

## Globalisation and the Work of South African Textile Designers<sup>1</sup>

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### **ABSTRACT**

The work of South African textile designers has changed significantly over the last thirty years. Thirty years ago textile designers in the home sector market were recognised as skilled, professional workers. Primarily employed by large textile manufacturers, they were formally qualified, worked in large design studios, and had control over their work and creativity. Designing by hand, their creative abilities were recognised in the industry and they were accorded due status and respect. From the late 1980s / early 1990s technological changes began to undermine some designers' autonomy and control but there was still acceptance that those designing for the home/furnishing market were an elite and that the new technologies were not suitable for their type of work. But from the mid-1990s South Africa, and in particular the textile industry, began to integrate rapidly into the global markets.

This paper examines the impact of this globalisation on the work of South African home textile designers. It argues that the way in which the global integration of the textile supply chain has happened in South Africa has facilitated dramatic changes in the work of textile designers. As a consequence textile designers do not enjoy the status, autonomy and control of their work that was previously evident. Furthermore, the paper suggests, that just as the new technologies have played a key role in enabling the development of the global supply chain, so they have also allowed and even facilitated this marginalisation. The paper thus opens up a new area for discussion and draws attention to a different dimension of globalisation in impacting on the work of a particular profession.

The research is based on a qualitative methodology. Utilising snowball sampling, in-depth interviews have been conducted with South African textile designers and other key informants in the supply chain.

### **Keywords:**

### **Introduction**

This paper explores the work of South African textile designers in the home textile sub-sector. It suggests that as a result of the global integration of the home textile supply chain as well as new technologies the work of textile designers has changed substantially. Their status as creative, professional workers has been undermined and few have the same autonomy and control over their work as they once did.

The paper begins by providing an historical overview of South African home textiles. It goes on to discuss the way in which the sector has globalised, the dynamics of change that lie behind that process as well as the impact on the local industry. It then explores the way in which these 'new' dynamics affect the work of textile designers. It shows the ways in which the globalisation of the supply chain has 'dumbed' down the work of designers and pushed them into new labour market locations. A further dynamic that is examined is the role of technology in facilitating this process.

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### South African home textile industry

The South African textile industry began to develop in the late 19<sup>th</sup> century. Its beginnings were in blanket manufacturing with the first factories located in the Eastern Cape (Bezuidenhout et al., 2002, Maree, 1995). After World War II textiles developed in the area of furnishings, industrial textiles and clothing, and then, in the 1960s, synthetic fibres (Roberts and Thoburn, 2003: 8).

From the beginning state support was key to the rapid growth and development of the South African textile industry. This support came in two forms. Firstly, financial support provided through the Industrial Development Corporation; and secondly, the state provided support through protection (Maree, 1995: 22-23). As Maree (1995: 25) informs us, while the industry grew rapidly until the end of the 1960s, this was in the shade of government protection that included 'both tariffs and quantitative import controls'. The consequence of which was that the industry was not necessarily 'economically efficient nor internationally competitive'.

Historically the South Africa textile industry has been vertically integrated – meaning that manufacturing covered the full range from the different sources of fibre to the various finished products. In many firms there was vertical integration of these operations within the firm or factory itself. Products were wide-ranging and complex in their production. These included carpets, industrial textiles (for the motor vehicle sector, mining and construction industries), apparel, household textiles and furnishings and others. To cite (Roberts and Thoburn, 2003: 10), aside from the product output, there were two main production 'pipelines' within the industry.

The first pipeline is from the production of yarn (spinning), through weaving and finishing (including dyeing and printing). The second pipeline involves the knitting of yarn into fabric for production of finished goods.

The largest proportion of value added products were found in the spinning, weaving and finishing of textiles – much of which came from the processing of vegetable fibre (mainly cotton). Within the production of made-up textiles the largest sub-category was blankets and furnishings.

Unlike the Apparel Sector which traditionally bought or copied its designs, the furnishing sector invested a lot in product development. Much of the product produced in South African mills were designs printed on a base cloth (usually cotton-based) often manufactured in that particular mill. Printed designs were the mainstay of the South African textile industry. All the mills which printed cloth had design capacity and employed a large number of designers who did the creative work. While the main studios were often located near the mill they also had smaller studios in all the other major cities.

