

HOW ABOUT?

with Louise Howland



An old basket of fabric scraps is a link to another time and a foreign country, as well as the source of precious memories recalled.

Some years before she died, I spent a purposeful week with my grandmother. As well as a wonderful opportunity to be bathed in her gentleness, I wanted to hear her stories again, listening intently as objects reminded her of past places and people.

In the early stages of her dementia, Grandma became, if that could be possible, even sweeter than in the rest of her life. Perhaps this was because the little slips of the tongue were so poignant to hear when, as a psychiatric nurse, I was only too aware of the changes to come.

In her sewing room was a treadle machine that had come with the family when they left Fiji in 1930. In the round, stacked, handwoven cane baskets lay myriad fabrics. Living on the island of Ovalau, orders were placed by mail to fabric merchants in Europe. The mail would go by sea, and some 18 months later a ship would sail into Levuka Harbour bearing their textile treasures – isn't that about as far removed from internet shopping as you can get? Grandma told me how they would sit for hours in their house by the waterfall and take afternoons to deliberate over fabrics for the dresses they would wear two years hence, and the furnishing fabrics with which they would re-cover and redecorate their home.

Favourites were dress silks from the area of Spitalfields, east of London. In the mid-18th century the English silk designers began to distinguish their work from the prevailing French taste for generalised floral types by producing floral patterns derived from botanical engravings. The silks were worn to dances at the Lodge, and concerts and dinner parties across the island.

Cottons combined with worsted wool, produced on the border of Lancashire and Yorkshire, were ordered for the men's waistcoats – hardly what my father and husband chose to wear on our recent visit to Fiji, nice as they may have looked in their shorts and Hawaiian shirts! Indian and English block-print textiles, in a full range of colours, copied both the patterns and the colouring of dress silks but were a little more practical for everyday wear on the island.

The laces were stories in themselves. The scraps of lace were even more magical than the small bolts, knowing that the rest of the lace had gone to the ball as a collar, a bodice or a handkerchief edging. The laces came from St Gallen, as



did the linens that made the long, flowing tennis outfits shaped by whalebone stays. The international lace trade of the 18th and 19th century made St Gallen famous, as well as very wealthy.

My favourite fabric from the basket in my grandmother's sewing room was always, for some odd reason, the Swiss lawn – quietly plain but pure and proud amongst the brocades and jacquards. Year after year I've checked these baskets. Fabrics came and went, but the piece of pale green lawn was a fixture. And fixtures are what we seek after all, aren't they? Like wanting our grandmas to live forever.

Until next month,

Louise