



Kaffe Fassett is famed for his vibrant knitting patterns and needlepoint, but his new autobiography reveals a life every bit as colourful as his textile designs

King of the bohemians



Brandon

Mably, Kaffe Fassett's partner in life and business, is showing me round the house in an otherwise unremarkable Kilburn street where the textile designer has lived for 20 years. To those in the know, it's immediately obvious which house is Kaffe's – the porch is completely covered in opulent mosaic.

'That fireplace was the first mosaic Kaffe ever did,' Brandon says. 'All the pieces came from the remains of an old rubbish pit on Hampstead Heath. He used to swim in the ponds all year round and would find these bits of broken porcelain lying in the mud and put them in his pocket. He always said he'd find a use for them one day.'

If the name doesn't ring a bell, you're either very young or in a minority. Time was when you couldn't turn the pages of a weekend supplement or women's magazine without finding an advertisement for yet another of his jewel-bright needlepoint tapestry, knitting or patchwork-quilt designs. He has dreamed up thousands of designs, produced countless books, and travels and lectures widely, touring the US annually. In 1988 Kaffe [it rhymes with 'safe'] became the first living textile artist to have a one-man show at the Victoria & Albert Museum.

And this month he brings out *Dreaming in Colour*, his autobiography, which is littered with famous names; from Dustin Hoffman, with whom he attended drama classes, to Barbra Streisand, who loved his knitwear. 'Kaffe,' commented Dustin, 'couldn't act his way out of a wet paper bag.' That's ▸

Extramural study
Kaffe Fassett at home in a kaleidoscope of his own designs. The Chinese painting was picked up in an antiques shop in Cornwall

Words **Tiffany Daneff** Photographs **Tara Fisher**



◁ as may be, but Barbra used to come to Kilburn for fittings.

Such success seems almost too much. Perhaps he is terribly pushy, I tell myself as Brandon leads me into the light-filled studio on the top floor of the house. On the shelves is just a small part of Kaffe's large porcelain collection, picked up over the years from London flea markets, carefully arranged from floor to ceiling in coloured bands of cobalt and aquamarine, fuchsia and peony, and fresh cabbage green. The floor is littered with piles of half-stitched quilting, colourful fabrics and threads. Beside the window, in a chair much too small for his frame, sits Kaffe Fassett. The hair is greying now that he is 74, but he is colourfully kitted out in striking oxblood-red trousers and purple and blue tops. And he still has the chiselled cheek bones that led to him being asked to model for

Queen back in the Sixties when he first arrived in England.

In a soft West Coast drawl, he talks about his love of London. 'It's a great city to walk in and discover all those little streets and squares. It is so full of charm.'

There could hardly be more of a contrast between Kaffe – who grew up under the broad blue bohemian skies of Big Sur, California in a wonderfully chaotic house that had been home previously to Henry Miller, Orson Welles and Rita Hayworth – and his

'I thought Women's Institutes must be awful places. But then I realised they were just passionate about craft'

devoted fans, the vast majority of whom are comfortably into middle age and very many of whom are members of the Women's Institute.

'I used to think Women's Institutes must be the most awful places,' he laughs, already winning me over with that frankness. 'But when I got there I realised they were just passionate about craft.' His first visit in the early Seventies must have been quite an encounter. 'There was I, this freak. Being American, six foot three and a man!'

Then, as now, he was received with thunderous applause. His audience is much the same today. 'I get the old hippies with red hair and purple tights, just the same as they were – colourful and fabulous – then there's the precise patchwork people and a lot of men, more than before.'

Many needleworkers, he explains, are perfectionists. They even have tools to measure the length of

a stitch. A world away from, as Kaffe puts it, 'freewheeling slobbers like me'.

Kaffe designs on the hoof. His first creation for the *Vogue Knitting Book*, in 1968, was made up as he went along. And when, in his excitement, he left the finished garment on a bus, he had to start again, with no guide to follow. Luckily no one at the publishers noticed.

'When the mind is concentrating on perfection,' he explains, 'it's difficult to think of possible colour schemes or to be creative. I give people the licence to play with colour. I tell them: "Life's a banquet".'

He has much empathy with his audience. 'Age is liberating,' says Kaffe. 'I remember my art teacher in his seventies telling me "I am too old to be polite". I think it is especially liberating for women. So many start out having a lot of creative talent, but then they have a family and a husband and all

Following a pattern

From left: a selection of Kaffe's patchwork; the master at work in his studio; a laughing Buddha from his large collection and one of his most successful needlepoint designs; crocheted skull caps decorated with buttons and beads



the responsibility that goes with that. They've got duties,' he says. 'And then they get to a certain age and the kids have left home and they get back what they started with – that creativity. That's when they come to my lectures.'