*"...going back to the 80s and 90s, where we had the big studio and in those days capable of printing approximately 300,000 metres a week, which was over a million metres a month, and it was never really a problem to fill the printing capacity, because it was all local. To print those kinds of metres you have to draw a lot of designs. For a lot of designs you needed a lot of designers. A lot of skills were required and everything was manual or hand-painted."*  
(Interview, Solly Brand, CEO in a division of a large textile mill, 23 August 2011)

The situation has since changed. There has been major restructuring in the textile industry with a number of mills now focusing on one aspect of the pipeline or even closing down. Employment has fallen dramatically particularly in the spinning, weaving and finishing sections. From large vertically integrated firms, we now have a landscape of smaller and more specialised companies. Designers have been affected by these developments as the studios attached to the mills have also closed or dramatically reduced their staff (for example from 25-30 designers to 2 or 3).

I argue that there are three dynamics responsible for this situation. Firstly, there have been changes in the macroeconomic policy of the South African government which resulted in a reduction in tariff protection of the local industry. Secondly, there were changes in the traditional distribution channels. And thirdly, there has been a shift from a production to retail-driven supply chain. All of these factors are closely linked to each other and part of the broader global integration of the South African textile sector since 1994. They are mutually reinforcing and connected and all need to be seen as integral to the changes in the fortunes and structure of the local industry. Prioritising one factor over the other would present a skewed understanding.

In the post-94 period government policy was to open the South African economy to the global economy (Truett and Truett, 2008). The textile industry saw a rapid reduction of tariff protection at a much faster rate than required by World Trade Organisation Agreements. Not only was it possible for suppliers to source product, particularly basic commodities, more cheaply abroad, but they were able to bring in a variety of products that were not manufactured in South Africa. Imports increased from 27 percent of sales in 1990 to 37 percent by 2001 (Jenkins, 2007: 617). The availability of product at lower prices put manufacturers under enormous pressure to the point where they could not compete. The CEO of one of the few remaining mills explained the problem he faced in one area of production.

*“Late 90’s they started with ready-made curtains and that really has gained momentum. ... that would have grown from 10% of the market to 60% of the market in a 10 year period. In volume terms, it’s much bigger you know. ... we rode that wave for a time when we got our wide width Jacquards, which gave us an advantage to be able to make ready-made curtains, We developed ready-made Jacquard curtaining, ... and so we had a price advantage, but every time we had an increase [in our costs<sup>2</sup>] our price became more and more expensive against the alternative and we were continuously under pressure from the retailer to reduce our prices. So we deconstructed and change the product, ... Deconstructed the product to make it cheaper, and cheaper to a point where we had nowhere to go from a price point of view and at that price, they were unable to commit to volumes and as we lost the volumes, ... we weren’t able to recover our costs, to run our wide production facility. So by virtue of the volumes, we were unable to continue making the product. Then we took a decision to cease production and retrench those people. So that’s really what happens. You get squeezed out of the market, by virtue of price and you are unable to maintain volumes and you are unable to recover your costs. If you are unable to recover your costs, you either close down or restructure, it’s that simple.” (Interview, Kevin Downes, 7 June 2011)*

Secondly, there were changes in the traditional distribution channels. Historically there had been two outlets for home textiles. On the one hand, at the lower end of the market, were the independent retail stores who purchased ‘piece goods’ from the wholesalers. These were fifty metre lengths of fabric and the retailer then sold on smaller lengths of fabric to their customers. On the other hand, at the high end, was the wholesale market. Converting product that they commissioned from the mills, they sold to decorators and decorator-type shops but they also sold to the independent retailers. While the wholesalers might have controlled the supply chain the independent retailers were an important customer, purchasing 60-80 percent of a print-run. The reduction in tariffs provided opportunity for local independent retailers to source products globally. Banding together in order to be able to purchase volume, they sourced product directly from international suppliers, cutting out the middle-person (the wholesaler) they so were able to sell more competitively. As a large part of their market eroded, wholesalers began to convert fewer ranges, meaning less custom for the mills (and less work for the designers), and they also began to

