

THE WORLD OF INTERIORS

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Fauves by the Coves

Founded in Newlyn in 1920, Cryséde manufactured groundbreaking garments whose Cornish-themed designs drew on the Modernist art movements then making shockwaves in postwar Europe. The outfits were too pricey for locals to afford, but the company's decade of success would see many women lifted out of poverty, as Norman Miller reports



In the aftermath of World War I, a small artisanal company named Cryséde – its name reputedly inspired by Chaucer's *Troilus and Criseyde* – took over three derelict fishermen's cottages in the Cornish fishing port of Newlyn. Here Cryséde manufactured and sold groundbreaking silk and linen textiles, which drew not only from the creative energy of the country's nascent Modernist arts scene, but also from new European movements such as Fauvism and Vorticism. As the company's founder Alec Walker put it: 'My principle

was to carry modern feeling... into the fabrics themselves.'

Through the 1920s Jazz Age, Cryséde produced a stream of striking designs reimagining Cornish motifs through a lens of zinging colours and dancing geometries. 'Madron Carn', for example, presents a vista of squiggly black trees, moorland fields and rocky outcrops, captured in yellow/greens and brick red. 'Ding Dong Mine' (inspired by an oddly named industrial beacon near Penwith) could pass as a pure abstract of pale-hued interlocking

curves against a black backdrop but for the old tin-mine chimney that draws the eye like a wonky rocket. 'Isles of Scilly', meanwhile, envisages the Cornish archipelago as a swirling red Fauvist fantasy.

Walker's journey began in Yorkshire, where his father bequeathed him a small silk mill to run in 1912. Aged 23, he created a company called Vigil Silks, which sold the polka dot and stripe designs that were typical of the period from a small shop in London's Sloane Street. This early enterprise introduced him to silk-trade buyer

The firm began in 1920 making silk and crêpe-de-chine dresses with Post-Impressionist renderings of Cornish woods, farms, tin mines and so on, but soon diversified. By 1928, leisure and beach wear was available printed on linen, such as this dress in 'Lobster Supper'

and contemporary-art collector Tom Heron (father of painter Patrick), plus Kay Earle, a Newlyn art-school graduate who answered a job ad for a poster designer and whom he later married.

It was Kay who introduced Alec to Cornwall's burgeoning postwar art scene, prompting the couple to move to Newlyn in 1919, where the fabric-firm founder began experimenting with loose watercolour paintings of the surrounding landscape. But it was a trip to Paris that spurred a dramatic change. In 1923, Walker crossed the Channel to meet painter Raoul Dufy with the hope of buying his textile designs. When it turned out he couldn't afford them, Dufy suggested Walker find inspiration from his own paintings instead.

With this advice ringing in the Englishman's ears, success came with stunning rapidity. Kay began creating dresses inspired by her husband's watercolours, later collaborating with London fashion designer George Criscuolo. By the end of 1923, Crysède's new designs had garnered over 3,000 mail-order clients, including customers in Paris, the USA and Australia.

At a 2024 exhibition, the Royal Cornwall Museum celebrated Crysède's pioneering designs. 'They were bright and distinct among the more pastel day-dress

prints that surrounded them in the 1920s,' says Jeni Woolcock, the museum's collections and engagement manager. She is echoed by Victoria Bradley, a curator of contemporary textiles at the V&A, who believes that Walker and Heron's deep artistic engagement ignited the company's distinctive output. 'They came from an artistic standpoint that was progressive and outward-looking – and moved British culture and fashion forward,' she says.

Emboldened by increasing demand, Crysède extended its range from silks to include hand block-printed linen and cotton for use in both clothing and furnishing. Physical expansion came too; in 1926, production moved to the Old Western pilchard-processing building in St Ives, where former fish tanks were pressed into use for dyeing and finishing fabric.

