Van Doesburg is best known for his Principles of Neoplastic Art (1919; 1925), discussed by Henk Engel in 'Theo van Doesburg & the destruction of architectural theory'. The artist's Counter-Construction Mais on Particulière, created with Cornelis van Eesteren in 1923, remains the most compelling icon of the synthesis in De Stijl between art and architecture. This design, with planes floating in space, which surely inspired Rietveld's Schroeder House in Utrecht, also features in 'A universal language for the arts' by Gladys Fabre. In a second essay, 'Towards a spatio-temporality in painting', Fabre attributes van Doesburg's pursuit of the fourth dimension to his affinity with the Italian Futurists. She goes on to discuss further stages in his career in which he experimented with simultaneity (1928–9) and Art Concret (1929–31).

In the final essay, Michael White delves further into van Doesburg's psychology and multiple identities. He attempts (no easy task) to draw together disparate threads of his theoretical positions, relating them, for example, to the meaning of van Doesburg's diagonals, relating them to his 'fundamental view of history as the replacement of cyclical notions of birth, flourishing and decay with continuous evolution'. Finally, quoting Hans Arp, he characterises van Doesburg as 'someone en route from an obscure point of departure to an unknown place'.

The various essays, focusing on diverse but sometimes overlapping issues, combine to clarify a picture of the artist and at times to lead the reader towards unanswered questions. The chronology, running from 1914 to 1932, is helpful but the lack of complete cross-references to the illustrations is frustrating. The series of short biographies of 94 artists represented in the catalogue is invaluable; it also highlights the multiplicity of his intersections with avant-garde artists in his quest to construct a new world.

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SHIRLEY CRAVEN AND HULL TRADERS: REVOLUTIONARY FABRICS AND FURNITURE 1957–1980
LESLEY JACKSON

Shirley Craven and Hull Traders are probably new names for many, but their contributions to progressive textile design in the 1960s and ’70s were significant. Lesley Jackson has produced an illuminating investigation, highlighting the contribution of Craven to British textile design, and uncovering the names of numerous designers in a field where they often remain anonymous.

Hull Traders was founded by Stanley Coren and Tristram Hunt in 1957 ‘as a platform for promoting contemporary British craftsmanship’, mainly through exhibitions. Textiles played an important role in early shows, although ceramics, glass and furniture were also promoted. October 1957 saw the firm’s first exhibition ‘Time Present’, held at the studio of textile designer John Drummond, whose hand-screen-printed classical panoramas were shown alongside prints inspired by Abstract Expressionist action painting. Eduardo Paolozzi and Nigel Henderson’s designs for various objects, including textiles, were also displayed. Hull Traders aspired to promote British craftsmanship and in September 1958 the firm was invited to exhibit the work of a number of British designers at New York’s Lord and Taylor department store.

By 1960 textiles had begun to take centre stage. Initially printing was undertaken by Ivo Tonder but in 1961 Hull Traders acquired a dedicated print works, in Trawden, Lancashire. Jackson’s revealing discussion of screen printing and pigment dyeing clearly explains why each was so crucial to the ‘vivid intensity, richness and depth’ of Hull Traders’ fabrics and consequently the company’s success. There are plentiful, high quality illustrations, although it is not always easy to locate examples discussed in the text. The images are accompanied by helpful captions that enhance Jackson’s analysis of Hull Traders’ output. Generally, fabrics are illustrated as flat patterns, but the occasional inclusion of contextual images showing the end-uses of fabrics, as curtains or upholstery, really aids understanding of how patterns worked in use.

In 1960 Coren and Hull were bought out by Peter Neubert, a shareholder and the firm’s salesman. Neubert’s business and sales experience proved invaluable to the Hull Traders and with no background in textiles he left creative decision-making to Shirley Craven, colour and design consultant and art director, and her husband Bernard Holdaway, designer of the company’s furniture range tomatom. A discussion of Craven’s education, designs and design process forms Chapter 2. She graduated from the Royal College of Art and like many of her contemporaries struggled in the cutthroat world of freelance design, where the designer lost control once a pattern had been sold. The opportunity to work at Hull Traders placed Craven in an almost unique position of being able to design, choose colours and oversee production.