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<sup>2</sup> In particular he mentioned the cost of utilities, indicating that they were a bigger proportion of the cost than wages. Another mill CEO mentioned that it wasn’t so much the labour wage bill but the salaried wage bill that constituted a large portion of their costs.

look to the international market to expand the range of their own products. A second change occurred in distribution channels in the early 2000s when many of the major retail chains began to open 'brands' or divisions that focused on homeware products including ready-made curtains and bedding. The volume of goods required by the major retailers gave them enormous buying power and allowed them to determine the price structure. If local manufacturers could not meet those price points they sourced product abroad. Capturing the ready-made market they soon forced most of the independent retailers out of the market, eroding the market share of the wholesalers even further.

Thirdly has been a shift, in the last ten years, from a production driven to retail driven supply chain. With their purchasing power retail now drives the purchasing and thus the manufacturing process. Alongside this have been changes in the way the market views home textiles. Three or four decades ago fashion and home textiles were seen differently by the market. Home textiles had a longer 'shelf life' and fabrics were manufactured with at least a three-year life span in mind. There were time lags between northern and southern markets, with northern trends taking a year-or-so to penetrate southern markets. The primary product was fabric on the roll. In the last ten years this approach has been turned upside down. There has been a convergence of fashion and home textiles in terms of trends and approach. Home textiles are now viewed as seasonal and 'throw-away', and the time-lag between fashion and home has all but disappeared (Interviews Jane Moss, 12 April 2011 and Robert Hardy, 12 April 2011). South Africa has three seasons and the colour and look of the designs must be appropriate to the season.<sup>3</sup> One of the consequences has been an increased demand for design to meet the need to continually have fresh product in-store. There is also a need, as the season develops, to respond to the market in terms of product. 'Speed-to-market' has replaced 'economies of scale' in all aspects of the production chain including design. In terms of product ready-makes now dominate the market in bedding, curtaining and soft furnishings. Designs are not confined to textiles but co-ordinate with 'other surfaces', for example kitchenware, wall art and bathroom accessories.

The king-pins in the retail-driven value chain are the buyers. They will research the upcoming trends through visiting trade fairs and making overseas 'scouting' trips to inform themselves of the upcoming trends. Some retailers call in trend consultants to brief them, there are also subscription-based trend websites that they consult. Once buyers have established the trends they meet with their suppliers and brief them as to what they are looking for, as well as review material presented by the suppliers. Most importantly they inform the suppliers about the price points. At this point the buyer might inform the suppliers about designs that they have seen that they wish the suppliers to purchase or the suppliers might have sourced designs to show the buyers. Once agreement has been reached the suppliers initiate the process of manufacturing, liaising with mills usually in Pakistan, India or Asia depending on the product and price. It is more than likely that the different components of the product, fibres, fabric, dyeing, printing, finishing are carried out in different locations. There are commission printers in the South Africa, and sometimes product will be printed there but even when this is the case the base cloth is imported. Price points determine whether product is imported as ready-mades or components are imported and the CMT is done in South Africa.

A major consequence of these developments has been a spatial change in the organisation of production. Historically, in South Africa, most of the production involved in the output of a textile product happened on one site, in one place. Now aspects of the pipeline are dispersed to different

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<sup>3</sup> Within each season there are different trends, for example romantic, ethnic, contemporary. Throughout a season retailers bring new product into the stores that are within the season and trend but different to what was in the store the previous week.

parts of the world. The question we now turn to is then how have all these changes impacted on, and, changed the work of textile designers.

### **Textile designers, new technologies and globalisation**

In South Africa thirty years ago most textile designers were employed by large textile manufacturers. All the mills had design studios and in their heyday employed upwards of twenty designers each. Textile designers in the home sector market were recognised as skilled, professional workers. Most designers were professionally trained holding Diplomas in Textile Design from tertiary institutions.

