

REPORTS OF SOCIETY MEETINGS

SEAT MOQUETTE – PAST, PRESENT AND FUTURE

**by Harriet Wallace Jones and Emma Sewell of WallaceSewell
with Mike Ashworth of London Underground**

A report of the LURS meeting at All Souls Club House on 14 June 2011

Harriet and Emma trained in textiles at the Central and Royal College of Art in London, graduating in 1990.

They set up their studio in 1992 with the motivation to create unusual fabrics with the appeal of hand woven pieces but made using industrial techniques. Their designs are influenced by early 20th century artists such as Mackintosh, Verneuil, Klee (particularly his use of colours) and the Art Nouveau, Art Deco and Bauhaus movements, using colour and distinctive patterns, combinations of yarns and weave structures. They mainly produce fabrics for scarves, throws and cushions which they sell through their small shop in Islington, stores in UK, USA, Europe and Japan and their website www.wallacesewell.com

After initial planning, basically, designs are developed by wrapping yarns around card to draft up the lines, colours and blocks of the design. These are then produced on computer controlled hand-loom. The designs used to be transferred to punch cards but they are now done via computer and are emailed to Mitchell Interflx Ltd of Halifax who produce the fabrics on industrial sized looms.

Emma and Harriet have lived in London for over 20 years and thrive on the people, buildings and design to influence their work. They have always loved the strong dynamic designs on the seats of the Underground trains especially the works of Misha Black, Marianne Straub and Jacqueline Groag. So when the opportunity came, in 2007, to enter a competition with four other companies to design a new moquette for London Overground they were very excited at the opportunity.

The main challenge of this design brief for them was to only use 4 colours, instead of the 20 they would normally use in a piece, and that colour could only be used in small blocks. After a number of designs they settled on one influenced by a Milan throw which features a repeating sequence of different sized rectangles. Their brown and orange design won the competition and now features on trains; and a throw which is available from the LT Museum shop.

Following this success with London Overground, Emma and Harriet were invited to design a new moquette for Croydon Tramlink. The brief was to make the design distinctively London and also to consider potential effects of vandalism on a design (for example: large blocks of colour show up damage). They started by thinking of aspects of the Croydon and Wimbledon areas such as rural to urban; and they also looked at early LT posters. They decided upon a design which features contrasting inter connecting panels to signify movement, travel, speed and fluidity. This was woven by Holdsworth & Camira of Halifax, who have produced LT moquettes for six generations and trains were refurbished over weekend suspensions.

When a competition was announced to design a moquette for use across the whole Underground, Emma and Harriet thought about the icons and landmarks of London and came up with a design which features simplistic representations of four iconic buildings/structures created from simple shapes. They then experimented in using some elements for more than one landmark. Their design was chosen out of 300 and has started to appear on the Central Line as those coaches are refurbished. The pattern initially looks like a series of basic shapes but upon closer study the four icons become apparent thus:

- (1) The semi-circle, rectangle with stripes and triangle below – St Pauls Cathedral.
- (2) The Red circles represent the London Eye and also reference the roundel.
- (3) The red and blue checked rectangle, blue triangle and blue rectangle represent St Steven's Clock Tower, more commonly known as Big Ben.
- (4) The blue triangles on top of blue rectangles with greenish stripes represent Tower Bridge.

Emma and Harriet concluded by saying that these projects have been a pleasure to work on and they are honoured to be following in the footsteps of great designers such as Enid Marx, Marianne Straub, Jacqueline Groags and Michala Black.

Mike Ashworth then took the floor. He has worked in London Transport for over 20 years – currently as the Design & Heritage Manager for London Underground based at 55 Broadway. However, he may be better known to members as a previous Curator of the LT Museum in Covent Garden. Mike told of how, when he was a child in Lancashire, he remembers his Mum doing her work on preparing punch cards for the manufacture of moquettes. For many years the major producers of moquette were Listers of Bradford, British Furtex and Holdsworth's, both of Halifax. The latter pair now form part of Camira.