Very quickly her bold, abstract and colourful designs were receiving widespread coverage in the design press. Her stylised and painterly floral design Le Bosquet won a Design Centre Award in 1960. Such patterns reflected an interest in textile designers in the paintings of the Abstract Expressionists, reflected in designs dominated by brushstrokes. Nonetheless, Jackson points out that the key to Craven’s approach in such designs was the ‘tension between expressiveness and restraint’. She also eloquently describes Craven’s flat abstracts based on landscapes (Division and Shap from 1963, and Detour and Lomax, 1965), ‘more like jazz improvisations than classical scores’.

Craven enjoyed creative control of the output of the company and was responsible for buying in designs from other designers, including Althea McNish, Peter McCulloUGH, Trevor Coleman, Flavia Irwin, Dorothy Carr and Doreen Dyall, choosing designs that she felt were forward-looking and original. A discussion of these designers is covered in Chapter 3. Craven allowed each designer a level of creative freedom rarely seen in the rest of the trade.

Although the firm’s output was dominated by printed textiles, it was also responsible for manufacturing furniture designed by Bernard Holdaway. Invited to design a room for the 1966 Ideal Home Exhibition, Craven and Holdaway drew on their own experience as a young couple with small children and produced an open-plan room with a range of brightly coloured furniture based on a circular theme, tomatom. The range, its manufacture and media responses are discussed in Chapter 4.

As the book was written to accompany a touring exhibition launched at the Ferens Art Gallery, Hull (Craven’s birthplace) in November 2009, it also includes a useful catalogue of Hull Traders’ output, including information on designs, designers, fabric, repeat size, and numbers of colourways. Short biographies of designers whose textile designs were produced by
the company are provided. Such an addition is extremely useful as so many of these designers are little known outside the industry; much work is still needed on designers in the British textile industry. The book culminates in an inventory of the tomotom range of furniture, including details of pricing.

This book is a meticulously researched study, drawing on interviews with the firm’s key workers and including detailed analysis of the firm’s output. The book will appeal to anyone interested in British post-war design and the influence of fine art on textiles. Jackson is clear that Shirley Craven was central to the success of the firm. Her own designs combined with her artistic direction resulted in the production of fabric patterns with a vibrancy and originality that set the company apart.

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WADDESDON MANOR
THE HERITAGE OF A ROTHSCILD HOUSE
MICHAEL HALL, FOREWORD BY LORD ROTHSCILD
Scala Publishers £39.95 $75.00
320 pp. Fully illustrated

This book, first published in 2002 and fully revised, is a detailed account of the building of one of Europe’s most iconic manors and estates and a complete chronicle of the family who have always owned it: the Rothschilds. The book also provides a valuable insight into the business of running a successful visitor attraction as well as giving the reader a balanced view of partnership working – in this case of the family with the National Trust. With its outstanding photography by John Bigelow Taylor, this is by no means a conventional ‘coffee-table’ book but will serve as a reference for historians of art, architecture and genealogy.

Waddesdon Manor was built to designs by Gabriel-Hippolyte Destailler (1822–93) on Lodge Hill, west of Aylesbury in Buckinghamshire, between 1877 and 1883. Although additions were made after 1883, including a West Wing and modifications to the Bachelors’ Wing, the whole Manor was based on a composite of buildings known to or owned by the Rothschilds, including Chateau de Mouchy, Oise, France, and the Pless Palace on Wilhelmstrasse, Vienna. Detailed in the memoirs of Ferdinand Rothschild (1839–98) are precise notes regarding the building of Waddesdon Manor, which have served as Hall’s main source. Interestingly, the author draws out the emotional turmoil of the Manor’s owner in those early days of the build, and here we have an insight into his vision of creating both a statement of high architectural quality and a sense of community. Following a previously established similar framework to the east of Aylesbury in Aston Clinton, Lodge Hill, the Manor became part of an overall Rothschild village ambience that persists today in the village of Waddesdon. The inclusion of original plans by Destailler and photographs taken of the excavations are real features of this book. Notably, the Manor was built in Bath stone. This is a true free stone that can be quarried and cut in any direction without fracture, allowing for bold structural building work, but that is also soft enough for very intricate carving. Set on immense foundations, the Manor rises majestically with combinations of Roman Corinthian Orders and arched windows, heavy iconic turreted crowns and composite pediments. Gothic influences, revived in the Victorian period, mix with Renaissance and French styling.