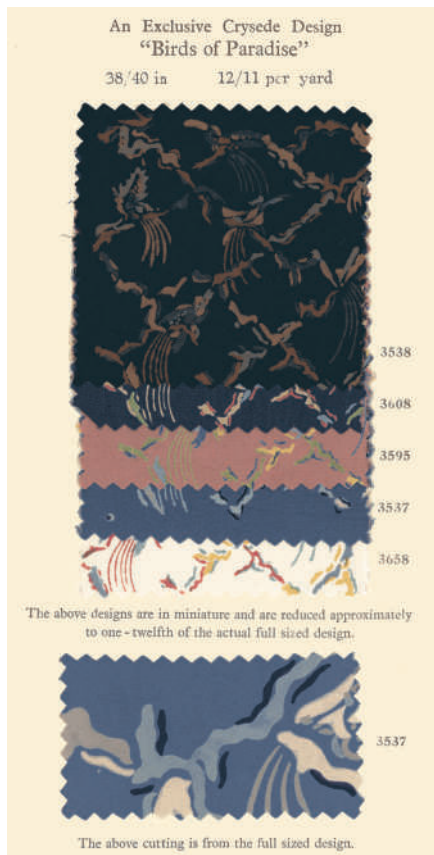
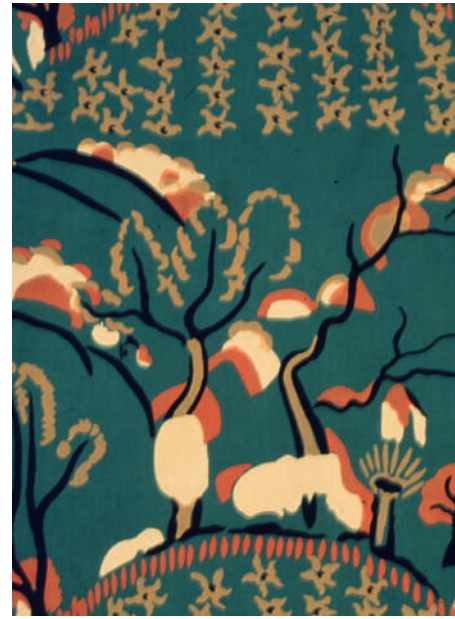
Crysède also played a key role in emancipation; as a major employer in west Cornwall when work was scarce, the company provided generations of young women with valuable dress-making skills. 'They hired women who might otherwise have spent their lives net- and sail-making on low income,' Woolcock points out. 'Many of those who trained in sewing and administration went on to open their own successful draperies or haberdasheries.'

Alas, Crysède's decade of triumph couldn't be sustained. By 1929, Walker had become unhappy due to both the pressure to expand and a fall-out with Heron, and the latter departed to establish his own firm – Cresta Silks – in Welwyn Garden City. It was truly an annus horribilis for Walker, with the break-up of his marriage to Kay followed swiftly by a nervous breakdown. Though he returned briefly to Crysède in the early 1930s, he retired from the firm in 1933. After a series of financial crises and the impact of the approaching war, the company folded in 1939.

Cresta Silks went on to commission a range of dazzling block-printed fabrics from Paul Nash, with Patrick Heron taking the design reins after World War II. And despite Crysède's eventual demise, its legacy remains evident, according to pattern designer and interwar cloth expert Ariana Martin. 'Crysède started a trend for painterly mark-making in textiles,' she says, reeling off a list of contemporary designers that have absorbed the firm's vision: Collier Campbell, Kate Loudoun Shand and Eley Kishimoto among others. Not bad for a company working out of an old Cornish fish factory. *Crysède's fabrics can be seen at Penlee House Gallery & Museum, Penzance. Visit penleehouse.org.uk*



Couturier George Criscuolo fits an evening gown of Crysède silk in St Ives, around 1927. The styles he created – blouses with finely wrought pin tucks, striped pyjamas, casual printed jackets and tennis dresses – were almost as important as the patterns themselves



TOP LEFT AND TOP RIGHT: © PENLEE HOUSE GALLERY & MUSEUM, PENZANCE. BOTTOM LEFT: ROYAL INSTITUTION OF CORNWALL. BOTTOM RIGHT: COURTESY OF THE JOHN BRIGHT COLLECTION AT COSPROP

Top left: in 1927, founder Alec Walker painted 'Men Working in the Violet Fields at Trembath', which was later simplified to become the fabric 'Drift Valley' (top right). Above left: swatch fabric cards, which showed different colourways of the same design at one-twelfth life size, were dispatched to prospective clients. Above right: a Fauve-ish handkerchief design based on an unidentified Cornish beach