

Sew-it-yourself: A Child's Kit Dress

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Figure 1: Front View. Style no. 663. Pinafore dress produced in four colourways; harebell with foxglove pink (above), designed to be worn with coordinating top and socks and knitwear for ages 1-6 years, 100% cotton, screen printed. Summer 1981. Worthing Art Gallery and Museum. Photograph by Nicola Miles.

At first glance this garment appears to be a simple patterned pinafore dress. It was donated to Worthing Museum by a Sussex resident as part of a larger collection of children's handmade clothes. The process of exploring this piece, however, has led to the unravelling of a multitude of rich and intricate threads.

Beginnings

Categorised as style number 663 and made for the Clothkits 1981 Summer collection, it was

part of a range of clothes that had started at number 1 in 1969 with a basic girl's shift dress in a brightly coloured geometric pattern typical of 1960s designs [Figure 2].



Figure 2: Front View. Style no.1 Pinafore dress and pants produced in 3 colourways, colours: turquoise/purple/blue, lime/gold/orange pink/orange/red, cotton twill, screen printed, 1969. Anne Kennedy private archive.

Both these dresses heralded a different approach to making that resonated with the changing roles of women in the 1960s and 1970s.¹ They represent the efforts of two women designers at a time when women were gradually entering the work force and struggling to combine work and family. They signal a change in children's fashion which had up until the mid-1960s been somewhat staid and dull.² They hold the history of a part of Sussex and its ties to tradition, family, and folk practices, and they demonstrate a group of artists influencing one another within a community whose heritage includes amongst others Peggy Angus, Eric Ravilious, Tirzah Garward, Ursula Mommens and John Piper.³

¹ Sherry Schofield-Tomschin, "Home Sewing: Motivational Changes in the Twentieth Century", *The Culture of Sewing: Gender, Consumption and Home Dressmaking*, ed. Barbara Burman. (Oxford: Berg, 1999) 97-110.

² Noreen Marshall, *Dictionary of Children's Clothes 1700s to Present* (London: V&A Publishing, 2008) 39-40.

³ James Russell, *Peggy Angus, Designer, Teacher, Painter* (Suffolk: Antique Collector's Club Ltd, 2014) 38-40, 115-119.

Designed more than ten years apart, these two dresses reveal changes in fashion and design between the late 1960s and early 1980s. Style no. 1 is typical of the shift dresses that had become popular in the 1960s with its straight lines, high hem and brightly-coloured geometric pattern. In contrast style no. 663 has a longer, flared skirt shape, a softer colour palette and a nature-based folk art pattern.

The 1960s was a time when fashion was rapidly changing and for the first time childrenswear was also being significantly influenced. A surge of young female designers had graduated from London Art schools interested in designing for children, partly because they were having children themselves.⁴ Names like Barbara Hulanicki, Mary Quant, and Kikki Byrne were becoming known, and amongst them was Anne Kennedy.

As a Textiles graduate from Camberwell School of Arts and Crafts, Anne was inspired by several factors including her visits to the Victoria and Albert Museum and her exposure to modern art and design such as Bauhaus and De Stijl, Le Corbusier, Klee, Matisse, Bonnard and Scandinavian design. These were combined with her apparently poor sewing skills and the general shortage of interesting children's clothes. Anne said: 'I worked on creating things that were easy to make, fun and colourful, using as few pieces as possible...'⁵

Easy-to-make and easy-to-wear were key factors at a time when women were starting to enter the workforce in greater numbers and had less time for making but still had reasonable sewing skills learned from previous generations used to making their own clothes.⁶ They wanted practical clothes for themselves and for their children that were more interesting and stylish.

Style no. 1 was created in a kit form with the garment being screen-printed directly onto cotton with sewing instructions adjustable to size and age. The kit came complete with haberdashery including matching thread and buttons. [Figure 3]. Anne said of it:

The first pinafore dress ... was just one piece so you couldn't go wrong and it was printed on the cloth. The instructions were there so anybody could make something that looked good, easily, and would enjoy it. So that was what it was all based on, so that people with no confidence in sewing, and who couldn't cope with paper patterns could do this successfully. I think that's why it grew because we tested everything.⁷

⁴ Alice Guppy, *Children's Clothes 1939-1970* (Dorset: Blandford Press, 1978) 247.

⁵ Anne Kennedy, personal interview, 08 August 2016. Firle, East Sussex.

⁶ Amy Twigger Holroyd, *Folk Fashion* (London: IB Tauris & Co Ltd, 2017) 84.

⁷ Anne Kennedy, personal interview



Figure 3: Style no. 1 pattern, 1969. Anne Kennedy private archive. Photographed by author.

