographical cultural story, or a student on further research, or whether you are a young designer looking for inspiration from what is in your immediate vicinity, or if you are an individual interested in your own familial crafts heritage, our global textile history is steeped in beauty and full of hidden secrets.



CASE STUDY: Aratrik Dev Varman

In January 2018, British Council launched a collaboration with IMG Reliance (Lakmé Fashion Week) and Fashion Revolution in India under *Crafting Futures*, the British Council's global programme supporting the future of craft through research, collaboration and education.

British designer Bethany Williams and filmmakers Storyloom Films came together on a residency in the Northeastern Indian state of Tripura led by local designer Aratrik Dev Varman of the brand Tilla, which took them on a journey to share ideas and explore a more inclusive fashion future wherein local craftspeople are seen as a valuable contributor.

Tripura is a small Indian state bordering Bangladesh, which is home to 19 different tribal communities. Unusually, these communities are matriarchal and weaving plays an important role in women's daily lives. Women weave their own clothing in their spare time, which includes a wrapped narrow piece of breast cloth and a sarong. Traditionally, weaving is done on a loin loom or back strap loom, and the narrow strips of cloth are joined together to make larger textiles.

Left: The local craftspeople of Tripura, collecting, and spinning fibres.



CASE STUDY: Aratrik Dev Varman



The designs and colours of the textiles are unique and representative of each community, often relating back to their animistic religious beliefs. Most of the communities speak different dialects of Kokborok, a language without a script – meaning that all community wisdom and knowledge is passed on orally between generations. However, the sustainability of the practice is under threat due to the absence of hand-spinning, the introduction of a frame loom and the affordability and access to natural dyes and fibres.

Through the residencies, a series of films and creative outputs have been produced. By highlighting the stories of the women in Tripura, the purpose is to encourage viewers to go out and explore their local communities, celebrate craftspeople and understand the unique role that craft and the hand-made have to play in our identity and cultures.

Left: Aratrik Dev Varman's showcase and collection for Tilla as part of Lakme Fashion Week, using the fabrics woven in the village of Tripura.



How do I discover my own craft heritage story?

It's never been easier to reconnect with our past, local or personal. Technologies such as the internet and the digitalisation of tools have made researching easy and compelling.

Feeling stuck? Try following these simple steps...

1.

Start close to home. **What do you know about your family's craft history?** Was your granny, aunt, great aunt, mother, uncle etc a great knitter, crocheter, woodblock-printer, doll maker, embroiderer, weaver?

2.

Find out more about them and start a conversation.
How did they learn and who from?

3.

Were they employed in your local area's industry? Did they learn just for pleasure and as a result become masters of the trade?

The thread of discovery could start from that old jumper you never wore but secretly admired, or by finding an old photo which grabs your attention.

CASE STUDY: La Ebe

It all goes back to Ebe, my maternal great grandmother, class of 1895. She is remembered as rigorously dressed in black, simple elegance, white mane collected in a chignon, aristocratic features with the blessing of flawless skin, no wrinkles.

Born in a privileged family, at the age of 12 Ebe loses her mother and her life takes on Cinderella proportions, violent stepmother included. At 16, she escapes to live with aunt Firma who teaches her the art of sewing that makes her career blossom overnight like the first violet from under the snow.

After the enduring times of WWI, Ebe marries Arturo, a fine cabinetmaker, specialising in manufacturing furniture for the booming yachting industry of Viareggio, a rebellious communist. Together they have three daughters, one of whom is my grandmother.

Ebe is so talented that she creates dresses by draping the fabric directly on the mannequin before the client's appointment, a gift of a limited elite of the likes of Madame Lanvin. She possessed a mix of wizardry, innate skills and sense of style that made her the couturier of the town's aristocracy that, with discretion and exclusivity, demanded more of her time and creativity. The studio had a double entrance, or exit, a revolving door of goodbye on one side while her apprentices would welcome the next customer.

Another war, husband and son-in-law deported by the Nazis and one granddaughter later, life continued for Ebe with more clients and the first subscription to an international magazine that delivers sketches directly from the latest shows in Paris.

I grew up close to her, avidly wanting to know more about her life. The fourth proposition of the Fashion Revolution Manifesto resonates particularly with the principles I grew up with.

"Fashion respects culture and heritage. It fosters, celebrates and rewards skills and craftsmanship. It recognizes creativity as its strongest asset... Fashion honours the artisan."

