

THE FABRICS OF MY LIFE

The sign at the showground said 'Studio Clearance – artworks and fabrics'. Just the word Fabric was a magnet in itself. A local artist, Rosie, who now works in paint and paper, had previously created great quilts, both large and miniature, and for these she had frequently dyed fabrics to create special effects. This was an opportunity not to be missed. What would she have for me?

My earliest memories are of standing on the kitchen table so that my mother could set the hem of my latest frock. Typically little girls' dresses would have set in sleeves, a fitted waist and a full skirt. This one was pale green robia voile, semi sheer with dots, piped at the yoke and smocked to match at the yoke and waist and sashed behind. Robia voile came from Tootal Broadhurst Lee Limited of Manchester, England, manufacturers of 'cotton goods of superior and dependable quality' that were marked with the brand on the selvedge. This brand would dress me for another decade, as even my summer uniform for school was a Tootal fabric – Tobralco. Other dresses were in Liberty lawn, fine printed cotton which were smocked to enhance a dominant colour. Winter dresses would be in the wool and cotton blend Viyella, and PJs in Clydella – a sister fabric with a higher percentage of cotton. My PJs always had feather-and-fan embroidery on collar and cuffs. This was just pre World War II when most mothers sewed for their children and we were a country that looked always to England. We exported wool and wheat and imported all our fabrics. During the war good fabric was harder to come by, but somewhere a friend or relative would have a piece put away, and later my new dress would be passed on to a younger child.

By the time I was 12, it was post war and fabrics were again available. I was tall for my age and now old enough for a tailored linen dress – Moygashel linen of course from that small village in County Tyrone in Northern Ireland. Mills have been there since 1795 when a group of Huguenot settlers established Irish linen weaving there, weaving some of the finest linens in the world. As with Scotch Whiskey, they claimed that the high quality of their dress and upholstery linens was due to the quality of the local water.

Soon I was 15 and ready for my first mixed party. What would I wear? My mother took me shopping and we found sheer organdie printed with sprays of white flowers. This was made into a shirtwaist dress with peter pan collar, small cap sleeves and sparkling glass buttons to the waist. It had a full circle skirt at ballerina length and was worn over a pink taffeta slip, also with full circle skirt, and flat black suede pumps. Most appropriate for a shy teenager who thought it truly beautiful.

After I left school it was time for cocktail dresses and ball gowns.

This was when I first met silk which comes in so many forms. Lightweight habutai which is so soft and warm as a lining, chiffon beloved by Valentino for draping dinner gowns, the stiffness of organza for lining collars or as a sheer in itself, fuji for shirting, chamois for draping, raw silk for suiting, taffeta for cocktail dresses, dupion and shantung. These were the days when one dressed for the theatre and cocktail parties. Street length dresses in fabrics that said they were special – special in the nature of weave or lustre. Silk taffeta and dupion were frequently woven with contrasting warp and weft threads, giving a 'shot' effect in colour as they caught the light. It takes considerable skill to cut taffeta and dupion well as they have an innate stiffness that does not drape

well. Velvet and velveteen were also popular and one has to be careful to cut with the nap or pile running all the same way. Just as organdie is a cotton fabric and organza silk, so velveteen is cotton and velvet is silk. Velveteen does not have the deep lustre of velvet.

This was an era of real glamour when it came to ball gowns. Fred Astaire and Ginger Rogers still danced on screen and Grace Kelly married her prince. In Sydney up to 2000 people went to big balls at the Trocadero where two bands shared a revolving stage. Ball gowns were very glamorous – velveteen bodices with huge tulle skirts over contrasting linings, lace tops laced with satin bows and tulle skirts, shirred georgette with shoestring straps. Everywhere waists were small and skirts flew, so the dance floor was a whirl of colour. When at the end of the night the clarinettist hit the high A in Golden Wedding, everyone was on the floor.

How fortunate was I to have a mother who sewed so well! One night, however, as I waited for my escort to a ball, her hand was shaking as she trimmed the midnight blue tulle skirt. The bodice was a matching reembroidered lace with the scalloped edges making a deep plunge to the back waist and this back was laced with lilac satin. Regrettably I had chosen a furnishing satin and her fingers bled from forcing a fine needle through this tough fabric. This night my father put his foot down and said that I could sew these dresses for myself from that time on – and I did.