The world of work for designers, even more so in mills supplying the higher end of the market, was one where they controlled both time and process. The less experienced or skilled designers were given a fairly tight brief by the studio manager or product manager. But the more experienced designers were given a 'concept' or brief and it would be up to them to interpret it. Designing and painting by hand, their creative abilities were recognised in the industry. They would draw out and paint the design, put it into repeat. In some cases they were required to paint the different colourways. There was an accepted understanding that they were creative professionals and were not 'controlled' and monitored as in other labour processes. They did not have to 'clock' in as did many of the mill employees and could leave and return to the workplace in order to research, find inspiration and 'feed' the creative process (Interview Paul , 1 March 2011).

There was an emphasis on training in the industry. Every year the top mills (in term of the creative reputation of the designers) took in the top graduating students. They were not expected to be immediately productive. It was acknowledged that they needed to be trained further in the studio learning about the market and its constraints, textile production and the mill environment.

*"... in fact the general thinking in those days was that a designer was not productive for the first three years of their design life. And they were prepared to put up with that. The first three years cost them money. That is an investment in skills in the industry" (Interview, Gill, February 2009).*

What differentiated the work of designers was their skill and creativity. Those who were less creative or skilled were given more mundane work like painting colour-ways or designs for the lower-end of the market. But those who were good were recognised and feted. They attended the launch of ranges they had designed and were applauded by those in the industry.

From the late 1980s through the 1990s there were a number of technical changes to the design labour process that impacted on the work of designers. Technological innovations and changes in both printing technology and design escalated from the mid-80s onwards. These technological changes were a double edged sword. On the one hand, some of them opened up new design possibilities and extended the creative envelope. But, on the other hand, they allowed managers to demand that designers work faster and more in-tune with the market. But more crucially, these technologies broke into the bank of knowledge and skill held by the designer. As will be demonstrated this had huge implications for the labour process and the job security of designers.

The first significant development was the wide-spread introduction of the Photostat machine. This heralded the changes that were to follow. Instead of pain-stakingly drawing the repeats it was now possible for the designers to photocopy their drawings and work out the repeats more easily and quickly, albeit in a rough manner (Interview, Serena, 18 February 2011).

Around this time there were refinements in printing technology<sup>4</sup> which allowed for greater tonal definitions in the designs. This enabled the designers to utilise a wider range of materials and mediums in their designs. No longer were designers only restricted to gauche paint; they could now use pastels, crayons, watercolours and other mediums to draw and paint their designs. The upgraded rotary screen printers were capable of picking up these more subtle marks and textures. Photostat machines were also used to photocopy 'new' 3D design elements eg nuts or scrunched paper and then incorporate those elements into the design.

The use of photocopy machines in the design labour process was followed by scanners and the first generation of the CAD software in the late 1980s and early 1990s. The changes here were incremental. The first CAD systems were basic and produced very 'stiff' designs.<sup>5</sup> Besides the 'stiffness' it was impossible to create the painterly feel of hand-painted designs. Where they were utilised, and many SA mills only began to invest in this technology in the mid-90s, they were not used for home/furnishing designs, or they were used for colouration and not design. Designers would hand-draw and paint the basic design elements before using CAD to put the design into repeat (always a very time-consuming process). However, as the technology developed, becoming more sophisticated, so the design process shifted more towards CAD. While hand-painted designs were easily superior to that produced by early CAD technologies, the technologies have advanced dramatically in the last ten years. Most of those working in any sort of design capacity today utilise CAD to a greater rather than lesser degree.

Designers trained in the 1970s or early-mid 1980s did not have CAD skills. Some of the mills offered designers the opportunity to learn CAD. Alongside CAD innovations was the development and use of inkjet printers. These technologies had an enormous impact on the design labour process both allowing for the speeding up of the design process. Robyn<sup>6</sup> explained the consequences for the design process.

*"CAD was probably the biggest change. We had the CAD system for about the last twenty years. All the systems were upgraded and designers given the chance of training. We got new software coming in all the time. The changes were the combination of CAD and the inkjets. A lot of designing was with our inkjet machines. You could play around with ideas on CAD and then print it out. We found that people would rather see an artwork on a piece of fabric, rather than on paper. ... [Inkjets] It enabled us to get the strike-offs quickly. We could get a print sample almost immediately. If we had to set up the machines we would wait one-to-two weeks before we got a strike-off, but with the inkjet we could get it in an hour."*  
(Interview Robyn)

The speed at which strike-offs could now be produced gave the studios a competitive edge, it also facilitated the lowering of fixed costs, as Gill indicated.