Having to provide for her family, especially in such dire times as the wars, made my great grandmother resourceful – in the same way she would use the distressed exterior leaves of the lettuce for the evening vegetable soup, she'd create clothing for my dolls from scraps of the couture fabrics of her clients frocks. It wasn't about the quantity, it was about making the most of the little that was available. Disposing wasn't an option, buying without a purpose wasn't either. No. 12 of the UN Global Goals for a Sustainable Future (Responsible Consumption) wouldn't have a reason to exist. Now we have communication resources ready at the click of a button, yet we need to make hundreds of countries swear to "common sense". Somehow I feel I have the role of bearing the torch of my great grandmother's legacy that luxury is, first, a state of mind.

How do I discover my community's heritage story?

Discovering your community's craft heritage is easier than you might think. Technologies such as the internet and the digitalisation of tools have made researching easy and compelling.

Try following these simple steps...

1.

Dig into the archives. **What does history say about your area's craft history?**

Visit local libraries, museums and tourist information centres to see what they know about the historical crafts in the area. Was there a certain industry that flourished? A particular skill that your town, county or country excelled in?

2.

Start a conversation. **Does anyone still practice those heritage crafts?** Plan a trip to visit a studio, workshop or factory that still practices the crafts that were once a vital part of the community landscape.

3.

How can those crafts be revitalised? Could you organise a workshop, an event or a public performance to share your findings and encourage others to learn a heritage craft?

CASE STUDY: Spinners and their Spinning Wheels



“Spinners”, or “Verpėjos” in the Lithuanian language, started as an art project and is a movement of spinning wool using traditional spinning wheels. It was founded in 2017 by Laura Garbštienė who uses it to connect art, creation, self-expression, textiles, fashion, handicrafts, ethnography, and ecological thinking. She uses the term “wool-activism”.

Laura is a contemporary artist from Lithuania. With an MA in Textiles, she practices in the fields of video art, photography, often becoming an object of her own works. After over ten years of intensive artistic endeavour and city life, she moved to a remote Lithuanian village, bought a few sheep... and that’s how it all started.

Learning to spin

“It always seemed to me, that spinning needs a lot of patience. Several years ago one granny from the next village taught me how to do it, and it wasn’t easy at all.” When learning to spin, the

yarn becomes too thick, too loose, too bulky, too thin. Sometimes it breaks until you find out your balance between the speed of a wheel, and tension in your hands. It’s about being calm and balanced. The process naturally brings contemplation and a harmonious flow.

Laura’s first spinning workshop was in the summer of 2017 for women and girls mostly living in urban cities. It is something anyone can learn and incorporate into their life.

Workshop activities vary: spinning, learning from local grandmothers and each other; interdisciplinary artists create their own concepts; researchers of ethnography come to observe; attendees contemplate the wheel, knit, weave, and build installations. The project culminated in a “wheel orchestra”: people sit silently at their wheels, spinning in their own rhythm and the sound of turning wheels is recorded – a symphony of simplicity, beauty, and balance.

CASE STUDY: Spinners and their Spinning Wheels



From sheep to jumper

Underpinning the weaving workshops is Laura's fascination with wool. When she moved to the village, she bought a sheep. "I became interested in old breeds of sheep, and properties of wool," she explains. "When I understood, how wool is being processed in the textile industry, I decided to stop buying industrial wool." The role of sheep from wool production to its centuries-old mythological appearance in human life is a focus for the workshop. Laura extracts natural dyes from her garden and experiments with her wools. During the long Lithuanian autumn and winter, Laura spins every day.

In nearby villages there are still women in their 70s and 80s, whose homes are decorated with textiles woven by their own hands. Some of them still can show you a big weaving loom, or a spinning wheel but they haven't spun for decades. The practical value of the spinning wheel in Lithuania decreased rapidly during the socialist regime, when personal property and farming one's own sheep was impossible – the textile industry evolved quickly during these times as well. Therefore, weavers started to weave from industrial yarns, and nowadays even home-woven textiles are mostly made from industrially produced yarns.

"I felt ashamed that wool products we use in Lithuania have no connection with sheep reared in Lithuania," explains Laura. "Tons of wool is disposed of, while at the same time in my village we have an elder who knows how to make yarn since her childhood!"

Today we can see that simple means of self-expression – a kind of artistic protest of a wool activist – evolved to bring like-minded people from different backgrounds together.

NOTES

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