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ALL THE SEASON'S RICHES



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FROM LEFT Shelves filled with patterns at Hudson Valley's Design Library; designer Isabel Marant at her company headquarters, in Paris.

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THE AISLES HAVE IT
A long view of the Design Library's 11,000-square-foot loft, home to seven million fabrics and textiles from around the world.

TRICKS OF THE TRADE

PATTERN RECOGNITION

You've most likely never heard of it. And if you're not a professional designer, you'll never see it. The Design Library (and its millions of textiles) is the fashion and decorating worlds' best-kept secret.

BY MARIAN McEVoy PHOTOGRAPHY BY MARK MAHANEY



PRINTS CHARMING
Clockwise from top left: Design Library director Peter Koepke, with a pile of indigo Japanese prints, in his office; patterns from YSL's ready-to-wear collections from the '70s; Keshi Akino, a director of art and home design at Lands' End, right, searches the archives for ideas; a linear Frank Lloyd Wright pattern contrasts with two antique American pieces; a pattern designed by Raoul Dufy for Bianchini-Férier.



WHENEVER NATACHA RAMSAY-LEVI—a longtime lieutenant to designer Nicolas Ghesquière—was on the hunt for inspiration for one of Balenciaga's collections, she headed to Wappingers Falls, a low-key, ungentrified village along the Hudson River about an hour and 15 minutes north of Manhattan. There, in an 11,000-square-foot loft in a reconverted 1907 fabric mill, she visited the Hudson Valley headquarters of the Design Library, a mecca for the more than 3,000 fashion, interior and paper goods designers who tap its seven million textile designs every season. "When I first discovered the Library in 2008, it was love at first sight," Ramsay-Levi says. "The collection is not about items of the moment, but designs that are everlastingly beautiful—timeless. Yes, the Design Library is a secret. That's why it's so inspiring. It is rare, intimate and chic."

It is also the largest and most rigorously organized repository of surface design in the world,

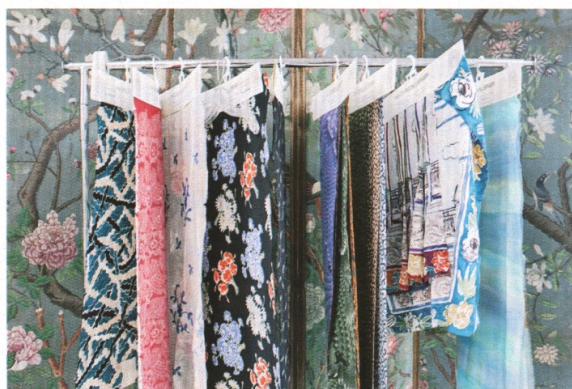
selling and leasing textile designs and original fabrics dating from the 1750s to the 1980s. In a room filled with 24-foot-long antique work tables and flooded with natural light from high windows framing views of the wild landscape, patterns are stacked on open metal shelving, hung on industrial rolling racks, piled up in horizontal filing cabinet drawers or attached to the pages of thousands of antique and vintage sample books on floor-to-ceiling shelves.

It would be hard to exaggerate the scope and eccentricity of the Design Library's vast archive, organized into 1,200 categories that comprise a sort of United Nations of textiles. Beyond several million examples from Europe and the United States, there are many more from South Asia, Africa, China, Japan, Central Asia, Indonesia and Central and South America. Among the mostly unsigned, anonymous pieces are original vintage patterns by Frank Lloyd Wright, Raoul Dufy, Robert Bonfils and Sonia Delaunay. Among the many thousand patterns once used by the great

French couturiers, there's a group of whimsical patterns commissioned by Elsa Schiaparelli in the 1930s and piles of aggressively chic, eye-popping graphics used by Yves Saint Laurent in the late 1970s.

The collection reflects the worldly tastes and connoisseurship of its owner and director, Peter Koepke, who came to the business of print and pattern by trading in South American tribal art and artifacts. For nearly two decades, he was a private New York City dealer specializing in Amazonian textiles and pottery, procuring mainly for international collectors and European and Australian museums. "I found all of the pieces canoeing up rivers and streams visiting obscure tribes in remote villages," he says. "It was dangerous and exciting. And the logistics of getting large pots from South America to New York were daunting, to say the least."

In 1988, Koepke's Amazonian adventures ended. As Peru's civil war intensified, the American economy—and the market for pricey pottery—cratered. He also



FABRIC OF LIFE
Left: A selection of silk prints hangs in front of a chinoiserie screen. Below: A recent acquisition of thousands of fabrics by Bianchini-Férier.



met his current wife, who wasn't keen on paddling small boats through civil wars in South America. In 1990, Koepke teamed up with Susan Meller, a renowned author and textile collector who had amassed a couple million fabric designs, some of which were on view—to buy or lease—in her Manhattan garment district loft. Koepke worked for Meller as a design consultant for 12 years before he bought the business in 2002. “When I first took the collection over, I didn’t have a clue,” he says. “I went from the urbane, museum world to the commercial, hurried worlds of fashion and decoration. I had a sort of identity crisis: For years I was Indiana Jones—then suddenly I became a librarian.”

And a successful businessman. In 2005, Koepke opened an office in London, with a collection that grew to 40,000 prints and patterns geared to European designers. “Worldwide, we work with about 3,000 individuals,” he says. “They come to us because we supply information and inspiration.” When design teams from Alexander McQueen, Ralph Lauren Home, Nike,

Calvin Klein, Marc Jacobs, H&M or Patagonia arrive at the Design Library, they often have a specific print goal—or “mood,” as Koepke puts it—for an upcoming collection in mind. Keshi Akino, the director of the art and home design division at Lands’ End, visits four times a year for “general inspiration and particular motifs” to translate into her home décor collections. “We purchase varying amounts each season,” Akino says. “We take them back to our studios and recolor and rescale them so they suit our products.”

“You never know what you are going to find,” adds Ramsay-Levi. “It’s like gambling, in a way—you hope you will unearth a treasure. Sometimes we buy a print and use it as is. Sometimes we keep the exact pattern but change the colors. Sometimes we buy a print and do nothing with it—it’s purely inspirational.”

Whenever the Library receives a request for fabric, one of 10 full-time consultants will either pack a suitcase filled with relevant samples to bring to the designer, or encourage a visit to its Wappingers

Falls or London headquarters. Clients may also click into Kosmos, the company’s online collection of 9,000 prints categorized 130 ways. For a lease price ranging from \$300 to \$400, the designer is given exclusive rights to a fabric for one to three years. In some cases, patterns can be bought outright. (Resale is forbidden by contract.)

“Our clients are highly unlikely to find the same design anywhere else; we sell or lease it to one person at a time,” explains Koepke. “We see all sorts of trends taking shape, but our success depends on our unshakable discretion. Our integrity is as important as our collection.”

“I like to say that I am in the recycling business,” he says, laughing. “We’re recycling visual history for use today. Textile design—like literature and music—is a reflection of its time and culture. But unlike museum collections, you can touch this one—move it around, take it back to your office, scan it, use it. In the end, the Design Library is all about access.” ●