

My V&A Katharine Hamnett

It was as a protester rather than a “creative” that Katharine Hamnett first exploded on to the national consciousness 23 years ago. In the queue to meet Margaret Thatcher at a Downing Street reception, 1984’s Fashion Designer of the Year whipped off her overcoat to reveal one of her trademark slogan T-shirts emblazoned with the legend “58% DON’T WANT PERSHING”. “Mrs Thatcher gave a squawk and said to me coldly: ‘We’ve got Cruise missiles here, not Pershing. Perhaps you’re at the wrong party.’”

It may not have amused the Prime Minister, but her demonstration added to Hamnett’s aura as the 1980s queen of controversial cool. Her “Tees” had already starred in Frankie Goes to Hollywood’s *Relax* campaign and in Wham!’s videos. And for a decade her wearable and well-cut, no-nonsense ranges of denim, leggings, combat trousers, military-style shirts and sportswear made Hamnett the label of choice for the fashion-conscious counter-culture, a trendsetting badge which declared that, whatever else you might be, you definitely weren’t “One of Us”.

At 60, Hamnett is as feisty as ever, her activist passions undimmed. In recent years she has led campaigns for the ethical and sustainable production of everything from jewellery to cotton. As you’d expect then, this long-time V&A devotee also has outspoken opinions about the museum, taking a dim view of many of the FuturePlan

initiatives. Agree or not, it’s hard not to warm to an engaging and refreshing *grande dame* who has always kept a foot outside the self-absorbed world of fashion luvviedom. “I never read what people write about me in magazines or newspapers,” she says. “If it’s bad, it ruins your week. If it’s good, it just makes you insufferably big-headed.”



“Most art students in my year had jumped on to the Great Bed of Ware at one time or another”



Goya engravings
The Prints and Drawings Study Room gives you real access to the hand of the master at work. When I was at St Martin’s School of Art, I was researching for a costume design project for

Carmen and came across these Goya bullfight engravings. Goya’s engravings are so powerful; so direct and modern, as well as so macabre. I went to a bullfight to see El Cordobés once in the south of France in the 1960s when I was on holiday with some friends. We all crept under the fence and ended up in the front row. I hated it. The bull was killed right in front of us, it was horrific and disgusting. The print of a matador dancing round a bull reminds me of my relationship with the fashion industry.



Top right: Katharine Hamnett meets Margaret Thatcher in 1984. Associated Press. **Above centre: Hamnett photographed by Alex Sturrock.** **Above and right: La Tauromaquia, two illustrations from a set of 33 plates by Francisco Goya published in Madrid, 1815.** Inside the cover were pasted three bullfight tickets, dated 1873

Cast Courts
I love fakes, and the fakes in the V&A Cast Courts are breathtaking. Standing under the gate of Santiago de Compostela you really feel you are outside a real Romanesque building. I’d be perfectly happy for the people who made these casts to build my entire house, even if it were all made of plaster rather than stone. I love this place the way it is and I don’t think it should change. I loathed it when they modernised the old galleries, always dumbing them down. It hasn’t improved the V&A. They should just fix the roof and leave it alone. It was perfect the way it was.



The Great Bed of Ware
I like the Great Bed of Ware because it conjures up first loves and being naughty students. There were lots of romances that started with drawing expeditions to the V&A. Most art students in my year had jumped on to this bed at one time or another.

Textiles
Museums in northern Europe are so lucky because they have the perfect climatic conditions in which to keep and conserve textiles. These galleries were a treasure trove for me when I was a student – places where, like the library, I made lots of peaceful but really exciting discoveries. They haven’t changed much since then, and I don’t think they should. Many of the textiles that you find here were created with techniques that are now quite lost and will never be rediscovered. I especially remember an amazing shawl fringe decorated with perfect 3D lilies of the valley, complete with leaves. It was so delicate it must have been hand-knitted with pins. I haven’t been able to find it, but this exquisite knitted matinee jacket must be one of

the most beautiful pieces of baby clothing in the world. It looks as perfect as the lace on a Velázquez painting.

Indian muslin
The cotton industry sometimes tries to argue that organic cotton never looks as fine and luxurious as the conventional product. As well as every other pre-1930s item of clothing in the museum’s collection, there is a roll of superfine eighteenth-century Indian muslin on show in the V&A that proves this isn’t the case. The Bengalis were once the finest weavers of muslin in the world: they could spin fabric of an almost infinitesimal thinness, famous since Greek and Roman times, that was known as woven air. But in the 1800s the popularity and quality of fabrics imported to Britain by the East India Company were threatening England’s own cotton industry. British colonialists in Bengal made sure that Indian production came to a halt by cutting off the thumbs of the spinners. It destroyed an industry whose skills went back 2,000 years, and muslin has never been quite the same since.



The National Art Library
I practically lived in the National Art Library when I was a student. It was an inexhaustible supply of inspiration. I have hardly been back since, but I’ve got an excellent visual memory, so it’s all still here in my head. I used to come to look at all the old fashion documents in the archive when I was researching periods as part of studying the history of fashion. *La Gazette du Bon Ton* is a French magazine that was published from 1912 to 1925. It’s a back catalogue of amazing fashion ideas of all kinds, illustrated by the likes of Georges Lepape. These magazines show ideas that are beyond inspiring, the styles and fantasies of another age – so marvellous and so wild.

Top: plaster cast of Puerta de la Gloria by Master Matteo, Santiago de Compostela, nineteenth century. **Above: Cortège: Robes du soir de Worth by Jean Bernier and Léon Bakst from La Gazette du Bon Ton, issue 2, Paris, 1924-1925.** **Right: Le Jugement de Paris illustration by Georges Lepape from La Gazette du Bon Ton, 1924-1925.** All © V&A Images



English gown made with Indian muslin embroidered in cotton thread, c.1800 © V&A Images