London Underground has a known history of industrial design, including seating fabrics. There is an extensive collection which was formed by the old LT Laboratory in Acton. They kept reference samples for future production and to test for the weave for durability and colour fastness.

On public transport, originally many seats were wooden, some with punched designs. These were durable, light and kept dirt and fleas off in days when public hygiene was more of an issue.

In terms of tube trains various early types were made of Ratan (woven cane). Again these were lightweight and were used for many years until increased competition from buses and tram services, which had more comfortable seats, encouraged a redesign.

The 1923 Tube Stock illustrated a seat pad (or squab) covered in whatever fabric the manufacturers catalogue contained – with no thought for design or uniformity across the fleet. Frank Pick and his assistant Christian Barman (LT's first 'Design Manager' and in his own right designer of the 1930s HMV Electric Iron) decided that there was an opportunity for a different patterns to be used to signify different stock and this led to designs by people such as:

- Enid Marx with her Brent and Chevron designs of 1937 and 1938 respectively;
- Marion Dorn with the Leaf (1945 and 1953) and Canonbury design of 1937;
- Eric Chapman's Roundel of 1947;
- Jack Thompson's Tribolite in 1954 that was used on the Metropolitan Stock.
- By the 1960's there were distinct families of design such as Marianne Straub's "Blue/Green" which was used across trains and buses. 1970s designs featured fashionable colour and design – such as the "Orange/Black" and are now very popular in the LT Museum Shop as retro pieces. In the 90s moquettes started to include line colours within their designs. LT is now one of very few rail transport to use fabric – most now use stainless steel or plastic or wood slats. LT feel that moquette gives some comfort to passengers in an at times challenging environment – it is made from natural wool and is fire-resistant. One important design point is that fabric which is all 'plush' can visually wear quicker and so fabric that has a traditional moquette cut and uncut loop pattern is often preferred as it helps cope with heavy use.

Two considerations that LT have had in their choice of design over the years are 1) that it is an assured design which will not look dated too soon as it will have a "life" of 15 to 20 years; and 2) that it is not too tight or "jazzy" a pattern as this can cause passengers to feel sick or dizzy as they look at it whilst the train is in motion (Mike explained that the test for this is called the "3 pints and over the points" test!).

In 2009, LU decided to hold a competition to design a moquette which would, eventually, be used on all trains to give a more uniform corporate look across the fleet. As stock is now used on a multitude of lines (such as S Stock on the H&C, District and Circle) the need for designs to feature line colours would be removed. However, the design did have to transfer well from a 2 dimensional drawing to the 3D fabric with pattern, colour and texture. The pattern also needed to be short repeating as seats on the various stocks are different sizes and so trimming needed to make the pattern fit can be minimised so as to make savings. (Mike explained this by using the example of hanging wallpaper – you need to make sure the pattern continues across rolls but without having to trim too much off and waste it). As mentioned earlier, this competition was won by Emma and Harriett and their design has now been named "Barman" (after Christian) and is already on the Central Line and will be rolled out across the majority of lines as seat refurbishment programmes dictate – although it may take 15+ years for it to reach the new Victoria and S Stock seats as these had just been introduced before the decision to use Barman was agreed.

The meeting then thanked Mike, Emma and Harriet in the usual manner and a time of questions and answers followed. This included about how and why a new moquette was decided upon and how priority seating will be indicated.

Mike replied that LT felt that none of the current fabrics were suitable for use across the fleet, as they were too orientated to specific line(s). They looked at re-introducing a heritage design but felt that it was a superb opportunity for a new iconic design. Once the designs were submitted, a committee prepared a short-list and then a group of independent judges selected the top 3 designs for LU's ratification. Priority seats are now indicated by a panel within the design as well as a sticker above the seat. It is hoped that this will put a "degree of shame" upon the person who plonks themselves down in those seats. But, there is the disadvantage that passengers can't see which are the priority seats if someone is sitting in them – but testing did indicate that an icon within the moquette was more effective alongside a sticker above the seat.

Amanda Day