*"I can show somebody a design on paper that is in the wrong colours and they say no I don't like it. And I can separate it, colour it and print it on inkjet and they will say that is beautiful why haven't you shown me that?"*

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<sup>4</sup> The number of pixels in a roller were increased, becoming smaller and closer together (ie the 'hole' through which the dye is pushed). This allowed for greater sensitivity in the design, ensuring the textures would be reproduced during the printing process.

<sup>5</sup> Interestingly CAD was adopted by apparel designers (and of course graphics) long before it became used and accepted by SA home textile designers.

<sup>6</sup> Robyn trained as a textile designer and came to work at Frame. After working as a designer for eight years she became a product manager at Frame. She was there for twenty-six years and when Frame closed its printing department in 2009 she was retrenched. She moved to Mooi River Textiles (at that time part of the Da Gama Group) producing ready-mades for the retail department. She left after two years and is now out of the design/creative home textiles side altogether, working for a company that supplies ready-made lingerie (produced in China and Vietnam) direct to the retail trade.

In addition to design and colouration, CAD technologies also allow for the separation of the design on computer. This removed one job from the development of product as separators became unnecessary. And it increased the speed of product development.

A further technological development was the widespread introduction of 'pantones'. In a nutshell pantones are a standardised colour matching system. Instead of the colourist of old, mixing the colours and creating the recipes, often only utilising the primary colours, pantones linked to CAD design systems allowed the designer to select the pantone from among 3000 registered colours.<sup>7</sup> It also allows the production team to exactly match that colour when printing. Not only did pantones facilitate a faster work-rate, instead of painstakingly mixing and matching colours the pantones would do it at the press of a button, it also substituted for the skill and knowledge of the designer and colourist.

A more recent evolution has been the development of on-line reference material. These subscription-only websites (an example is WGSN- Home Build Life) provide designers with reference material; information on trends, colour, product, textile shows, retail stores etc. The information available is wide-ranging and cost is huge.<sup>8</sup> In addition there are the subscription-based websites full of design elements. This allows the CAD designer to cut and paste design elements from these websites into their design. Consulting the on-line trend manuals they would colour them with pantones to fit with the latest colour and fashion trends. "Design made easy. Design for idiots basically." (Interview, Sally) as one designer commented.

These technological developments, spread over the last twenty years, have had a far-reaching impact on the way in which designers do their work. The implications for the design labour process being revolutionary.

Firstly there has been the imperative to work faster. As indicated when many of these designers started work in the 1970s there was an understanding that design was a creative process. Both management and designers agreed that good design took time and designers were given that time. Technological developments enabled the mills to demand that designers produce faster in order to facilitate their need to be more competitive and profitable. Even before many of the more innovative technological developments management began to demand that designers work faster. Robyn explained that when she became the Frame product manager she reduced the turn-around time for household designs from one month to two weeks. Photostat machines, scanners, and CAD allowed designers to work even faster and enabled management and suppliers to demand such. These demands have changed the work environment into a much more pressurised work space.

*"My customers, they are like very tight, if they give you a brief and they want it, like overnight, so everything is like very fast and high pressured and you have got to have very broad shoulders to deal with the pressure that they demand. So you get given a brief and say they want it Friday, on Wednesday they will be saying to you, I want it now, give it to me and like screaming and shouting, so you have got to learn to work like very fast and efficient, all the time."* (Interview, Tricia)<sup>9</sup>

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<sup>7</sup> Pantones are the copyright of a US company called Pantone Inc. Companies need to purchase / subscribe to Pantones in order to access the software that make the colour-codes available to them. Costs vary according to the package.

<sup>8</sup> According to my information the annual subscription per user for Home Life Build is £6,200.

