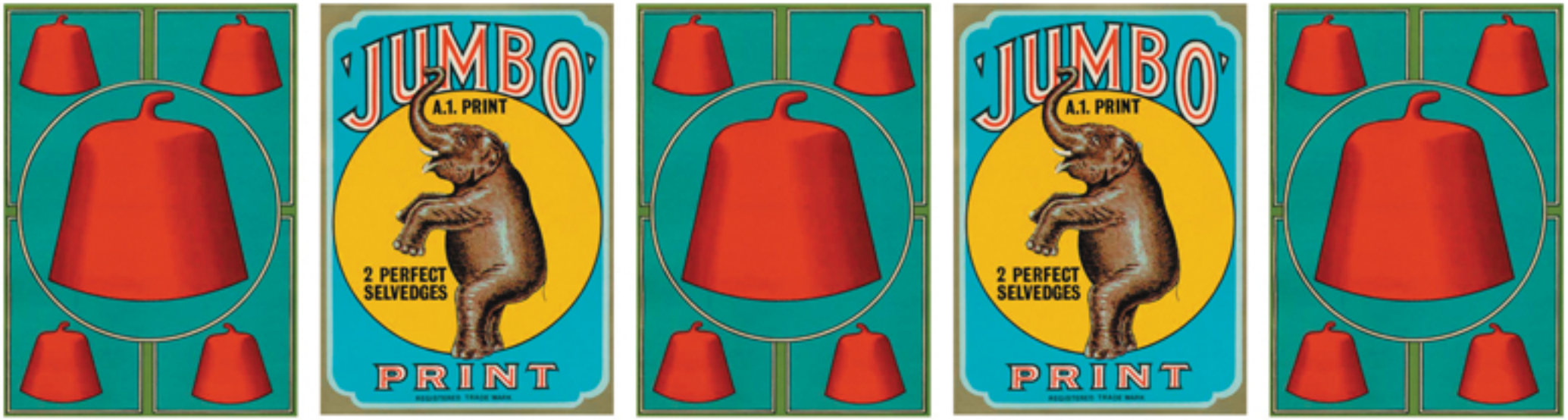


Fezzes, Dancing Elephants, and Ornamental Lettering:

THE TRADEMARKS OF COTTONOPOLIS

Introduction

A premier exhibition showcasing the previously unknown artistic and historical importance of trademarks attached by Victorian British textile merchants to pieces of cloth exported around the world.

These trademarks feature images from diverse ethnic groups across the 19th Century globe, plus many unique typefaces and graphic devices.

The collection of over 2,000 original hand made wood and copper stamps, a thousand paper labels, plus typefaces, sample books and artwork is held by a private art collector in New York City. It has never been shown.

THE COLLECTION

In the late nineteenth century, during the heyday of Manchester's textiles industry, hundreds of thousands of individual trademarks were designed for use during global export to distinguish the products of the city's numerous manufacturers and merchants. These marks were hand stamp-printed or affixed as gummed paper labels onto the outer layer of folded pieces of cotton. A mark or label might spell out the name of the merchant, the type and dimensions of the cloth contained within, and often it also depicted a scene, emblem, animal or figure calculated to appeal to its intended, often illiterate, purchaser. As such, these marks represent an early and sophisticated form of branding. The marks are also unique for the innovative and skilful ways in which their creators both integrated typography and ornament, and visually embraced different cultures with a respect which goes against the stereotype view of how Britain traded with the New World.

THE PROPOSED EXHIBITION

"Fezzes, Dancing Elephants, and Ornamental Lettering: The Trademarks of Cottonopolis," features a carefully curated selection of cotton industry trademark-related artefacts salvaged from Manchester's cotton warehouses by photographer Adrian Wilson. The collection includes over two thousand hand-made wood and copper stamps used for printing the marks, around four thousand unpublished printed stamp designs, and around eight hundred paper shipper's tickets. The original tickets and stamps will be on display as well as reproductions of the tickets and prints of the stamps blown up to different scales and repeated in wallpapers. With their bold colors, sometimes surreal imagery, intricate ornamental devices and utterly inventive display typography, these labels and marks glow with a unique aura that derives from an age when the British Empire was still a dominant economic force.

