

# River & Cloth



## Fact Sheet on Arthur Liberty & the Liberty Store



*Arthur Liberty<sup>1</sup>*

Arthur Lasenby Liberty was born in Chesham, Buckinghamshire in 1843. He was a great business man who also had an eye for beautifully crafted exotic objects and artistic talent. It was this outlook that made the Liberty store such a pioneer in fashion and home décor.

Liberty began his career at the age of 16, working in the warehouse of a relative who was a lace manufacturer. By the age of 18 he began working for Farmer & Rogers 'Great Shawl Emporium', and during that year he visited London's second Great International Exhibition held at South Kensington (on the site now occupied by the Victoria & Albert Museum). The exhibition contained many exquisite art and luxurious objects from all over the world, but Liberty was drawn to the section devoted to Japanese art, particularly the porcelain with its beautiful intricate patterns. Viewing Japanese art would have been quite rare at that time – although art from China, Iran and Turkey had been imported to England for several centuries, Japan did not open up to Western trade until 1868. These Japanese art objects, textures and patterns, were to have a profound and positive influence upon Liberty's aesthetic taste and subsequently, his success.

Farmers & Rogers Great Shawl Emporium became a meeting hub for artists and Liberty was respected for his interest and expertise in the arts. When his employers opened another store specializing in oriental goods, Liberty was made Junior Manager. Before long, he was managing the whole store and continued to do so for a further 10 years. Liberty's interest in Japanese art happened at just the right time – a few years earlier it would have been unobtainable and a few years later it would have become too common and Westernized<sup>2</sup>. By following his instincts and passions, Liberty was able to predict important trends and make some very astute business decisions.

Soon his artist friends encouraged him to start his own shop as they felt he was not being given the recognition he deserved. They also promised him their custom and loyalty and this gave him the confidence to strike out alone and start his own business.

With a £2000 loan from his father-in-law, Liberty opened his first shop which he named East India House at 218A Regent St. This sum was a huge amount at the time, but Liberty knew Regent Street would become the prime retail location we know today. It was the first street in London to be built specifically for shopping, selling luxurious goods and was designed by the famous architect John Nash.

Liberty had a genuine belief and passion for the goods he sold. He was part of a large movement for improving public taste and strongly supported genuine craftsmanship. He continued to be influenced by other cultures, importing exotic fabrics from the East and travelled to countries such as India, China, and Iran seeking inspiration for his merchandise and designs.

East India House was such a success that within the first year Liberty was able to repay back the money he owed with the profits he made from selling luxury goods. His shop received many famous customers including artists Rossetti, Millais, Watts and Whistler. William Morris was a frequent caller and bought many goods for his own use. As the business grew, neighbouring properties were bought and added. Eventually, Liberty had a vision to build his own Tudor style store with the help of designer/architect Edwin T Hall.



*The Liberty Store today on Regent Street<sup>3</sup>*

Liberty's aim was to create a shop that encouraged the customer to feel like they were wandering around their own home. The store you see on Regent Street today was built in 1924 using timber from two ships - the HMS Hindustan (which is the length of the shop's frontage) and HMS Impregnable.

In the late 1800s, Liberty was instrumental in the development of various artistic movements including The Aesthetic Movement, and both the Arts & Crafts and Art Nouveau movements. The formations of these groups were a response to the ostentation of Victorian style and contained simple, elegant forms, which were hand crafted and similar to the aesthetics in craft and dress found in the Far East and the Middle East. Art Nouveau is still referred to as 'Stile Liberty' in Italy.

Today, Liberty the store continues to be at the forefront of contemporary fashion and is still world famous for its prints, fashions and design classics. One of Kate Moss' recent collections for Top Shop was influenced by print designs from the Liberty archive.

## Liberty and Merton Abbey Mills

Liberty is renowned for its beautiful fabric, a lot of which was created at Merton Abbey Mills. In the early part of the 19th century, an Irish man called Edmund Littler took over the printing works at Merton Abbey Mills for the production of fine silks and fabrics. Littler began producing designs and fabrics for the Liberty store around 1875. In 1904 Arthur Liberty bought Littler's premises and Liberty produced goods there right up until 1972.

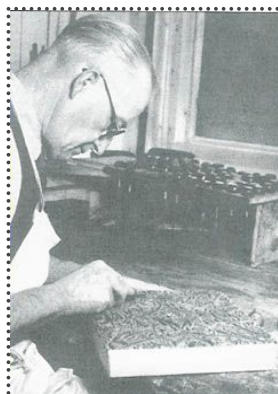
William Morris was a neighbour, as he had set up his studio and workshops down stream in Merton Abbey Works, the site now occupied by the Savacentre. Arthur Liberty used to rejoice in the fact that "We sent our dirty water down to Morris!"<sup>4</sup> Like Morris, Liberty used traditional block printing techniques to create beautiful and intricate designs.

Block printing is an ancient technique that has been used to decorate fabrics as far back as 4<sup>th</sup> Century BC. The Fact Sheet on Block and Calico Printing contains more information on the history of these techniques, but we should mention here that it would take up to 27 printing blocks to create a typical Liberty shawl! The printer would have worked over a day to make a shawl like the one below:



*Vintage Liberty Scarf*

As Liberty fabrics became hugely popular, block printing was no longer a viable technique to use. A skilled block printer can only produce 27 metres of fabric a day compared to 164.5 metres printed by a screen printer and 274.32 metres by a machine. Blocks were made out of wood and it would take a master block carver two weeks to make one.



*Creating a block out of wood*

## Notes to Text:

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- 1 See Liberty's: A Biography of a Shop, p.20, by Alison Adburgham, Allen & Unwin, 1975  
Photograph printed by Sir Joseph Causton and Sons Ltd
  - 2 See The Liberty Store, pp.8-9, James Laver, Liberty & Co Ltd, 1959
  - 3 Photograph taken by LuisVilla. See <http://www.flickr.com/photos/maguisso/124771105/>
  - 4 See Liberty's: A Biography of a Shop, p.40
  - 5 Photograph taken by Fabulous Vintage Fashion. See [flickr.com/photos/fairytrixy/3738510140](http://www.flickr.com/photos/fairytrixy/3738510140)
  - 6 Photograph taken by FairyTrixy. See <http://www.flickr.com/photos/fairytrixy/3738510140>
  - 7 Photograph from An Historical Guide to Merton Abbey Mills, p10, Kevin Leyden, Wandle Industrial Museum, 2000