

# PINS & NEEDLES

You might not know the name behind the needlework, but Hand & Lock has embroidered and embellished the attire of Hollywood royalty and nobility alike.

**Melissa Emerson** visits the firm's Fitzrovia atelier to meet the young head designer keeping its 250-year heritage alive

Although unassuming from the outside, the sense of history is tangible in Hand & Lock's Fitzrovia atelier. A glass case of military badges and a signed, handwritten letter from Cecil Beaton are framed on the wall, and a towering stack of old wooden drawers with a web of loose threads spilling out stands against another.

I'm greeted by youthful head designer Scott Gordon Heron. We pass through the studio of equally young embroiderers; it's a surprise to say the least. "No little old ladies in sight," his colleague laughs, telling me that everyone (except the chairman) is 30 and under.

The Hand & Lock story began a few hundred years ago, when French Huguenot refugee and lacemaker M. Hand arrived in London in 1767, plying his trade to tailors. "He wove wire into what anyone else might recognise as metallic ribbon, but actually it's a lace that's used in military uniforms," Heron explains. Having successfully mastered this, Hand began to embroider with gold wire, a specialism the house still practises today in its 250th anniversary year.

Expertise in couture was added to the mix when the firm merged with S. Lock & Co in 2001. Founded by Stanley S. Lock, who took over his employer's embroidery couture business CE Phillips & Co in the 1950s, its clients included Sir Norman Hartnell, Christian Dior and the royal family, who honoured the company with a royal warrant in 1972.

It appears Heron was destined to follow in Mr Hand and Mr Lock's enterprising footsteps. "I've always loved painting and drawing and expressing myself through image," he says. "I thought I'd be a printer or a fashion designer, but all my

teachers told me I was an embroiderer. A school trip to the Première Vision textile trade show in Paris proved to be a huge eye-opener.

"Everyone I meet today appreciates embroidery for its beauty and history, and how meticulous it is. It's a skill that you can't just learn in a day and that's what has always fuelled my passion."

Over the last seven years, Heron has worked his way up from design assistant to head designer, although these days he doesn't get to do quite as much embroidery as he'd like. "I love how repetitive it is. It's like meditating in a way, doing the same thing continuously," he says. "I enjoy working with silks and silk shading, but it's hard to be a designer and an embroiderer at the same time in this industry."

Heron is largely responsible for producing the drawings that form a crucial part of the making process. "They're used by the designer to help the embroiderer understand what to do," he tells me. "The artwork needs to be really clear and concise because it's the tool that we use to communicate. The drafts are annotated with abbreviations of what techniques and materials to use where and when."

Such precision is key when working with luxurious fabrics. "The lace we work with can be extraordinarily expensive if it has a really high gold or silver content. I'm currently working with handwoven damask silk from Italy for a commission, which costs £200 a metre. One of our most opulent commissions was a buckle for a Malaysian monarch three years ago that had goodness knows how many diamonds on it," he adds.

The drawings are also of great value and are carefully ▶



HEAD DESIGNER  
SCOTT GORDON HERON,  
IMAGE COURTESY OF  
HAND & LOCK



IMAGE COURTESY OF  
SARAH RAYMOND



LEFT: IMAGE COURTESY OF SARAH RAYMOND; ABOVE AND RIGHT: IMAGES COURTESY OF HAND & LOCK; BELOW LEFT: IMAGE COURTESY OF ASPINAL OF LONDON

“The ornamentation and embellishment of textiles comes naturally to the human race”

► archived. “All of the drafts we produce are like blueprints. Even if it’s just a monogram, we archive it because we might need to make it in exactly the same way as we did before,” Heron says, adding that this is particularly important for royal coats of arms and military insignia. “We’ve produced important work for big national events like Jubilees and royal weddings. It’s great to be a part of that – you feel very proud.”

He explains that the regal and the ceremonial arm of the business, with its rules and regulations, is balanced by the creative freedom of contemporary projects across fashion, interiors, film and theatre. “One day you could be designing a coat of arms for the Queen to wear on Maundy Thursday, and the day after, you’re embroidering a swear word for an artist on a piece of sparkly fabric,” he laughs. “The principles of embroidery stay the same, it just happens to be in a different context.”

As we chat about the fashion arm of the business, I learn the house has collaborated with Louis Vuitton, Mary Katrantzou and most recently Burberry for its A/W17 show.

“It’s more difficult to break through the barrier into fashion because it’s such a secretive industry. Fashion designers don’t always credit the textile

manufacturers or embroiderers they work with,” Heron says.

Contemporary fashion might be helping to bring the craft back into the limelight, but Heron points to its popularity throughout history. “It’s always been there. After food, water and shelter, textiles are a necessity, and I think the ornamentation and embellishment of textiles comes naturally to the human race. I don’t think that desire will ever die out.”

Part of that desire, he believes, is to do with storytelling. “What’s really wonderful about textiles is that they form a kind of dialogue of human anthropology. You can look at a piece of embroidery and recognise the era it’s from. You can document what’s gone on, and that’s really special.”

Today, much of that documenting takes place on social media. “If you think about Instagram, everybody wants to tell the world who they are, and the idea of personalisation is so integral to that. A patch or a monogram is the perfect accessory to take a photo with,” he says.

Increasing embroidery’s appeal to a contemporary audience is a key part of this year’s anniversary celebrations, which include a special collaboration, *The Embellished Handbag: A Celebration of 250 Years of Fashion and Embroidery*.

Thirteen fashion brands such as House of Holland, Vivienne Westwood and Aspinall of London (left) have created an embroidered bag to be included in a Hand & Lock exhibition, which will tour Sydney and Chicago before arriving in London in July.

But it’s not just the catwalk and the high street where embroidery is enjoying a resurgence. “Performance textiles and embroidered structures can be used to regulate the heart beat, open arteries, and even help skin heal,” Heron enthuses. From the high-tech to the hand-stitched, the art form shows no sign of dying out. And in Fitzrovia, the young and passionate team is ready to carry the Hand & Lock banner into the next 250 years. ■



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