Children's clothes were available in larger stores like Mothercare, C&A, Marks and Spencer, Woolworths and British Home Stores but were conservative in design.⁸ More interesting clothes came from Scandinavia and Europe but were expensive and only available if you lived in London. A key to the success of Clothkits was mail order which enabled people who didn't live in London to access more affordable and stylish clothes.

A loyal Clothkits customer, Jenny Pearce lived in New Ash Green in Kent. This was a prototype village built in 1967 to accommodate a new modern lifestyle and with residents who were typical of the average Clothkits customer. She describes how Clothkits was popular in her village because:

it was full of young marrieds and most people had small children. And many people were architects and journalists and in the music industry, so liked something different and appreciated good design and strong colours. The range of children's clothes available at that time in shops was limited and quite traditional - but the interesting stuff (e.g. the Danish brand Young Dane, or French brands) was expensive and mainly sold in London shops. The more skilled mums made their own children's clothes but Clothkits offered an alternative, quick and cheap but interesting and colourful, and not requiring much sewing knowledge. They were very hardwearing and washed well too. The colours were

⁸ Elizabeth Ewing, *History Of Children's Costume* (London: Batsford, 1982) 166-171.

beautifully co-ordinated and it was great fun mixing and matching the different clothes. There was considerable pleasure in unfolding the newly arrived kit and cutting out the crunchy new material...⁹

Practicality and design were important factors for the Clothkits style of children's clothes and Anne insisted on good quality hardwearing natural fabrics which were very in keeping with the move towards environmental sustainability in the 1970s.¹⁰ Her training also gave her a thorough understanding of working with dyes and colour. Liz Thomas, a customer, emphasises this when she talks about what she liked about Clothkits:

the quality of the natural materials (cotton and wool), the colour range and the printed patterns. The fashion industry was very pedestrian and the printed cords had rich unusual colours. I also liked the fact that they used cotton rather than artificial fabrics that were universal for the main garments.¹¹

Style no. 663 [Figure 1] was available in four colourways with each consisting of only two colours to keep printing costs down. Often a third colour was created by overprinting which was cost effective. By the 1980s a 'total' look was possible with matching t-shirts, jumpers, hats, scarves, gloves, socks and tights with an increasing move in the commercial market towards ready-to-wear [Figure 4].¹²



Figure 4: 1970s catalogue page showing the full range of matching accessories. The Keep, Brighton.

⁹ Jenny Pearce, personal interview, 4 December 2016.

¹⁰ Amy Twigger Holroyd, *Folk Fashion*. 15-16.

¹¹ Liz Thomas, personal interview, 17 Oct. 2016.

¹² Noreen Marshall, *Dictionary of Children's Clothes 1700s to Present*. 41-42.

Fashion Influences and Folk Design

The shape of style no. 663 is typical of Clothkits clothes throughout the 1970s and 1980s; simple shapes, ideal for active children, consisting of tunics and pinafores, layered skirts, waistcoats and smocks. This was also extended into women's and men's wear. Fashion trends in the late 1960s and 1970s were influenced by other cultures and this was evident in couture fashion with Ossie Clark and Celia Birtwell's use of the kimono and sarong, Yves St Laurent's Russian peasant and Spanish looks, and Thea Wilson's kaftans.¹³ A nostalgic English country aesthetic was also popular with Bill Gibb's lavish mix of romantic historical influenced garments and Laura Ashley's revival of Victorian and Edwardian shapes and floral patterns.¹⁴ Clothkits clothes were also affected by these fashion trends, and folk costume was a key source of inspiration, in particular, Max Tilke and his studies of the structure and shape of peasant costumes.¹⁵

The placement of pattern on borders, around hemlines, openings, cuffs, waistbands and necklines is typical of folk costume and this was a standard design technique that made Clothkits distinctive. The pattern design for style no. 663 has a series of hearts and a leaf design that are repeated around the neckline and straps and echoed in the border pattern around the hem with spiralling branches and heart-shaped leaves. The heart is also used as one of the main motifs in a symmetrical tripartite arrangement typical of patterns on folk textiles that are often nature based.¹⁶ Two birds face a central heart with a thistle shaped flower above and this motif is repeated around the dress. Folk textile designs were often directional, running in stripes, or a continuous pattern running around a garment in bands. This directional print meant that the fabric could only be cut in one way which suited the kit format.