These were the days when many made their own clothes. For summer dresses the season officially opened on Bank holiday – the first Monday in August when banks, insurance houses, legal firms and stockbrokers closed but retail stores were open. This was the day when summer fabrics were ‘released’. My mother and I were always there early. Stoffels swiss cottons sold out quickly and they were not to be missed. David Jones would have fashion parades on the hour – 10.00 am, 11.00 am, noon and 1 pm – of clothes made to Vogue or McCall patterns from fabrics for sale on the floor. Between these parades an imported seamstress would give a lecture on an aspect of dressmaking and these lectures were supported by a supplement in the Women’s Weekly. On Monday one would learn how to adjust a commercial pattern to your own figure, fitting and how to prepare fabric and press a garment in construction. On Tuesday she would give instructions on cutting out the fabric and transferring markings from the pattern to fabric. Wednesday would sew the bodice with darts, seams and facings, Thursday would set the sleeves and Friday would set the zipper, turn the hem and finish the garment. I would usually watch a session of these lectures in my lunch hour, as they reinforced the evening classes I was then taking in dressmaking. This was a 4 year course leading to full tailoring, but after two years I had learned what I needed to know. I had learned to sew on a Singer treadle which breaks the thread as soon as you lose rhythm, and at this stage this was the machine that both mother and I used.

Greys of Pitt Street, Sydney, advertised themselves as the largest fashion fabric store in the world with two weeks of ‘fashion excitement’. What a store! A fabric for every purpose and a generous choice all around. So much choice, in fact, that I would dream away my lunchhour there and take home samples for discussion with my mother.

Such fashion was far from inexpensive – fabrics were generally 36 inches wide and the big skirts of the day needed 5 yards of fabric @ about 5 pounds a yard. Quite an investment when office salaries were around 12 to 15 pounds a week. Three yards of cotton would make a shirt dress and even less would do when the shift became popular. Fractional fitting shoes in narrow widths cost

around 7 pounds for Selby and 11 pounds for my favourite Millers. Metrication has brought us fabrics that are generally 115 cm wide which means far more economical cutting.

Having enjoyed my share of parties and balls, I was engaged and my responsibility now was to prepare for married life with a traditional trousseau. This required much gazing into the window of Perle's of Elizabeth Street where there were the finest of nighties and negligees to be copied in swiss voile and embroidered with rosebuds, and camisoles and slips of silk crepe de chine. It was time to assemble china and table linen, so I learned to put the back of my hand on table linen to test the 'feel'. Should it be warm I would know it was not linen, as perhaps advertised, because linen is always cold. It was always linen at Jeffcoat & Stephenson who had an exquisite range of tablecloths and handtowels. There was a special shop in Angel Place where one bought linen tablecloths to embroider. There is also a test for silk – pull a thread and burn it. On pure silk the burning will stop when the flame is removed and the thread should ball up and turn to ash. With imitations the thread may melt, bubble or drip.

A few years later we moved to Brisbane and it took me some time to discover Morris Woollen Mills at Redbank. Originally a boiling-down works to convert sheep carcasses into tallow, it later became a major meat canning and freezing works. In 1934 it reopened as Morris Woollen Mills with a workforce that grew to 700. During World War II the mill worked non-stop to produce blankets and uniform materials. After the war it returned to domestic production and earned gold medals for high fashion fabrics. This mill was a real 'find' and I was always rewarded with something exciting each time I made the trip there. Where else could one find the wool flannel for Brisbane Girls Grammar blazers? Want to copy a Sportscraft skirt? Always something there. Reduction of tariffs in 1973 made the mill unviable and *in 1983* there was the inevitable closing down sale. What a sale was that one! My friend Maureen and I were going, so my husband Don decided to tag along. He became a major asset. The procedure was that one selected a roll, or rolls, and then took them to the counter to be cut. As Maureen and I rummaged through the heavily discounted stock we amassed a huge pile around Don which he guarded against other marauding bargain seekers until we were ready to broach the counter. It was nevertheless a sad day, as this was an original source that was disappearing.

We came home with an incredible pile of assorted 'stuff'. In praise of my husband I'll have to say that he never questioned what I bought or that most of it just disappeared into storage. What did I do with all of this? Some fine wool pieces I took to Thailand to be tailored into a jacket and skirts, I made up jersey knits into dresses and pure wool worsted into Sportscraft pleated skirts. Then there was the fabric originally made for saddle blankets for the Queensland Mounted Police. It was bottle green and tomato red one inch checks in a clever double weave that wove two layers together. This later became an extremely warm dressing gown for my son. There are still some lengths of wool in a camphorwood chest – one favourite that I so nearly make up every couple of years or so is a Kelly green, navy and white houndstooth check. I take it from the box, hold it up and decide that I can't buy the right coloured jumper and put it away again. But always I know it is there.

