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Dress

RISD Museum

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I'm Kate Irvin, Curator in the Costume and Textiles Department at the RISD Museum, and today we are looking at a Liberty print dress designed by the Japanese maker Junya Watanabe.

This is a dress that's made out of a very supple and actually pretty luxurious printed cotton fabric—yards of it that are overwrapped in a very complicated way around the body.

It's a Liberty of London fabric. It's from Liberty's tana lawn line, which was introduced in 1920 by Liberty of London, and it's named for Lake Tana in the Sudan. Whether he actually made that connection to the Sudan is an interesting conversation from my perspective as a curator. Because this dress really is all about the connections via trade, and the various sources of inspiration that we see in fashion: historically and in contemporary fashion today.

The Liberty fabric itself is referencing 17th and 18th century Indian chintzes, which were printed fabrics that came from India and were marketed to the west, to England in particular. Liberty of London in the late 19th century was looking at fabrics such as this for their own inspiration, and here we have a printed cotton fabric that was made by Liberty of London—but made by Liberty of London in Japan specifically for Junya Watanabe.

We see the designer really playing with that certain notions that we might have, and playing with history. I think that's really one of his ultimate aims: to insert history into his visual narrative but in very unexpected ways.

My name is Pradeep Sharma; I've been the Dean of Architecture and Design at Rhode Island School of Design and oversee a number of departments including Fashion and Industrial Design. The object we're looking at is a Junya Watanabe dress in a Liberty fabric, and it shows a collaboration between two very distinct styles of working: one is very much about shape and form and cut; and one is very much about surface pattern. So these elements combine to make a very layered object, one that shows how you can layer many, many stories and narratives into one garment.

The ruffled nature hides some of the shape, but it also exaggerates some of the shaping—around the bustline in particular, around the neck. As it comes down, you can see elements of body. And when you get to the legs, just on the left-hand side, there's a real sort of pulling together. There's a lot of fabric in this and it really gives it the shape.

I think it's a lesson for students—you could take a Liberty fabric and just do something ordinary with it, you could take the silhouette and just do something ordinary with it, but he's combined it and really put layers and layers—literally layers and layers—of material as well as history in that garment.