

# RODCHENKO'S WORKER'S SUIT HAD NO FLY

LUCY MCKENZIE



Unlike wool, which is 'born' rather than 'made', traditions, as opposed to customs, can be as constructed as the patchwork of folk paganism in the 1970s horror film, *The Wicker Man*. Hugh Trevor-Roper's 1983 essay 'The Invention of Tradition: The Highland Tradition of Scotland' outlines the apocryphal origins of clan tartan. Trevor-Roper proposes that they stem not from an indigenous nobility but from a combination of Walter Scott's Romantic personal vision and eighteenth-century English militarism. Despite the disparaging tone in which it is written, and its obvious contempt for such inauthentic heritage, the essay contains insights that invite further examination.

The designer Beca Lipscombe and I, working under the name Atelier, present our first fashion collection, encompassing high-quality wovens, knitwear, raincoats, workwear and accessories. This collection is part of the project, *The Inventors of Tradition*, which also included an exhibition, a film screening and this publication. We wanted to discover what lies behind the public image of 'Scottish style', what industry has survived the shift to the Far East, and if the claim that symbolic value has vastly overtaken actual productive and creative might is correct. In so doing we continue Trevor-Roper's analysis of myth, but in a new climate and without his prejudices.

The purpose of the collection was to extend the research of *The Inventors of Tradition* into reality, and to do this Atelier collaborated with some of the most established manufacturers still producing in Scotland today. These include Mackintosh, Caerlee Mills, McRostie of Glasgow, Hawick Cashmere, Begg Scotland and Janette Murray Handknits. Discoveries in archives, as well as the content of film footage found at the Scottish Screen Archive, directly influence the style and ethos of the collection. After studying their archives and samples we discussed with the companies whether it would be possible with their current technology, labour force and workload to realise a small number of original designs. We tailored our ideas to these limitations: a finish that would be easily achievable, the adaptation of familiar shapes, working with the wool weight and colours already threaded on machines or fabric in stock.

The concept of the collection is a wardrobe for working women, especially artists and those in creative and artisan professions. As a painter, I understand exactly what I need in a work coat for the studio: it must be inexpensive and durable, but also rather dapper, like those worn by skilled factory workers when Scotland was an industrial power base. The act of adopting formal dress for work is in contrast to the contemporary norm of stained jeans and sweatshirts. In recent years embellishment and adornment have undergone a re-invention, and jeans can be bought pre-paint-spattered on the high street. Together with the tailor Steven Purvis, I designed a series of work coats inspired by historical models, following the example of Denise Van Der Kelen, the director of the decorative painting school I attended in Brussels.

A garment's use is dictated by its fabric. Several of the coats are manufactured in both cotton and silk to highlight this fundamental truth; in silk the same work jacket becomes delicate and can be used as evening wear. To give the best specific silhouette the coats are cut differently for men and women, rather than unisex. The lightweight masculine models echo those worn by designers in the atelier, or men of leisure in the library.

A work coat can simultaneously suggest both drudgery and liberation. The work coat signifies the bohemian emancipation of the women who were able for the first time to enter public and private art schools at the end of the nineteenth-century. Whether this is the group of artists and designers in the circle of Charles Rennie Mackintosh at The Glasgow School of Art, known as the Glasgow Girls, or Käthe Kollwitz posing with a beer tankard in her studio, the image of the smock-wearing 'New Woman' is iconic. One model in the Atelier collection is designed for housework, and the combination of white over darker tones alludes to the classic uniform of the domestic servant. As with that other luxury, haute couture, it was the decline of domestic service in the 1920s that ushered in the concept of ready-to-wear. Previously, a 'good' outfit was only needed on the weekly afternoon off, but with their shift from sculleries into offices and factories, working women needed available and practical daywear.

Beca Lipscombe's eponymous label manufactures exclusively in Scotland, a highly unusual undertaking where production limitations lead the design process. In this collaborative work she presents a selection of quality cashmere, pure wool knitwear and wovens to be worn with the work coats, as one inevitably does in a cold climate, by layering garments over each other. This honours a truth which is often negated in the aspirational fantasies of the fashion industry.

It is important for us, as in all our work together, that we maintain our separate identities. This creates not only a physical, but a conceptual layering. Our personal fashion histories are different. Beca, as a teenage model, was aligned with casual, expensive British and North Italian sportswear labels, hard-earned or stolen, and worn impeccably. By contrast, my adolescence was immersed in subculture, where fashion related solely to music and Siouxsie Sioux made swastika armbands okay. Gothic style is exceptionally elastic; expanding and splintering, with the enduring component of Celtic – especially pagan Celtic – images and sounds. Casual styles also evolve for each successive generation. There is no need for the result of these influences to be in conflict when no artificial unity is expected. Where we meet is in an appreciation of craftsmanship and in the wish to define our own ideas of what constitutes a personal Scottish style.

Beca shares a colour palette with her artist mother, whose *trompe l'œil* figurative tapestries use the macaroon, Caramac and neo-navy featured in her knitwear. These 'local' colours complement the shapes of her skirt and trouser suits, which are cut in the comfortable, flattering and luxurious style of classic leisure wear. Her contemporary take on the eternal Aran jumper, where the knit is loose enough to reveal naked skin underneath, typifies the sensuous flair she brings to Scottish traditions of clothing.

*Some may argue, looking at Atelier's new collection: 'It's just a round neck cashmere jumper with a jogging bottom pant.' However, we challenge anyone to be able to shop for such a simple, no-nonsense garment now. We live in an over-designed world where branding, labelling and embellishment overrules quality, skill and style. To quote Jean Muir: 'less is Muir.' You may be able to find a round neck cashmere jumper, but we guarantee the trims on the sleeves and body will have been given the Italian finish (skinny and minimal) and there will be some form of applied symbol to reassure the customer of its status. Beca Lipscombe, 2011*

Beca's handknits are not skimpy, but robust: the kind that, combined with a cagoule or Mackintosh, can replace a winter coat. Her Mackintosh has deep sleeves reminiscent of the kimono shapes that Muir and Bonnie Cashin devised especially to accommodate chunky knitwear underneath. It is sportswear in its original incarnation, to contrast the formal structure of everyday dress.

Our hat designs are based on recognisable shapes associated with national costume – a Spanish *canotier*, or the traditional headscarf and bonnet of Scotland, all produced in sombre Presbyterian style. Like the work coat, they suggest the completion of an outfit considered unnecessary today, and therefore a deliberate action.

Belgium, like Scotland, is a post-industrial, rainy country with a strong manufacturing past. Unlike in Scotland, however, innovative Belgian fashion design has flourished in the last twenty-five years into a globally recognised economic and cultural force. This has happened through support by the state, higher education and an infrastructure of skilled production. Without serious investment by people who care, our industry will die, or at best decline into something devoid of local character. Belgian fashion honours tradition while extending and re-imagining it; can we blame our lack of creativity only on a lack of resources? We know that to dress idiosyncratically in Scotland must be something undertaken with bravery.

Atelier's take on national dress has little to do with the subversion of historicism exhibited by designers like Vivienne Westwood or Alexander McQueen. Nor do we align ourselves with the irreverent re-jigging of woollen golf wear for a younger market. Rather my antiquated shapes echo Glasgow at the turn of the twentieth century; their feminism is whimsically romantic. The Greek ornament Beca often uses, Running Dog, here unfinished on the edges of blanket skirts, is the neoclassical motif loved by Robert Adam and Alexander Thomson. We do not propose that people should be walking amalgamations of symbols, only that Scotland has the cultural and manufacturing potential to define itself away from predetermined myths.