<sup>9</sup> Tricia studied Textile Design and Durban Institute of Technology. She graduated in October 2005 and immediately started work as a runner for an apparel supplier, She was asked to join the graduate programme of a large retail company and started there at the beginning of 2006, later she become an assistant buyer

Secondly, the new technologies have had an impact on the designers' skill and knowledge. As always the concept of skill doesn't exist outside of a social context. On the one hand CAD has required a different set of skills to those of the designer doing hand-drawn and painted designs. Nevertheless, most of those interviewed do talk about a loss of skill, they say that the most basic skill required by and designer is the ability to draw and many designers are no longer able to draw. Furthermore, there has been a blurring of 'design' boundaries and graphic designers who might have CAD skills but little technical knowledge of design ie repeats, the ability to create a design that is aesthetically pleasing and follows the principals of good design; and, the knowledge to mix colour, are being employed as textile designers.

However, it does need to be recognised that CAD-design can be a broad brushstroke. At the one end of the scale are the very expensive and sophisticated systems used by international design houses (eg apple-based AVA software aimed specifically at the decorative and textile industry). In the hands of a trained designer they are more likely to be able to produce good design (faster). On the other end, are the much blunter one-size fits all systems (eg Photoshop or Illustrator). Many designers (Interviews, Devi, Sally, Caroline) point out that at the lower end of the market you frequently don't find technically trained designers any longer but 'technicians'. Utilising website design elements and pantones they create design through cut and paste. As such these technologies work to deskill or replace the designer and colourist. They are no-longer necessary to the development of product, particularly for more simple designs with fewer, flatter colours destined for the bottom end of the market.

These technologies also facilitated a shift in the job profile of the designer. No longer was it necessary for a company to have a designer who had the skills to design product from a concept through to production. While many still insist that drawing is the most important skill a designer needs, many of the 'new' CAD designers no longer have drawing and painting skills. Furthermore, many designers use these new technologies to 'rework' old designs. Using CAD, existing designs are re-coloured so that they are modern and up-to-date with the latest trends, or they are reworked so as to avoid copyright issues. This allows for a lowering of costs as 'new' designs can be produced faster and by those who are not trained designers.

### **Globalisation and technology – the double wammy**

The question that I will now address is how have these two processes – the globalisation of the supply chain and new technologies worked together to affect the work of textile designers. The globalisation of the home textile supply chain and the resulting closure of mills in South Africa resulted in many designers being displaced from the traditional labour market. Not only did this process eventually result in job losses but it also forced changes in the work of designers. The new technologies enabled and facilitated those changes.

Firstly, the change in the distribution channels which resulted in the increasing import of product by the independent retailers and other suppliers resulted in the wholesalers converting fewer ranges. Not did this immediately put pressure on price and contracted the mills market but for designers the demand for the work decreased.

*"... [name of a local wholesaler / convertor] got 90% of his product locally. From Whiteheads, built up a really good design collection, had a reputation for design etc, but his business now is purely imports. He brings in a huge amount of fabric and he is a wholesale distributor. He doesn't print the ranges anymore. What he brings in is specific commodity*

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within one of their subsidiary companies. In 2008 she moved back into design and found employment as a textile designer in a large towelling manufacturing company.



*type stuff, like high-end commodity type stuff. He used to have five ranges at one time.”*  
(Interview, Kevin Downes, 7 June 2011)

By the turn of the century South African retailers were beginning to source product off-shore, particularly looking to Pakistan for printed product. Not only did South African mills have to compete globally but the designers they employed were also, indirectly, competing globally as well.

*“A lot of the customers were then buying [designs] directly or through agents. In terms of the design it was obviously more important for them and cheaper to buy off shore. So they would purchase art-work and give it directly to the mills in Pakistan and they would produce it over there. So we didn’t get as many orders.”*  
(Interview, Susan Robbins, 26 May 2011).

A further new development was that clients began providing the designs or informing the product managers that they should purchase a particular design. The mill designers would be required to ‘tweak’ the provided design according to the clients wishes.

*“The clients now started to give you designs. They became cleverer and more proficient, whereas we used to feed them all the time, now suddenly they were feeding you.”* (Interview, Sylvia Holland, 25 February 2011)

The designers’ work became less creative as they began to work primarily with existing designs. The design teams in the mills began to assume the role of suppliers to retail.

