



Duration

01:06:56

Reference

OH12

Subjects

Textiles / Knitting / Counterculture / Fashion / Crafts Council

Recording date

20 August 2015

Recording location

Interviewee's home, Kilburn, London

Interviewee

Fassett, Kaffe (KF – speaker, male)

Interviewer

Lin, Gloria (GL – speaker, female)

Synopsis

In this 2015 First Decade interview, the US-born textile artist Kaffe Fassett (b. 1937) talks about his discovery of knitting and the rise in popularity of the medium in the 1970s and 1980s. He discusses the emergence of 'knit outs' in the US, where crowds filled city parks to knit and exchange techniques. He also reflects on his relationship with the Crafts Council during its first decade, reminisces about his involvement in Crafts Council educational tours and talks about his jumper held in the Crafts Council Collection.

Recording

00:00 GL asks what KF was making during the 70s. KF describes how he was excited by his discovery of knitting as a new craft skill. At that time, he was serious about being a painter – that was his life and he had no idea his new work would lead to something.

00:54 KF discusses in detail meeting Scottish fashion designer Bill Gibb and how he was influenced by his work. He talks about his love for hippy culture: 'Girls can cut their hair off like a boy [...] and this whole gender thing got mixed up and it didn't matter if you were gay or... but in the freedom of all that came this wonderful rummaging around of [*sic*] charity shops.'



05:30 KF talks about showing his first knitted designs to Judy Brittain at *Vogue* and her vision for him to combine his knitting with Bill Gibb's design ideas: 'She said, "This is where knitting is going in the future, this is really exciting; the richness, the layers of pattern and colour that you're doing."'

06:40 KF talks about his initial inspiration for garments, his techniques when working with Bill Gibbs and public reaction to their pieces.

08:47 KF mentions how he began doing more serious commercial work with textiles. 'I would put 200 colours in a garment or something [...] I wasn't doing it to be reproduced, I was just – I thought, 'I'm just gonna pull out all the stops and [...] just be as free as I can and as crazy as I can and put it all in there' because it's such a simple craft but if you put a lot of colour in it then it looks really complicated.'

09:51 KF talks about making his friend, photographer Steve Lovi, a sweater and how this generated initial ideas for a book of KF's knitting – *Glorious Needlepoint* (1985) – his 'coffee-table book' that people would just 'fall into and get excited about'.

12:04 KF reminisces about his experiences on tour with the Crafts Council (CC) in libraries, schools and the Women's Institute. He mentions his uniquely shaped pieces and describes 'knit outs' in the US. 'It was very exciting to see that people were inspired and could get turned on by a very simple craft and I felt that it could really change the world. It took years for knitting to become big and when it did become big it was because of... people in America started these "knit outs" where they would take over a park in the middle of New York or an old railway station in Boston and they would make a great big party of knitting [...] they couldn't sell anything but they could inspire people and turn them on.'

16:49 KF says that the CC was about 'getting us [makers] out there' and talks about his exhibitions with the CC. He compares knitting to baking, referring to the simplicity of the craft of knitting and textiles: 'It was very unusual to have a show on something that everybody could do; that's why the British Bake Off thing is so popular, because everybody can bake, so they get to see what they do every day slightly heightened or made into an art form, so it's very stimulating to people.'

19:03 GL asks: 'Do you think these things were happening because of a certain movement during the 70s?' KF agrees and discusses the feeling of being in London at the time – what he describes as 'communion of the craft work'.



21:52 KF tells a story about his Buddha and china collections, and getting his bowls seized at Customs in Vietnam.

24:07 KF talks about his feelings towards the CC during the 70s. He compares the CC to accountants who were 'after a kind of perfection', which he was not looking for. **'I was after warmth and romance, harking back to something that people could make and express themselves easily [sic].'** He thought the CC was important to make people aware and to stimulate people's imaginations.

31:03 GL asks 'Do you think there was a pressure to make craft intellectual or intellectualised?'

KF expresses his thoughts on 'polished' world of craft shows and the disparity between those and the art world. **'I wanted a bit of theatre and "over-the-top-ness".'**

32:27 KF discusses bursaries at the CC and how he felt he clashed with certain decisions during his time on the Board.

37:16 KF describes what drew him to knitting originally and how his time in Scotland sparked inspiration and excitement: **'There is a real possibility that something [which] keeps you warm could also be a wonderful thing to be around every day. Wonderful, glowing colours.'**

40:35 KF reflects on his different feelings for knitting and painting.

42:20 KF talks more about the 'knit outs', describing them as 'the Chelsea Flower Show for knitters'.

43:43 KF highlights the cultural differences between UK exhibitions and those in other countries, and talks about the potential for 'knit outs' to be a worldwide movement in the 70s.

46:42 KF discusses his website, which hosts people's work that has been inspired by his own, and how people have used his designs over the years.

48:59 KF enquires about the CC and its uses. GL responds.

50:07 KF talks about his appreciation of the CC for 'elevating very do-able creativity' that people could do at home. He also says that the CC made him aware of the number of creative people around him.

51:55 KF talks about a making day that the CC arranges for him and other makers.



53:21 KF discusses his BBC series *A Stitch in Time*.

54:12 GL asks KF about the jumper that the CC has in its collection.

57:25 KF begins to talk about his interest in Japanese knitting techniques and his new works for Rowan.

01:03:52 KF mentions his time at art school in Boston and talks about his feelings towards the US.