Perhaps this insight comes from observing his mother, a beautiful and dynamic woman. 'She was a frustrated artist,' he says, always encouraging him to pick up a paintbrush or needle. Thanks to her eye for colour and style, the family restaurant Nepenthe, which opened

in 1949 in Big Sur, soon became a lodestone for film stars, writers, artists and hippies. There was dancing under the stars while guests lounged on colourful cushions. Gloria Swanson, Olivia de Havilland and Steve McQueen all visited, while Jane Fonda and Ted Turner were regulars. In 1965 Nepenthe featured in *The Sandpiper* starring Elizabeth Taylor and Richard Burton.

Kaffe and his sisters used to entertain guests with folk dances they learned at Happy Valley, the hippy boarding school founded by Aldous Huxley and the philosopher Jiddu Krishnamurti, among others. It was here that the 14-year-old Frank Fassett decided to rename himself Kaffe after an ancient Egyptian character from a children's book called *Boy of the Pyramids* by Ruth Fosdick Jones.

One of the restaurant's chefs, a young actor called Lewis Perkins, ▷

◁ used to unravel jumpers from Goodwill stores and knit them into multicoloured striped sweaters. Kaffe loved the brilliant colours, but he was set on becoming an artist. The autobiography is filled with his charming line drawings and still lifes. He studied in New York, lived in Boston, travelled in Europe, hung out and held exhibitions. By the time he arrived in England in 1964 (inspired by a conversation with Christopher Isherwood), it was as a painter that he hoped to succeed.

‘A lot of people don’t even know I paint,’ says Kaffe, sitting beside a still life arrangement of blue and white porcelain he has just completed. Back then he painted and drew nonstop – still lifes

Hockney, Bailey, Cecil Beaton: he went with the flow, taking what Sixties London offered

of Portobello Road market and Widcombe Manor near Bath, where he stayed with Camilla and Jeremy Fry, the engineer and philanthropist. Through them he met Cecil Beaton, Tony Armstrong-Jones and Princess Margaret. He could not have had a better shoo-in to English society. Counterintuitively, London in the Sixties was easier-going than San Francisco, particularly if you were gay.

‘There was this stiff upper lip thing,’ he says today. ‘But there was a wonderful free craziness about the working classes and the aristocrats were fabulous. Those wonderful old houses and that relaxation about things ageing, and if there was a bit of dust in the corner it didn’t matter.’

He went with the flow, taking what London in the Sixties offered. He lived with Billy Gibb (or Bill Gibb, the fashion designer as he became), he knew John Schlesinger and Hockney – they visited each other’s studios in Notting Hill – he appeared as an extra in Antonioni’s *Blow-Up*. And everything and everyone that he loved, he painted or drew.

England was liberating. ‘Unlike America, England wasn’t all



A passion for painting

Kaffe has always loved to paint and draw. Left: some of his notebooks, showing floral motifs and an early self-portrait. Below: Kaffe’s 1999 *Study of Rose-covered Objects*



gung ho about success. In fact, that floundering about worked in my favour. It helped me find myself.’

He was blown away by the floral chintzes in English country houses. After visiting a Scottish woollen mill with Gibb, he brought back some yarn and started knitting, creating a pattern as he went. He showed it to a friend on *Vogue*, who put him in touch with the editor-in-chief of *Vogue Knitting Patterns* and he was hooked. Inspired by some Celtic manuscripts in the British Library, he began designing a Fair Isle vest.

In the way that life has of making its own decisions, Kaffe’s textile career took off. It’s not, I realise, pushiness – more that he was in the right place at the right time. He was photographed by Tessa Traeger for *Vogue*, the caption reading ‘The King of Knitting’. His designs were shot by David Bailey, the Missoni family invited him to Milan to design for them and by the Seventies he was on his way to becoming a household name. Painting had been a hand-to-mouth existence; textiles swept open the doors.

In the US he felt hidebound. ‘A true artist was supposed not to touch craft.’ But he was not so harshly judged in England, or perhaps he learned not to be so hard on himself. ‘Textiles were so powerfully motivating, I just couldn’t stop,’ he says. His enthusiasm was infectious. Princess Michael of Kent was

so impressed she suggested to the V&A, where she was a trustee, that they hold an exhibition of his work.

And though today he might not be designing for quite the same cutting-edge fashion designers as back in his heyday, his projects are still impressive. In 2000 he designed the sets and costumes for the Royal Shakespeare Company’s production of *As You Like It*, and he is currently working towards an exhibition next March at the Fashion and Textile Museum in London.

Most days he works in the studio with Brandon. Sitting listening to Radio 4 while sewing buttons on to a skull cup or cutting out fabric. A round tray is enticingly spattered with paints.

‘Some days I’ll be thinking I should be painting. Painting is more difficult for me,’ says Kaffe. ‘But I can’t wait to start on a textile piece. When all’s said and done though, you worry about what’s left, about history. The textile world was ready for me. But I hope that one day in the future someone will come along and wonder, “Who is this guy with the weird name?” And they might just decide to find out and discover all the painting.’ ◆

Visit kaffefassett.com to see more designs. *Dreaming in Colour by Kaffe Fassett (Stewart, Tabori and Chang, £25) is available at 20% discount from Saga Bookshop. See page 191 for details*