All of these changes and dynamics resulted in the mills losing business. From the mid-late 1990s they started to cut back on the size of their studios. Designers who left were not replaced. Many mills found their vertically integrated structure unsustainable and closed or sold off sections. Many, many other mills have closed down. As a result by the late 2000s the labour market for textile designers had shrunk. Many designers found themselves unemployed. But for those who remain in the business the work they do as well as their labour market location has changed substantially.

Many designers are now employed by the various suppliers to retail. Their work is quite different to what it used to be in the mill studios. They work according to the needs of retail; they are given tight briefs around existing design (sometimes a design but more often a product like a piece of fabric, wrapping paper etc). This involves adjusting the design to firstly, meet the ‘tastes’ of the South African market in terms of colour, sophistication etc, and, secondly, to meet the retailers price point, i.e. deconstructing the fabric and then locating a cheaper base cloth, reducing the number of colours in the design, etc.

The mills that remain outsource much of their manufacturing to Asia and all their printing is done off-shore (there is one exception). They import product either making it up themselves or outsourcing to CMT’s locally. They employ one or two designers and offer design facilities to their customers (primarily large South African retail chains). The designers indicated that the way they work is very different from the way they used to work. There is little creativity and their task is to carry out the instructions of the converters and ensure the designs supplied are Nedgraphics<sup>10</sup> ready (Interviews, Sally Wilson, 23 August 2011). As the CEO of one of the few remaining print mills explained:

*“... We have a different calibre of designers today, who doesn’t have to be the interpreter, the originator, innovator. They really have to copy what they are told or given to make.”*  
(Interview, Solly Brand, 23 August 2011)

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<sup>10</sup> Nedgraphics is a CAD system specifically developed for home textiles. It is one of the big two, but many see it as not as good as the AVA system that is more often used internationally.

The new technologies have facilitated these changes. FTP have allowed designs to be sent all over the world, the colour separation already done, the colours specified by the pan-tones.

*... you know with modern technology, you are able to design – a designer is able to put a design together relatively easy, email that information across to a CAD station in China or Pakistan and they can print that design, you know, very quickly, and they can add their product on the shelves. Probably two or three weeks longer in the pipeline, than if it was made locally, but when you take into account the price advantage, there is – and a bit of planning, its easily overcome. (Interview, Kevin Downes, 7 June 2011).*

A third area where designers now find employment is in retail. One of the largest retail chains has invested significantly in design. But interesting they are more likely to employ graphic designers than those specifically trained and skilled in textile.

*“... they produce all their own designs, on computer, send the disc to whoever is going to be doing the job. You get the buyers that are doing the travelling and bringing the trends back. Then the design studio is interpreting those trends under very strict parameters. Those buyers say these are the colours for summer. When you design you will design according to these colours and this trend. So they are absolutely controlling their own creative environment.” (Interview, Gill<sup>11</sup>, February 2009).*

Some designers called those who work in retail ‘art workers’ rather than designers. In doing so they distinguish between those who work contains a creative element and those who work with existing design changing colour and managing the technical aspects.

## Conclusion

This paper argues that the way in which the global integration of the textile supply chain has happened in South Africa has facilitated dramatic changes in the work of textile designers. As a consequence textile designers do not enjoy the status, autonomy and control of their work that was previously evident. Furthermore, the paper suggests, that just as the new technologies have played a key role in enabling the development of the global supply chain, so they have also allowed and even facilitated this marginalisation.

In South Africa textile design work is no longer seen as the exclusive preserve of those with a formal qualification in textile design and years of industry knowledge and training. The outcome of the shifts and changes discussed in this paper is that it being seen as something that can be done by many people even if they don’t have the technical knowledge of design. Consequences in a labour market where many designers lost their jobs as a result of mill closures, their skills are no longer recognised as their exclusive preserve.

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<sup>11</sup> Gill trained as a textile designer and worked for many years in South African mills. She has also worked abroad as a designer and colourist. Using local designers she currently supplies soft furnishings to retail,

