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DESIGN HISTORY AND INSPIRATION:
THREE NEW ZEALAND DESIGNERS OF THE 1970S

Jane Malthus

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WINDOWS TO FASHION DESIGN HISTORY AND INSPIRATION: THREE NEW ZEALAND DESIGNERS OF THE 1970S

Jane Malthus

Fashion designers Kevin Berkahn, Colin Cole and Vinka Lucas were as well known to New Zealanders in the early 1970s as Margarita Robertson, Karen Walker and Kate Sylvester are today. Based in Auckland, they had studios, shops and wholesale fabric businesses, and made ready-to-wear and bespoke clothes and wedding dresses. Entrepreneurial and ambitious, they catered to many, providing glamorous outfits for day and evening events.¹ Mostly self- or on-the-job-educated since there were fewer fashion schools back then, their talent drove them to set up their own studios and businesses. We are lucky that some of their designs survive in the Eden Hore Collection, now owned by the Central Otago District Council. As well as providing a window into fashion, textile and social history of a now distant time, they can illustrate stories of the designers' careers, and the history of textile supply in New Zealand's past.

Kevin Berkahn (c.1939 -) grew up on a dairy farm near Dannevirke in the 1940s, where an aunt, who was a dressmaker, inspired him. He made clothes for his sister and her friends, then moved to Auckland to pursue fashion design. With a growing reputation for special occasion and bridal wear, Berkahn went into business for himself at the end of the 1950s and attracted national attention with his entries in the New Zealand Gown of the Year. He knew the value of such publicity in the days before cell phones and social media.



Figure 1: Kevin Berkahn, dress with velvet bodice,
Swiss lace trim with rhinestones, 1973, EH35.

Photographed at Danseys Pass Hotel, by Derek Henderson,
2024. Model: Alannah Kwant.

Berkahn loved embellishing with beads. In this dress he added the rhinestones around the neckline and sleeve edges.

He also had his eyes firmly on international success. So, in 1971 he organised 'New Zealand's World of Fashion', a travelling fashion show that toured Australia, USA and England with a selection of couture and ready-to-wear clothes by a number of New Zealand designers including himself of course. He even obtained sponsorship from an international airline, Pan Am. The designers included the flamboyant and forthright Vinka Lucas, who was a walking advertisement for her own designs; Barbara Herrick (formerly known as Barbara Penberthy), who sold her fashion under the Babs Radon label; Joan Talbot, whose label was Tarantella; and John West, who made gorgeous suede coats.² Then In 1973, Berkahn established a "swishy salon" in Sydney, in anticipation of the impact that the new opera house would have on Sydney's nightlife. As he remarked at the time, few people in New Zealand would "contemplate buying a long dress made of lace from Switzerland that cost \$97 a yard, but it would sell in Australia".³ He understood his market and tailored his design output accordingly.

He hadn't, however, factored in Eden Hore! Hore, a farmer from the Mānīatoto in Central Otago, was embarking on a new project to display New Zealand designer fashion at his home near Naseby and Danseys Pass and came to Sydney to see a fashion show at the new Sydney Opera House. Berkahn was part of that show because of his salon in Double Bay. Hore purchased four gowns from him, including the Swiss lace one, and he also obtained several that had been part of the World of Fashion tour.

Having got his name and designs into the public arena Berkahn was commissioned by the New Zealand Wool Board to make a wool evening gown for Miss New Zealand 1973 Pam King, to wear overseas when competing in Miss World and Miss Universe. His take on a Greek chiton, with a gored long skirt, sleeveless, empire-line top and plaited girdle, was also eventually bought by Hore for his growing collection.

Vinka Lucas (1932-2020) grew up in Yugoslavia, (now Croatia) attending the Academy of Dress Design in Zagreb. After immigrating to New Zealand in 1951, she established a business, first in Hamilton, then by the end of the 1960s in Auckland, specializing in evening and bridal dress using elaborate fabrics imported from Europe as well as local fabrics. Vinka's husband David Lucas operated the textile side of their business. Vinka sold her designs, which are characterised by exquisite fabrics and trims, to retailers around New Zealand, under a number of labels including Maree de Maru, After Five and Vinka Lucas.

Vinka Lucas' selection of ornate, colourful fabrics set her apart from many of her competitors and made her a favourite with Eden Hore. She was also commissioned by the organisers of the Miss New Zealand pageant to design garments, including a wardrobe for Miss New Zealand 1970 Glenys Treweek to wear for the Miss International contest at the Osaka Expo in Japan.

The Lucas' entrepreneurship saw them set up United Bridal Salons, where they linked up fabric retailers around New Zealand to stock their imported bridal fabrics and patterns that Vinka had designed. Brides could buy pattern and fabric from the retailer then send them to Auckland to be professionally cut out at Vinka's workroom. The bride could then make the dress herself or get a local dressmaker to make it.⁴ This was a time when many people had good sewing skills.

Both Berkahn and Lucas set up companies to import the kinds of fabrics they liked to use, especially for their wedding dress lines, but also for evening wear. New Zealand had restrictive trading rules at the time and tariffs were applied to many imports. In order to protect the country's wool industry, importation and sale of many textiles was controlled by licences. Textile importers and wholesalers represented overseas fabric manufacturers, at that time mostly in Europe, and agents in New Zealand travelled the country with suitcases of samples of French silks, Irish linens, Italian wools, German velvets, and Swiss sequinned or embroidered fabrics. Designers often had first choice of the more expensive or fancy textiles and if they placed an order for a fabric before anyone else, they could get it as an 'exclusive' and be the only designer in the country to use that fabric. With the fabric they would then get the textile manufacturer's labels to sew into the clothes alongside their label.⁵



Figure 2: Vinka Lucas, dress with back panels, in Lurex brocade fabric, beads, early 1970s, EH54.
Photographed at Little Valley Road, Alexandra, by Derek Henderson, 2024. Model: Ngahua Williams.