This exhibition will appeal to a variety of audiences interested in the interplay between designed artefacts and their cultural, economic, and historical contexts. This rich visual material will be especially intriguing to graphic designers, typographers, illustrators, fashion designers and textile designers, as well as to art historians.

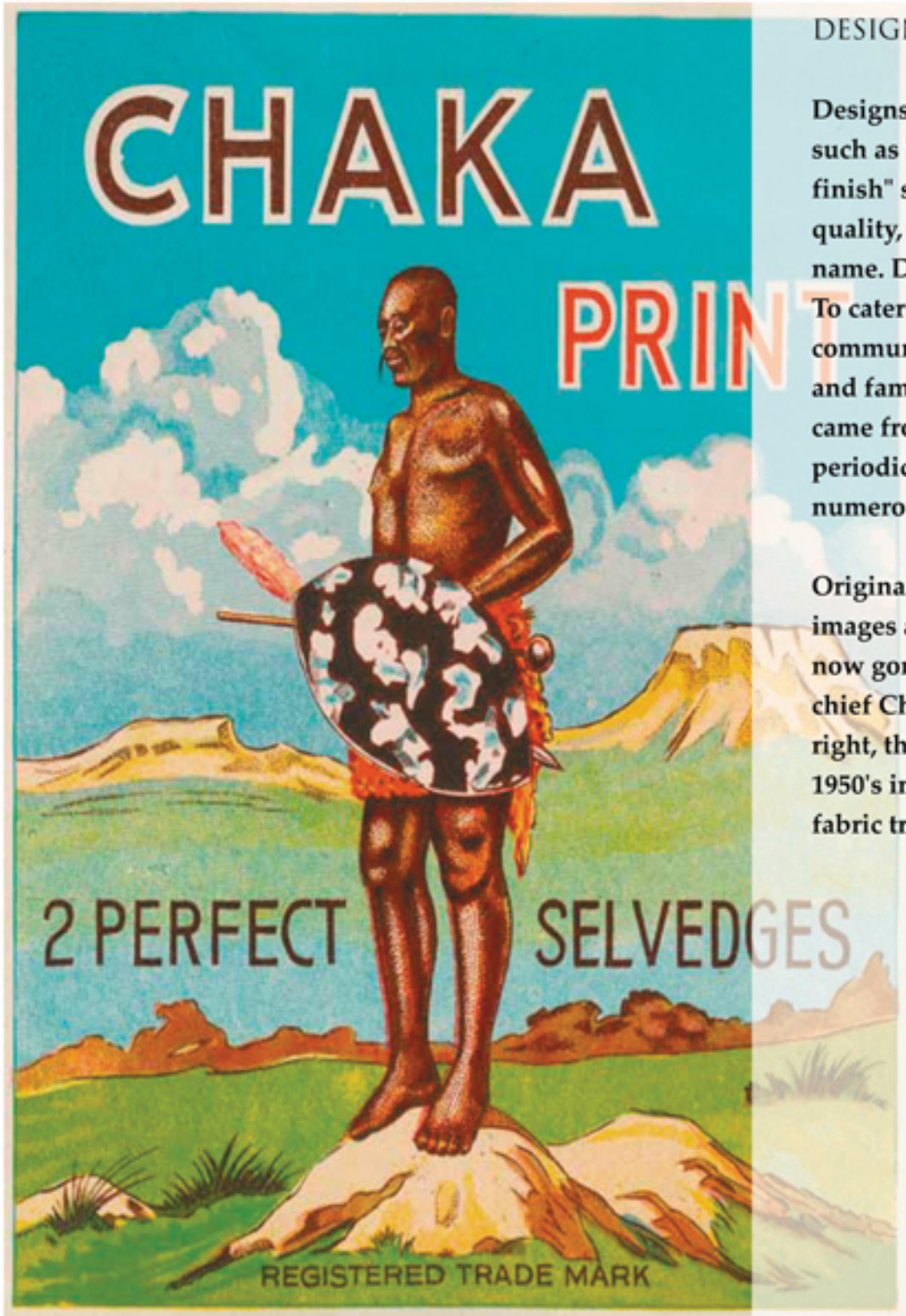
MERCHANT TRADEMARKS

Britain's dominance of the cotton fabric market peaked in the 1880's when 82% of the world's population wore fabric made in Manchester. As the center of this industry, Manchester became known as Cottonopolis and its heyday lasted as long as its factories led technical innovation and its merchants developed markets for cheap fabric.

Cotton merchants and manufacturers had used various identification marks on their cloth, especially to encourage consumer selection over that of competitor companies. Unfortunately this system was open to abuse as some merchants sold inferior cloth with copied fabric designs and misleading descriptions. The 1842 Design and Copyright Act required that all pieces of cloth (folded rather than rolled to enable denser compression into bales) had to be clearly stamped or labeled with a 'faceplate' that included the supplier's identifying mark, and the cloth's type and length.

This Act was hoped to both stop unscrupulous sales and protect the textile designer's intellectual property.

In the making-up departments of warehouses, cloth was divided into various lengths as specified by the final customer, folded and stamped or labeled. A 200 yard factory length of white cloth may have been divided by a merchant into ten 20-yard pieces for a West African robe customer, eight 25-yard pieces for Beirut shirtmaker, and five 40-yard pieces for a furnisher in Havana. Each piece requiring a different faceplate. The need for such flexibility and relatively short runs of different sized pieces made roller printing impractical. Stamping was the best solution and because one of the goals was to prevent faceplate design forgery, stamp makers were therefore encouraged to produce designs that were as intricate and artistically proficient as possible.



