

Gingham

When I was given the task of researching the French connection between gingham and Guingamp I must confess I was less than enthusiastic. My petulant protestations were brushed aside by the editors who smiled sweetly and told me to Google it - adding rather insincerely that gingham was just made for radio. Muttering under my breath about the reliability of information on search engines - after all anyone can publish on the net, me for example - I stomped off to my computer. Gingham and I have an uncomfortable relationship, to be perfectly honest I have always loathed the brightly checked fabric.

It all started when I began school. For some reason it was assumed that every mother would be capable of making the three regulation frocks required for the summer term and I was issued with the standard sewing pattern. Didn't seem a problem for my friends, who duly turned up in crisp neat, red gingham dresses - my mother sadly was not a seamstress. Her last job had been making shell cases in a munitions factory, so my dresses were badly made and almost down to my ankles, apparently so that I could grow into them - I didn't!

By the time I started high school she was too busy in the family business to botch another set, so they were bought from the school outfitters - blue this time and with the magical effect of putting a stone in weight on you the minute they went over your head! Even when I had grown out of them the hated fabric turned up in neat squares over the tops of my mother's revolting home-made damson jam - she never took the stones out and even now I can't look at a pot of jam with a gingham lid without wincing at the memory! As if gingham uniforms weren't bad enough, hundreds of gingham dresses appeared on what has to be the most appalling musical film in the history of the world, *Seven Brides for Seven Brothers*. It astounds me that anyone would think it was a good idea to make a musical about the abduction of young girls to be forcibly married to slack jaw mountain men. It might have been made in 1954 but come on - I only have to hear Howard Keel and my blood boils and red gingham dances before my eyes.

Being so biased on the gingham front, I was expecting very little as I started my search for the origins of the fabric, which is dyed before it is woven into those annoying little checks. It turns out however that in Cyberspace, a huge row is being conducted over who invented the fabric. Half the world thinks that it invented it and imported it to the other half and vice versa. Theories abound as to why gingham is so popular and, to my great annoyance, it's all rather interesting.

Put gingham into a search engine and you will immediately see what I mean.

Some sites will tell you that it originated in Northern Italy and should be pronounced "ging gam" which means stripe. In fact every name for gingham, in whatever language, means stripe. Because gingham used to be mainly striped fabric - who knew?! Anyway, other sites will tell you that gingham originates from Malaysia and was exported by the Dutch - now I'm getting worried. Wasn't gingham supposed to come from Guingamp?

Then I found a site focusing on France and, to my surprise, Guingamp claims to have invented gingham - but not for dresses or jam pots. Guingamp manufactured gingham parasols which were hugely popular until the 1940s. Confusingly the gingham in question had no pattern at all. Still, I think Guingamp had the right idea - umbrellas sounds a whole lot more appealing than school uniforms!

Then, as I researched more, I was astonished to find that many other countries claim to have invented gingham - Germany, Japan, India and Africa - to name but a few! I didn't like to say before, but I've always been led to believe that gingham came from Manchester.

In Japan, gingham has a spiritual connection. Green gingham is wrapped round Buddhist statues and placed on the graves of infants. That piece of information did nothing for my gingham paranoia. In Indonesia red gingham represents good and evil - see what I mean!

America's connection with gingham comes from the Shakers. They were migrants from France who migrated to England, some of which then migrated from Manchester to Northern America. Africa on the other hand is ambivalent - some parts of the continent associate gingham with colonialism and British run schools - I know what they mean there - as if they hadn't suffered enough! However, certain African tribes - the Masai for example - claim with good justification that the red checked gingham has been worn by them for thousands of years.

How does gingham crop up in so many cultures? Now it gets really interesting...well it does if you're a geek like me.

In the great gingham debate there are several theories. The first, and most obvious one, is that trade routes have spread the cloth and, more importantly, the design all over the world. Well that kind of explains how it got there, as does migration and colonialism. What it does not explain is why every country that has the wretched fabric lays claim to its original design. Theorists of the social science persuasion talk about cultural ownership - because the fabric design is so popular everyone lays claim to it. Over time each culture attaches their own set of beliefs to it - well that explains the Shakers, the Masai, Japanese Buddhists and, quite frankly, me - but the really interesting theory doesn't come from a fabric historian or a social scientist. It comes from scientists studying the brain.

The theory proposes that gingham is a universal pattern. That is to say sooner or later everyone will come up with this geometric design, and the first Eureka moment in any culture will be in red and white. There is a form of red gingham in every single country in the world. Is it me or has it just got cold in here?

Personally, I feel that a certain Nordic shop and lifestyle magazines have been the chief architects in the modern globalisation of gingham. It's sold as a country lifestyle, harking back to simpler times - yeah and during those times everyone was busy dying of dysentery. However, I am thrilled to report that Guingamp gingham is an umbrella.

Finally, gingham without checks or stripes are not only practical but looks good too - I'm almost warming to it - perhaps I should research musicals. Somehow I fear that my loathing of Howard Keel would only increase. Oh no.