In the 1970s, as the mother of two young daughters, I was kept busy sewing for them. I used Enid Gilchrist draft-your-own patterns or worked them out for myself. To make their legs look longer, I cut their dresses really short and made matching bloomers! Living in Brisbane, my choice for them

was mostly cotton because that washes so well. My signature item then, and often since, has been fine piping, so they had gingham sundresses piped in matching or contrasting colours. It was only years later, and after she had been travelling in Europe, that one daughter told me she finally appreciated the European finishes on the clothes I had always made. Lots of my old dresses went into their dressup box. In later years I was berated for cutting bean bag frogs from a stylish burgundy velveteen dress with a huge skirt which they thought should have been saved for their teenage parties. Both girls like to tell stories of clothes that were finished in a rush – such as sewing them into a dress instead of finishing with a zipper! I used to say as they left – keep moving and no-one will notice. For the other daughter I remember copying a dress for her that she had seen locally because I knew where to buy the same material, and then she met the bought dress at a party! Such are the perils of copying ready-made.

Then there was the saga of the school shorts. A friend and I decided that the children needed a sports uniform, so we researched some wholesalers and found that we could buy pre-cut shorts @ \$2 each. Foolishly we decided not to impose too much financial burden on those who could not sew, so we set the price of made-up shorts @ \$2.50! I was sewing flat out for weeks! However, we did have a sports uniform.

All this sewing has been done on a Husqvana machine that I bought for 90 pounds in 1956. This was a month's salary and I was well paid in a legal office at the time. This machine has a mechanical drive that has managed all fabrics from chiffon to canvas and parts for repair are becoming increasingly difficult to obtain, so it will be a sad day when I have to part with it. My favourite canvas was 12 oz cotton canvas which I used for both curtains and upholstery at the beach.

I have always admired a well cut garment, how that marries with choice of fabric and colour. I discussed at length with my teenage daughter how to describe clothes that she was seeing and we decided that the most important element is silhouette. How rewarding then to visit the Valentino exhibition at the Art Gallery and see his dictum on the wall – Line is Everything. I spent hours there on two visits to take in how all the elements of design – fabric, cut and finish – came together in such elegant creations.

It was during an interval at the premiere of Graeme Murphy's *The Silver Rose*, that I was approached by a ballet executive enquiring whether I was enjoying the performance. My response was that I loved it and how much I yearned to lean out and touch the elaborate costumes. This led to two hours in the wardrobe department of the ballet, touching the delicate hand painted dresses and seeing how they cut heavy woollen coats so that the dancers could still move lightly. Perhaps not everyone's idea of an exciting afternoon, but certainly mine.

Should you visit my storeroom, you would find that my love of fabrics has seen me collect far more than I can use. Or is it that fabrics collect me? I have bottles of buttons, tins of elastic and fasteners, bags of stuffing. There is a large box of paper patterns covering decades until I learned to cut for myself. There is the bedspread never made, the dress that didn't work out, the bargains too good to be true. There are the travel souvenirs – a stopover in Dubai brought home half a suitcase full of possible outfits, and of course one could not leave Cairo without Egyptian cotton shirting. Then there are the scraps from now decades of cutting – each one a memory of the dress, cushion or curtain.

Why keep all this? Because this is insurance against the dull days of life. Those days when it is cold, wet and miserable outside or perhaps just dull and depressing inside *oneself*. This is the time to turn to the stash of all that has been hoarded and hidden, to bring out the boxes, to spread it around, to see what goes with what – to relive the memories of acquisition – to drape, display and to dream. Some pieces have been there so long that they are old friends, beautiful in themselves but just awaiting that flash of inspiration to become something else. Many have come to me on the ‘speak to me’ principle – I just walk into a shop and somehow they just ‘speak to me’! Working and playing with fabrics is a truly tactile experience and an afternoon can disappear in a flash.

Why sew at all? For upholstery one can achieve results not obtainable elsewhere, colour combinations not commercially available or just that touch that lights up a room. For clothes it is so that a garment is so much more than just a shirt or a skirt. It is the whole journey of that fabric, from manufacturer to merchant to you, incorporating all the memories of acquisition and the dramas of creation. None of this is obvious to anyone around, but it is an internal joy and satisfaction to those who are born to do things for themselves.

So what did Rosie have for me? She had samples from her time as a textile artist when she was experimenting with dyes. If and when I put these samples to further use, it is a further step in the creative process and Rosie is embedded in my memory bank. Thank you Rosie.