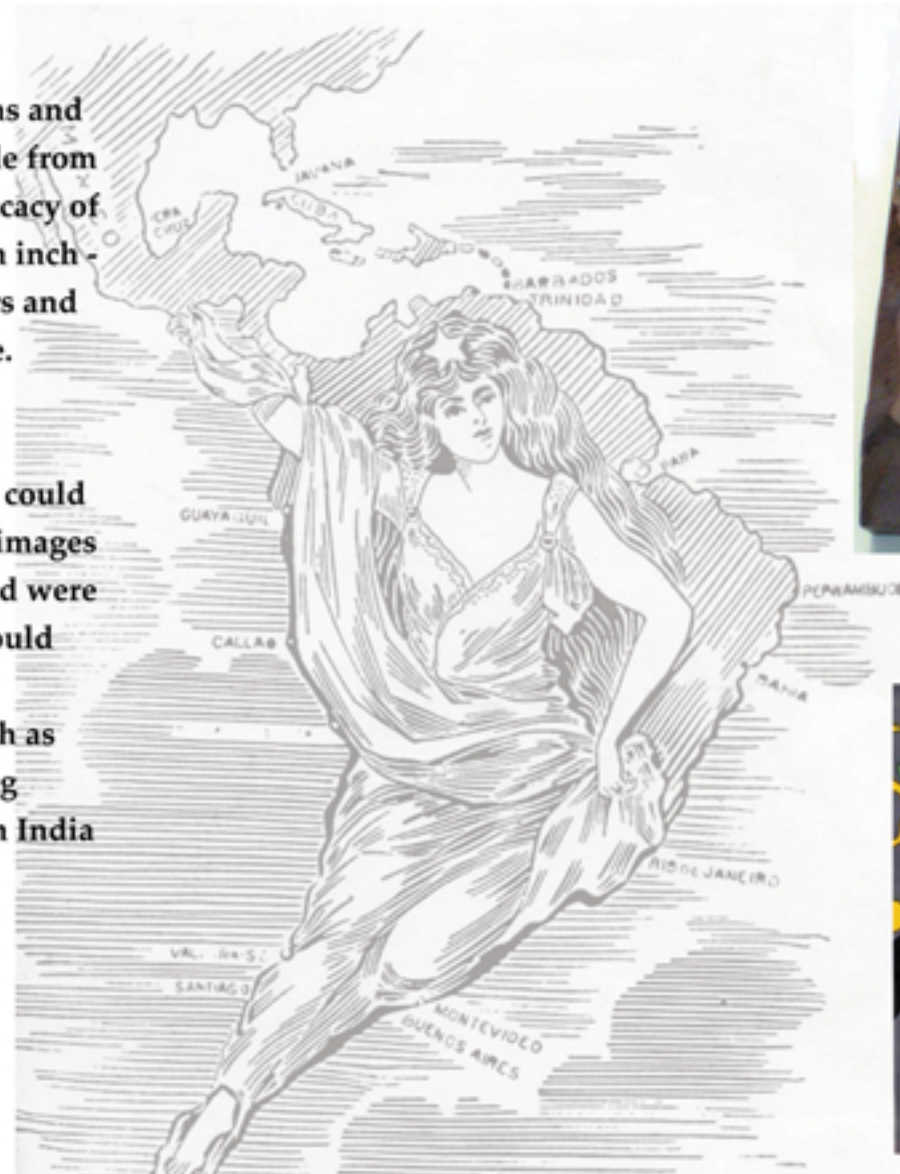
DESIGN SELECTION

Designs for the domestic trade tended to focus on promotional phrases such as "finished soft for the needle" or "unexcelled for quality and finish" sometimes integrated with images that invoked concepts of quality, luxury and good fortune, as well as reinforcing the brand's name. Designs for the export trade had to be more carefully conceived. To cater for a largely illiterate market, a brand name had to be communicated by an image. The images had to be memorable, positive and familiar to the culture of the customer. References for such images came from a merchant's contacts in that region, local guidebooks, maps, periodicals, postcards and other materials accessed through the numerous foreign consulates located in Manchester.

