



It's all in **THE DETAIL**

During its 248 years in business, embroiderer Hand & Lock has embellished everything from royal gowns to couture fashion. Lois Bryson-Edmett explores the British institution with an obsession for detail

IMAGES: FACING PAGE: EMBROIDERED COAT; THIS PAGE, FROM TOP TO BOTTOM: BURBERRY LETTERS; LION FACE JUMPER FROM HAND & LOCK'S SS15 COLLECTION; BADGES; GOLDWORK © LOIS BRYSON-EDMETT

You may not recognise the name Hand & Lock, but you've almost certainly seen the company's work. Everything from the Union Jack flag waved at the 2012 Olympic Games to the uniforms of the Queen's bodyguards have received the Hand & Lock touch, along with collections for brands such as Louis Vuitton, Chanel and Ralph Lauren.

Founded in 1767 by Huguenot refugee M. Hand, Hand & Lock – the product of a 2001 amalgamation of the original company and fellow embroidery business S. Lock Ltd – has amassed an impressive roster of clients, from the late Princess Diana to Sir Paul McCartney, and is happy to embroider shirts for the general public, right up to the Royal coat of arms. "The context of the embroidery we create is so diverse," explains head designer Scott Gordon Heron. "It's a huge spectrum that spans fashion and interiors to military, ecclesiastical, theatre, film and artists."

However, it isn't just the company's wide skill set that has contributed to its enduring success. Hand & Lock's most prized asset is a team of highly skilled embroiderers obsessed with detail, who spend hours painstakingly hand-stitching each masterpiece. "At the moment I'm working on a beautiful bedspread for a chateau," says Heron. "It's in the Gothic Revival style and measures two metres long and one and a half metres wide. By the time it is finished it will have taken six months to hand-stitch." Having the patience to create such pieces is a personality trait possessed by only a select few – something Heron's university tutors spotted in him early on. "My teachers told me, 'You're an embroiderer,'" he explains. "I was confused, I couldn't even sew a button on a shirt, but they could tell from how meticulous I was about detail."

AN EYE FOR DETAIL

An obsessive eye for precision is required throughout the exacting embroidering process, which starts with a draft that is pencilled on to tracing paper – an image of the design with instructions outlining to the embroiderer everything from the technique required to the stitch direction and stitch type. Embroiderers then place the draft over the fabric, poking holes through the paper along the lines of the pattern, blotting over a grey dust that falls through the holes to reveal the pattern on the fabric underneath. From this, the embroiderer can begin the fastidious work of bringing Heron's designs to life, stitch by stitch.



While techniques such as this may date back centuries, Hand & Lock is by no means behind the times. Production director Jessica Pile has been spearheading the brand's role at the cutting edge of contemporary couture, pioneering Hand & Lock's first in-house fashion collection.

"Because we're a company with a lot of history there can be preconceptions that we're old-fashioned, but we're actually young people working here," says Pile. Heron is 28, while Pile is just 26, and the company's youthful dynamism shows in its collection, which this year featured a jumper embroidered with a striking goldwork lion with a feathered mane and a tracksuit with a tiger pattern made from thousands of shimmering sequins. "It's wonderful that a company with our heritage can produce work that is sympathetic to the past, but can also re-contextualise the techniques," adds Heron.

A MODERN CONTEXT

This fresh attitude to a traditional craft has seen the brand take embroidery in totally new directions, from an embroidered rifle created in collaboration with anti-gun charity Peace One Day, to a decorated chair for artists Gilbert & George. Hand & Lock's monogramming service has also rocketed in popularity, with customers requesting personalisation for everything from bags and books to shoes and even a yoga mat. "I think the trend for monogramming came about when the recession hit," identifies Pile. "Customers thought that if they couldn't afford something new, they would up-cycle or change what they already had. People were also choosing to buy less expensive items and monogram them to make them more special."

Whether it's high-end designers such as Mary Katrantzou, or a member of the public calling on Hand & Lock's services, Heron believes the appeal of handcrafted embroidery will never fade. "I think we are always so much more attracted to something that's handmade that you couldn't make yourself," he explains. "People look at older pieces from our archive now and consider them amazing, but in another 150 or 200 years, pieces we're making now will be regarded in exactly the same way. I love embroidery because it's such an age-old media, so to be the head of design for a company with so much heritage is a privilege."

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