Because Berkahn and Lucas had their own importing businesses they could travel to the fabric fairs overseas, select fabrics that inspired them, apply for the licences to import them, and pay the tariff of course, but get the kinds of lavish and ornate fabrics they and their clients wanted. Lucas was even commissioned by European textile manufacturers to design and make wedding dresses in forthcoming fabrics for their marketing publications. Those fabrics sold well, apparently.⁶

Colin Cole (1931-87) began his career in clothing design by undertaking a five-year apprenticeship as a cutter-designer with Classic Manufacturing in Auckland and taking sewing and pattern drafting lessons in his own time. He gained further experience in companies specialising in coats, lingerie and children's wear (Poppetwear) before setting up on his own in 1958 in Karangahape Road, making evening and debutante dresses and high-quality daywear. He subsequently moved to Queen Street, for a short time producing larger ranges of his styles, then on to Parnell as it was revitalised. In 1961 he won a Golden Shears award. He established a reputation as one of New Zealand's leading high fashion designers in the 1960s, always producing one-off designs rather than ready-to-wear, and women travelled from all over the country to his studio for orders and fittings.⁷

In 1975, Colin Cole diversified slightly as the market changed, moving into larger business premises in Parnell and advertising to manufacturers as a design consultant and pattern maker. He had also just designed new uniforms for NZ Railways. Deauville International was one company that contracted Colin Cole to design for their three ranges as part of a four-person team. The team designed for the labels 'Deauville International', 'dile' and 'Lady Lana'.⁸ In the 1980s Cole sent a range of fifty outfits to a salon in Muscat, Oman.

Spectacular quality fabrics appealed to Colin Cole. A 1973-4 Colin Cole evening dress in a sheer synthetic fabric printed with large floral motifs in apricot, green, blue, brown and purple, which are outlined with couched apricot and gold thread is a highlight of the Eden Hore Collection. The dress has a long straight skirt attached to a wide waistband, with an apron bib bodice. The yoke and dolman sleeves are cut from a plain apricot satin. All those elements were popular aspects of 1970s fashion incorporated into hippie looks as well as high fashion.

These three designers followed their dreams of working in the world of fashion design. Yes, it was a very different time: technology, labour markets, fabric supply, and retailing have changed markedly since then; but they can still provide inspiration. Confident of their abilities, they still took risks in setting up independent businesses. They worked hard with their small teams to make those businesses survive, and when or if they didn't, they regrouped and started again. Berkahn went bankrupt more than once in his long career, and Cole moved into contract design when fashion and the times changed so dramatically in the 1970s. Berkahn expanded into Australia for a time and Cole and Lucas looked to the Middle East for customers for their lavish designs in the late 1970s and 1980s. Although Berkahn and Cole's businesses no longer exist, Lucas's wedding dress design business is now successfully run by her daughter, Anita Turner. Fashion design may have very different foci now, especially in sustainability, cultural diversity, and the virtual world, but finding outlets for one's creativity is a constant, no matter how it is achieved. Take heart from some who came before and make it work for you. For further information on these and other important 1970s and 80s New Zealand fashion designers consult Jane Malthus, Claire Regnault and Derek Henderson, *Central Otago Couture: the Eden Hore Collection*, Wellington: Te Papa Press, 2025.



Figure 3: Colin Cole, dress in sheer organza with couched gold braid, and satin, 1973, EH88. Photographed at Strode Road Orchard, Earnscleugh, by Derek Henderson, 2024. Model: Ngahuia Williams.

Dr Jane Malthus (ORCID ID: <https://orcid.org/0000-0001-9075-8197>) is an independent dress historian and curator; honorary curator at Otago Museum for their dress collection; on the board of iD Dunedin Fashion, and U3A Dunedin; a member of the Steering Group for Eden Hore Central Otago, the Costume and Textiles Association of New Zealand, The Costume Society UK, and the Costume Society of America.

- 1 For examples of their public profiles see: Kevin Berkahn with Maggie Blake, *Berkahn Fashion Designer*, (Auckland: Harper Collins, 1999); 'Do you get fun from your clothes?' *New Zealand Women's Weekly*, 14 September 1959, p17; 'Grand style fashions for the wee small hours', *Thursday*, July 9 1970: 7-15, includes fashions by Kevin Berkahn and Colin Cole. *New Zealand Women's Weekly*, March 25, 1974: 32, refers to a world tour by Vinka Lucas.
- 2 'Fashion for export: Kevin Berkahn's New Zealand world of fashion show', *Eve*, November 1971: 8.
- 3 Kevin Berkahn, interview by Jane Malthus, Auckland, 14 January 2016.
- 4 Vinka Lucas Designer Collection Haute Couture booklet, Te Papa Archives; *New Zealand Bride and Home Annual*, vol. 3, 1966-7, and No. 4 c.1968, unpaginated.
- 5 Trevor Hookway and John Kite, interview by Jane Malthus, Auckland, 15 November 2023.
- 6 'New Zealand fashion first beats Europe by months', *New Zealand Women's Weekly*, 29 November 1971: 24-25.
- 7 Colin Cole, New Zealand Fashion Museum website, <https://www.nzfashionmuseum.org.nz/colin-cole/> accessed January 2024.
- 8 *Apparel*, vol. 8 no. 9, (September 1976): 16.