



'Fascinating, strange
and enthralling'

MAGGIE
O'FARRELL

PATCH WORK

A Life
Amongst
Clothes

CLAIRE WILCOX

'An absolute masterpiece'

LAURA CUMMING

'Unique ... rich, tantalising'

TRACY CHEVALIER

BLOOMSBURY

LADDER

The textile store was so long that it was hard to hear what people were saying at the other end, and if the phone rang we had to run to answer it. The store had not always been a store. Many years ago, one of the museum's original galleries had been requisitioned, and it had been furnished with second-hand specimen cupboards from the Natural History Museum. The gallery's arching metal struts had once offered views to the galleries below but now were boarded over and blotted with thick cream paint to keep the light out. In the textile store, the outside sounds of the museum were muffled, although sometimes we could hear the laughter of school parties as they passed by with their clipboards.

The two of us were doing the audit, the quinquennial, for it took that long. Every August, the department closed for a fortnight while we went through the cupboards and drawers to check that each object was in its designated place. If it was, we placed a tick on our checklist. Now and again something was not where it should be, but we would usually find it in the drawer above or the drawer below, perhaps misplaced by a curator fatigued by the stale air and the demands of visitors: cloth workers; historians of weave; practitioners of stitch. Sometimes, pieces were nowhere to be seen. Regretfully, we marked them as Not in Place and carried on.

We worked in pairs so as not to make mistakes, like nurses doing a late-night drug round. We took it in turns to be the person with the pencil and checklist, and the person reading out the number attached to each piece, given to it when it was acquired by the museum. For example, T.45-1975 meant 'T' for textile and '45' for the 45th object acquired in 1975. Older acquisitions had tiny labels made of parchment, with the number and date written as if with a quill. Some predated the museum's organisation into departments and so did not have a prefix, merely a number. Some did not think to include the full date, for example marking '59, rather than 1859, or '99 rather than 1899, as if the nineteenth century would never end.

In recent years we had written the numbers and dates on woven tape using a laundry pen. The ends were tucked under and stitched onto the fabric, like a school nametape. In the case of hard objects, like shoes, someone with a steady hand painted the letters and numbers on the underside, using a fine brush. Sewing labels on was one of the jobs we had to do when we weren't doing audits and it was something I enjoyed, making my stitches as small as possible; thinking it my legacy. Sometimes, we spent the afternoons answering enquiries. Now and again we'd receive a letter addressed to the *Victorian Albert Museum*; it always amused us.

One of us would read out the numbers, like a bingo caller. Number, tick; number, tick. We had to be careful. We had been told of a rare piece of lace that had been thrown away, caught up in some folds of white tissue. LOST was written in capitals on its record card, meaning the piece had gone forever. As we went through a very full drawer, we found that a lappet was missing. We shook the tissue, searching, but found that we had been tricked; it had been stitched to its pair, for lappets –

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long streamers of lace worn either side of the face that were fashionable in the eighteenth century – come in twos, and we had missed one of the numbers.

With the lower drawers, we could lean in and sort through the folded pieces quite easily. If they were very full, or there were lots of tiny bits of fabric that needed careful repacking, we would lift the heavy drawer out onto the table, carefully transferring its contents onto tissue, before putting them all back again. But with the higher cupboards this was more difficult. We had to climb the ladder. We were always given the higher cupboards to check because we were the most junior members of the department, and the most agile.

The ladders were parked either side of the storeroom with a flat platform at the top that held one person comfortably, two at a push. One of us would stand on the platform, the other would balance below on the steps, looking up at the underside of the drawer. We couldn't remove the drawer because it was too heavy, and we were working at height now. At the top of the steps the atmosphere was warm and musty because the air conditioning was outdated. Our heads were within touching distance of the girders, just as I imagined the heads of the museum's builders with their cloth caps and handfuls of rivets would have been, as they bolted and hammered the metal struts together.

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The smell of naphthalene pervaded the air as we checked through a cluster of medieval caps. Lots of these had been found in London, as ever-taller buildings required ever-deeper excavations. The felted wool was designed to be warm and waterproof and, although the caps were hundreds of years

old, looked as if it still might be. In the next drawer along there was a group of top hats dating from 1820–1930. Each was sealed in a clear plastic bag marked with a skull and crossbones because mercury was used during their making and they were still toxic – caused madness. We detected the museum numbers through the safety of the hats' protective membrane.

We were on our own in the quiet of the textile store, at the top of the ladder, absorbed in our work. There was going to be a thunderstorm, and the air was electric and the hairs on my arm stood on end when we accidentally touched. Later, back in the office, we drank our tea; it was tiring, doing the audit. We handed our results in, our losses and findings, for today had been our last day. But I longed to be back on the ladder, our arms touching, and smelling the smell of naphthalene.

'I loved *Patch Work*, and all its wisdom about clothes and what they mean to us. Fascinating, strange and enthralling. I kept thinking of all the people I want to give it to, which is always the sign of a good book'

MAGGIE O'FARRELL, author of *Hamnet*

'I am overwhelmed by this book ... I have been moved to tears by the lives told here, but also by the infinite care with which she has considered them over and over again, stitched them together, pieced out of memories and love. I found my sense of life transformed by her writing as I often find it transformed after the exhibition of a great artist'

LAURA CUMMING, author of *On Chapel Sands*

'A unique memoir told in rich, tantalising fragments that made me look at what we all wear with new interest and respect'

TRACY CHEVALIER, author of *A Single Thread*

'An exquisite book that works like a well-curated and eccentric exhibition'

JULIA BLACKBURN, author of *Time Song*

'What a wonderfully woven tangle of stories, from dreamlike rememberings of her past to the intimate glimpses of a world behind the polished facade of the museum. To me, this is pure delight'

LARA MAIKLEM, author of *Mudlarking*