Accessories were also added which proved very popular. Sometimes they were done to fill spare space on a pattern,¹⁷ and sometimes they were sold separately, in the case of the matching hat and badge set, style no. 663, to sew on jeans and T-shirts. Worthing Museum also holds the matching hat, pencil case and bag, style no. 682 [Figure 5 & 6]. The hat was reversible and so could be worn plain with other outfits or with the pattern matching the dress. Patches were included that could be coordinated with other outfits and playful motifs of cats, a rowing boat and dinghies were included on the purse and pencil case. Colours were suitably named using natural themes: harebell, cactus, Indian red and anchovy.

¹³ Clare Rose, *Children's Clothes*, (London: Batsford, 1989) 136-7.

¹⁴ Isabelle Anscombe, *A Women's Touch: Women in Design from 1860 to the Present Day* (London: Penguin, 1985) 195-6.

¹⁵ Max Tilke, *Folk Costumes From East Europe, Africa and Asia*. (London: A. Zwemmer, 1978).

¹⁶ Henry Glassie, *The Spirit Of Folk Art, The Girard Collection At The Museum Of International Folk Art* (New York: Henry N Abrams Inc, 1989).

¹⁷ Noreen Marshall, (London: V&A Publishing, 2008) 40.



Figure 5: Style no. 682, harebell hat, pencil case and purse set (front and back). Worthing Art Gallery and Museum.



Figure 6: Summer 1981 catalogue page 17. Anne Kennedy private archive.

The pattern design for style no. 663 was created by Janet Kennedy, an artist and family member, who joined Clothkits in the early 1970s. Janet was to become the main print designer for children's clothes and her work was inspired by fellow artist, teacher, friend, and neighbour Peggy Angus. After graduating in Sculpture from Edinburgh College of Art, Janet and her husband Tyl had moved to Glynde where Angus rented a cottage called 'Furlongs'. Peggy's support had been vital, as Janet said, 'She lent us the money to buy a house and the shop in Lewes for £3000 for the two, when we first came. We were desperate for money.'¹⁸

Peggy Angus actively supported and encouraged other artists. She believed, like William Morris, that an artist worked best within a community and should be an important contributor to it. She gathered creative people around her. As Janet said:

Art for Life was her motto. She also knew Enid Marx and had an interest in folk art. She knew Quentin Bell and Eric Ravilious, Ursula and Norman Mommens, Edwin Smith and Olive Cook. You got to know everyone as she knew so many interesting people.¹⁹

In the Peggy Angus archive at The Keep in Brighton there are notes and ideas scribbled on scraps of paper and newspaper articles exploring printing garments on fabric, adapting patterns to fit different sizes, and making garments that would mix and match with one another. This playing with ideas and exploring possibilities was typical of Angus. As Anne said, 'We all absorbed from each other and got inspired by each other.'²⁰

Angus's keen interest in folk art and design extended to local Sussex traditions. This was epitomised in her many parties and gatherings that involved homemade costumes, folk songs, storytelling and of course, typical of Sussex, bonfires. She believed in the art of the craftsperson and advocated work done by hand with skill and quality. She also believed that people should have a sense of pride in their work and a sense of involvement that can be lost by the increased use of machinery. Angus tended to prefer a hand block print method to make her designs.²¹

The Clothkits' philosophy clearly shared some of the ideas and beliefs that were held by Peggy Angus. Anne's insistence on the simplicity of design and the quality of the fabric and dyes is in keeping with Angus's approach. The Clothkits designs were all hand-drawn and in

¹⁸ Janet Kennedy, personal interview, 13 July 2016. Littledene, East Sussex.

¹⁹ Janet Kennedy, personal interview.

²⁰ Anne Kennedy, personal interview.

²¹ Carolyn Trant, "Peggy Angus, Folk Art and Vernacular Design", *Symposium: Enid Marx and Her Contemporaries: Women Designers and the Popularisation of Folk Arts in Britain 1920-1960*. (Compton Verney: 2013).

the early days transferred onto screens and hand printed in their studio. This philosophy also extended to the way in which the company was run. It was very family-friendly and community-based. People gathered around Clothkits and it became one of the largest employers in Lewes. The spirit of Clothkits centred on country living with a sense of traditional community and family values. The use of folk patterns and costume harked back to an idyllic past that fed the nostalgia of the time.

