



Sleeveless ensemble  
photography by  
Horst P. Horst for  
*US Vogue*, 1947



**The Future Starts Here:**  
Rudi Gernreich and André Courrèges 1960

# Twentieth century knits

Katy Bevan visits the Fashion Textiles Museum to check out its major new exhibition, **KNITWEAR Chanel to Westwood**

Exhibitions about knitting don't come along very often and the new **KNITWEAR Chanel to Westwood** show at the Fashion and Textile museum is a real blockbuster. I spoke to Head of the Museum, Celia Joicey who says that knitting shows, rather than straight fashion or tailoring, always get large audiences. I was surprised at this, until I thought of it in terms of football: I don't know the rules, so have no interest in watching it. There are a lot of us out there who love a bit of knitting and understand at least some of the rules, even if it's just not to put that handknit in the tumble drier, but not so many people that actually partake in a bit of tailoring.

The history of knitting in the twentieth century would be a big story to fit into a small space. Although it couldn't possibly serve as

a chronology of knitwear, this is a great edited version, seen through the lens of the collection of Mark and Cleo Butterfield at C20 Vintage Fashion with the eye of both curator Dennis Nothdruff and designer Bethan Ojari – and the Fashion and Textile Museum have used the space brilliantly.

*“This exhibition is a way of accessing other people’s stories, in particular the fashion sensibilities of collectors Mark and Cleo Butterfield through their iconic and personal pieces.”*

The exhibition begins by exploring the role knitting and crochet played in the creation of functional garments, undergarments and accessories in the early twentieth century before working its way through the decades from the 1920s to the 1990s. There is something for

everyone, from a Chanel cardigan suit through traditional Fairisle tank tops to a Seditonaries punk sweater. The garments in question come from the extensive personal collection of style history aficionados Mark and Cleo Butterfield. They keep their collection of twentieth century garments in a warehouse in Devon, lending to the film and television industry, where costume designers are always searching for that perfect period piece, and giving inspiration to designers on the hunt for a new idea.

I spoke to the Butterfields about how they managed to edit down to this selection and how hard it was. Mark and Cleo are so enthusiastic about their collection that left to their own devices they would have filled the space entirely. They confessed to having four



Visionary Knitwear from L to R: Julien MacDonald A/W14, Lucas Nascimento A/W14 and Mark Fast S/S10



February 1976  
© Norman Parkinson Ltd



TOP LEFT: Visionary Knitwear, Yang Du S/S11, Sibling A/W12 and A/W13  
 ABOVE: The rise of Fairisle  
 BOTTOM LEFT TO RIGHT: 1920s dresses accessorised by Cleo,  
 1950s embellished sweater



more boxes upstairs that they had wanted to include but that there just wasn't room for. Dennis Nothdruff, curator of the Fashion and Textiles Museum was super strict, enabling him to maintain his vision and for us to see clearly what is left. "Knitwear is imbued with narrative and memory," says Nothdruff, "this exhibition is a way of accessing other people's stories, in particular the fashion sensibilities of collectors Mark and Cleo Butterfield through their iconic and personal pieces."

And personal they are. Cleo herself is a keen knitter and some of the designs showcased here she made for herself over the years. Mark wistfully recalls the white crochet 1960s Twiggy suit in the show and that Cleo made one for herself from the Twilley's pattern with Twiggy on the cover. Quite a mini skirt it has too.

The skinny Twiggy silhouette of the '60s links obviously with other crochet dresses here only a glance away: a glamorous 1920s dress crocheted in gold echoes a slim openwork dress in the same silhouette from forty years later. This exhibition is all about the links, not just between the stitches but over the decades, and the great thing about the design of this show is that it highlights those visual repeats. The 1970s and the 1930s both exhibit that sleek, body-con look. In the opening corridor there is a contemporary H&M crochet dress next to a petticoat made in 1907 in such a similar scalloped pattern that they could be from the same maker. There is even a link between the

embellished cocktail sweaters, the epitome of Hollywood glamour in the 1950s, and the novelty appliquéd jumpers of the 1980s.