Original labels and stamp designs on show for the first time will depict images and icons belonging to cultures from all over the world, some now gone forever. Even characters hostile to the British such as African chief Chaka shown here, who mustered the Zulu Army in the late 1700's, right, through to the Burmese Communist Party revolutionaries of the 1950's in the label below are celebrated on the humble Manchester fabric trade mark.

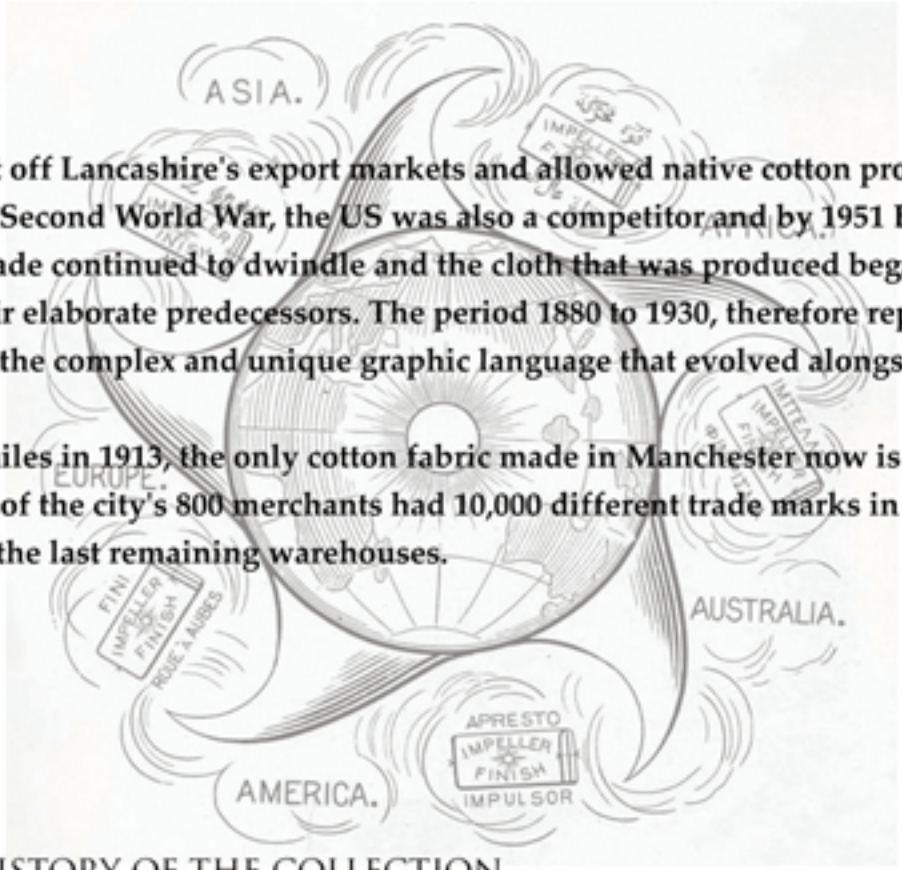
Stamps were made by hammering copper ribbons and pins into the stamp's flat surface which was made from a close-grain wood like pear. Because of the intricacy of the work - some lines were as thin as 1/64th of an inch - a stamp cutter's apprenticeship took several years and each stamp could take up to a month to complete.