The importance of children and family were central to Clothkits as they were establishing a business with a family. Janet and Anne both had four children at a time when it was hard for women to work and have childcare. They were one of the first employers in Lewes to have a crèche and women were often employed to do jobs at home which made it easier with childcare. Anne said of Janet that 'she was a great support ... She thought the same way as I did and we both had children so we were designing I suppose for our children and our friend's children.'²²

Clothkits also attempted to create a family environment in the shop with sofas, coffee tables, newspapers and toys. Alison Washington, whose husband worked for Clothkits, remembers, 'The shop was very friendly and had a children's play area and Wendy House. There were also papers for dads to read!'²³ This lifestyle was also reflected in the catalogues that were extremely important as the bulk of the business depended on mail order. Jenny Pearce said: 'the arrival of the new catalogue was eagerly anticipated and the new designs discussed with friends as we chose what we wanted.'²⁴

The catalogue picture of style no.663 [Figure 7] shows children in an everyday domestic setting playing in the garden with a hose. The appeal was clearly to an outdoor active lifestyle far removed from busy cities. The catalogues are filled with images of country scenes with flint walls, maypoles, sheep and spinning wheels. The context was just as important as the clothes. Traditional family life and community were depicted: the family at home, on holiday, at the beach, carrying out domestic tasks, out for a country walk, women making jam, men at the pub, children at school, girlfriends having coffee or sewing together. The catalogue models were friends and family and as such were very natural looking and not overly posed. The Clothkits team used many of the same models over the years; you could follow them growing up from babies, young children and teenagers to young adults which created a bond with customers. Liz Thomas commented:

²² Anne Kennedy, personal interview.

²³ Alison Washington, personal interview, 19 September 2016. Lewes.

²⁴ Jenny Pearce, personal interview.

having catalogues with normal people not models was very helpful - all shapes and sizes not long thin size 8s. You could then envisage what you would look like and it would be accurate rather than a disappointment!²⁵



Figure 7: Summer 1981 catalogue pages 4-5. Anne Kennedy private archive.

When asked about Clothkits, those that remember them usually reply with a wistful affection. Kate Beatty's response about her mother is typical, 'she absolutely loved Clothkits and I remember adoring a stripy T-shirt that eventually had more holes than stripes.'²⁶

In her book *Folk Fashion*, Amy Twigger Holroyd talks about the act of making and of wearing and how there is something liberating about doing both. Making affects our relationship with what we wear; it makes us part of a community; it frees us from the restrictions of mass produced fashion; it enables us to experience the pleasure and satisfaction of both the making and the wearing.²⁷ There is, however, a tension between what is perceived as handmade and commonly considered as unprofessional, and what is mass-produced and

²⁵ Liz Thomas, personal interview.

²⁶ Kate Beatty, personal interview. 19 Nov. 2019. Lewes.

²⁷ Amy Twigger Holroyd, *Folk Fashion*, 60-65, 74-101.

considered to represent perfection. Ironically this stereotype has reversed since dressmaking became a leisure pursuit in the 1960s rather than the necessity it was before.

Clothkits took away the anxiety of the making process by providing a ready-made kit, enabling the joy of creativity without all the responsibility. It helped bridge the gap between the homemade and shop-bought by, as Twigger Holroyd described it, acting as a 'facilitator or a 'metadesigner'.²⁸ Anne Kennedy regarded the involvement of the customer in the making process as a very important one, because 'we put a piece of ourselves into it'²⁹ and this is what makes the garment and the memories associated with the making and wearing of it most precious.

Endings

Changes in the 1980s, with fashions like power dressing and women working more, meant less time and inclination for home sewing.³⁰ Anne Kennedy remarked: 'I remember being quite frightened in the 80s when all sorts of things, the tailored suit, the power shoulders, all that sort of fashion came in and I remember thinking, this isn't going to be easy for Clothkits.'³¹ By the early 1980s Clothkit kit sales had dropped to 50 per cent of total sales, the rest being ready-to-wear. By the late 1980s the Clothkits ready-to-wear market had taken over and only kits for children were being made. However, childrenswear still claimed the largest per cent of total sales.³²

Despite a gap of almost twenty years, it is telling that the design for pinafore style no. 663 still appears original and current. It could easily be worn by a child today without seeming outmoded. In fact, some grandparents, and adults who wore Clothkits as children are rediscovering their old Clothkits and doing just that, such as Susan Yates [Figure 8]. This simple pinafore dress at Worthing Museum, along with all the Clothkits range of children's clothes, are a testament to the enduring nature of good design, skilful craft and an aspiration to do something differently.

²⁸ Amy Twigger Holroyd, *Folk Fashion*, 157

²⁹ Anne Kennedy, personal interview Nov. 2019.

³⁰ Marnie Fogg, *1980s Fashion Print*, (London: Batsford, 2009) 8-9.

³¹ Anne Kennedy, personal interview.

³² "Kit Chat", *Fashion Weekly*, 2 February 1989: 9.



Figure 8: Martha (2019) wearing Clothkits pantaloons from an 1986 design made up by Susan Yates, personal photo.

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