Nothdruff has managed to divide the long chronology into themes along the way. Each section is housed in a wooden crate, some stacked on top of each other, and the garments are framed within; a concept designed by Bethan Ojari. Sounds crazy, but it works. It means that you can look at each section in isolation, while standing back allows you to compare your box with other eras. It also cleverly creates a feeling of having just taken the front of the crate off to reveal a scene frozen in time from another era. I thought it was very clever indeed.

The titles of these displays include *Freedom and Fashion*, early knitted sportswear allowing greater movement at the start of the century and *The Future Starts Here*, a look at the work of Rudi Gernreich and André Courrèges from the 1960s, all monochrome and leather straps foreshadowing the bondage designs of a decade later. The *Make do and Mend* section highlights the multicoloured sweaters of the 1940s that made a virtue of using scraps of recycled yarn, still fashionable today of course. *The Novelty Factor* shows '70s pink and grey spots, a nod to op art and Scottie dog motifs. There is even a Ritva sweater from their first artist series in 1971 by Elizabeth Frink. (Other artists included Allen Jones, David Hockney and Patrick Hughes.) These came with a perspex display box so when you weren't wearing it you could hang your

artwork on the wall. An Escada jumper from the 1980s has a motif based on Franz Marc's famous blue horse painting, another art reference. Then there is an outrageous Fiorucci concoction with tassels and a Bill Gibb offering head-to-toe woolly coverage.

Biba is represented by a beautiful dress including an Art Deco design. Again this harks back to the Hollywood glamour of the '30s. Biba celebrated the 'glam look,' a fun version of dressing up with '30s glamour. I remember my first pilgrimage to Biba at Derry and Tom's department store in Kensington High Street. The whole store was designed like a film set from the lifts to the carpets with mirrors everywhere. The shop was so dark your eyes had to adjust to the lack of light, a look much copied by Way In at Harrods and others much later.

### VISIONARY KNITWEAR

Right at the front of the show, seen on the way in and on your way out, is the contemporary section of the exhibition, *Visionary Knitwear*, curated by Sandy Black, who knows a thing or two about knitwear in fashion – she literally wrote the book. Professor of Fashion, Textile Design and Technology at London College of Fashion, she is also author of tomes *Knitwear in Fashion and Knitting: Fashion, Industry, Craft*.

The designers selected have all studied at degree or masters' level in the UK, demonstrating the key role played by British design education in fostering a risk-taking

approach to innovation throughout the industry. Sandy is passionate about the strength of education in the UK that enables our designers to be at the forefront of the fashion industry. "We need to champion knit in education and celebrate the range and diverse approaches to knitting that come out of colleges."

Celia agrees that the aesthetic and technical developments are why contemporary knitwear is so exciting. Lo-tech and hi-tech exist side by side in fashion knitwear. Many of the designs in this exhibit use sophisticated technology, a kind of soft engineering, while there is still a place for the handknit. Amy Twigger Holroyd's piece uses the hand to intervene in a machine-made garment while some of Sibling's knits could only be made by hand.

The very recent outfit by 2014 BA graduate Camille Hardwick, is outstanding in its colour and textures. Made with monofilament, a coral pink semi-transparent jacket seems to have its own integral structure making it stand out. Alice Palmer is represented by a beautiful dress using her trademark corner construction, while Lucas Nascimento's understated pleated dress belies its complicated construction. I had to be restrained from stroking a meticulously crafted and delicate grey top by Iben Høj that would be totally wearable. There were so many designers that Black wanted to include that she has ended up with a slideshow of those that couldn't be squeezed in.

Extra glamour is added to the show, if it needed it, by the inclusion of *Knitwear in Fashion Photography*, a mini exhibition displaying iconic prints from the Norman Parkinson Archive and by Terence Donovan for *Vogue*, *Harpers Bazaar* and *Queen*, highlighting the increasing prominence of knitwear in twentieth century fashion. As if we needed telling.

*Knitwear Chanel to Westwood* is on at The Fashion and Textile Museum now – 18 Jan 2015. The Fashion and Textile Museum is at 83 Bermondsey Street, London SE1 3XF, a short walk from London Bridge Station in the shadow of the Shard and only 10 minute walk from Borough Market if you want to make a day of it. [www.ftmlondon.org](http://www.ftmlondon.org)

"Knitwear is imbued with narrative and memory."



Co-curators and owners of C20 Vintage Fashion, Cleo and Mark Butterfield