Shippers' tickets began to be used as additional branding devices from the 1840's onwards. They could be produced quickly and cheaply, could feature images of current celebrities and fashionable women and were therefore popular with customers. Merchants would sometimes produce a set of collectable labels to encourage sales, even serialising local fables such as the Ramayana in India. Victorian labels depicting Hindu gods can still be found on temple walls in India



In the 1880's a printer such as B. Taylor of Manchester employed up to 20 full-time artists to produce more than 15,000 different designs. Sometimes the tickets were specially commissioned, such as the one above from a set designed between 1916 and 1926 by the renowned poster artist E. McKnight Kauffer for Steinthal & Co. Ltd. These were used for textiles exported to Latin America and the West Indies and the images were designed using snapshots and picture postcards as references. The firm's owner, W.H. Zimmern, was keen to hire a high-caliber poster artist in order to improve on what he called "the usual chocolate-box banalities." The resulting tickets were exhibited in the Manchester Art Gallery and published in publications such as Studio and Poster.

INDUSTRY DECLINE



The onset of the First World War cut off Lancashire's export markets and allowed native cotton producers such as Japan and India to flourish. By the time of the Second World War, the US was also a competitor and by 1951 British market share had fallen to 15%. In the 1960's cotton trade continued to dwindle and the cloth that was produced began to be sold in rolls with simple transfer labels replacing their elaborate predecessors. The period 1880 to 1930, therefore represents golden age, not only for the cotton industry, but for the complex and unique graphic language that evolved alongside it.

From the peak export of 4 million miles in 1913, the only cotton fabric made in Manchester now is just produced for tourists in a museum. In the 1870's, just one of the city's 800 merchants had 10,000 different trade marks in use and now all that is left is this tiny fragment salvaged from the last remaining warehouses.

HISTORY OF THE COLLECTION

Adrian Wilson is a photographer who happened to have a studio in one of the old Manchester cotton warehouses. One day, a warehouseman called Steve Bates gave him a bag of stamps that were being thrown out which would begin this story. From countless hours spent rummaging through derelict warehouses, interviewing old merchants and collecting anything relating to textile trade marks, Adrian is now the acknowledged authority on the subject.

The Museum of Science & Industry in Manchester have a complete Victorian merchant's office on permanent display which was acquired from Adrian. He has been a paid consultant to the museum, written magazine articles and also lectured on the subject, even appearing as a special guest on the BBC's Antiques Roadshow in January 2005.

Apart from a couple of minor local displays in England, there has never been an exhibition of these artefacts, nor has Adrian published his definitive personal research into this overlooked area of ethnic, art and business history.