

St KILDA

Queen of the Waves



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A TRIBUTE TO A HEROINE BY

ALICE & JADE STARMORE





Our aim ...

... to celebrate the heroic lives of all the women of St Kilda, real and legendary, with spectacular costumes made in wool – the same medium through which they expressed their own creativity.

This wearable art has been designed to match the visual drama and intensity of their island home.

The costumes embody all aspects of their lives and legends, lived out in intimacy with their rugged surroundings





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St KILDA

Forty miles west of the Outer Hebrides lie the remnants of a massive volcano that was active about 55 million years ago. Parts of its circular crater rim are submerged beneath the Atlantic Ocean but some parts rear skywards, forming the highest sea cliffs in Scotland. This collection of spectacular, rugged islands is called St Kilda; at its centre, beneath sixty metres of ocean, lies the core of the volcanic crater. This area of sea, midway between Hirta and Boreray, is called An Linne.





Historical Perspective

One has to be a very good sailor to get to St Kilda, unless a rare calm spell quells the Atlantic for long enough. Even a fair wind makes for a rough crossing and there is always the possibility of not being able to make it to shore. Village Bay is the only safe haven but the wind direction and ocean swell often make it too dangerous to land there. Despite this, human habitation on St Kilda spans at least four thousand years. For generations survival depended on the ability to scale its massive perpendicular cliffs to hunt for birds and eggs. Islanders were born to it and even young girls travelled the archipelago. With the help of their menfolk they leapt from small boats onto tiny rocky ledges and then, with their basic necessities in their bags, they used hand and toe holds to scale the sheer stacs and cliffs of Boreray, Soay and Dùn to harvest food. The necessities included a smouldering turf, carried in an iron kettle which one girl had to carry in a basket on her back. Those girls faced the hazards of ocean and cliff with caution and courage in equal measure for they lived at the extreme knife edge of possibility. Any visitor faced with the reality of the enormous jagged cliffs, rising out of the heaving ocean, can only be humbled by their ability to make this truly awesome place their daily working environment.







The Queen of the Waves is one of those girls who grew to womanhood. I see her as a legendary heroine who represents all the women of St Kilda and so my ideas for the Queen of the Waves collection are based upon the ocean, which they looked upon as a resource and a means of travelling onwards with courage and hope, which they had to do when dire necessity forced the entire population to abandon St Kilda in 1930.

Our Queen of the Waves would have frequently looked like a bird herself, covered in plumage from her toil at feather plucking and, most spectacularly, wearing shoes of gannet-necks. She would have been profoundly aware that her life would change on leaving her beloved home and that the last sight she would see of it would be of thousands of elegant Solan Geese (Sulaire), wheeling spectacularly around Boreray.

She would never again be covered in feathers or dance in sulaire shoes but she could use her knitting skills to make a wardrobe for her travelling kist which would be imbued with memories of her ethereal world yet perfect for wearing in gentler pastures new.

OVER 1500 STONE-BUILT “CLEITEAN” ARE DOTTED OVER THE ST KILDA ARCHIPELAGO. EACH CLEIT IS EXPERTLY CONSTRUCTED TO KEEP THE RAIN OUT BUT TO ALLOW AIR FLOW. THEY WERE USED TO STORE HARVESTED SEA BIRDS, FISH, HAY AND VARIOUS FOODSTUFFS.



BORERAY WITH STAC LÌ IN THE FOREGROUND
AND STAC AN ÀRMAINN OVER TO THE LEFT





Sulaire Shawl

Our heroine's Sulaire Shawl is patterned with birds flying in a dynamic formation. The combination of strong graphic lines and the feather-lightness of the openwork echoes the the shape of the birds themselves, the sharp lines of their towering clifftop habitat, and the powerful grace of the people who traversed those near-impossible heights.





Sulaire Spencer

The Sulaire Spencer is shaped with memories of sulaire wings, dramatically accentuating the curve between waist and hip. Bird flight is echoed in tiny openwork forms at the centre front and on the long sleeves.











Hirta Hat Set

The Hirta Hat Set is patterned with tiny abstract bird images, inspired by the experience of being in the midst of thousands of St Kilda's seabirds perching on cliffs, diving in the sea and wheeling in the air. The colours are inspired by the soft and shifting tones of a misty Hirta morning.







Boreray Pullover

Watching sulaire diving and rising from the ocean is mesmerising and there is nowhere more spectacular on earth to see this sight than Boreray and the nearby towering stacs. The Boreray pullover is covered in a pattern of abstracted images of the diving and rising sulaire. The shape is emphasised with deep, coloured ribs at waist and arms and the fitted cuffs are fastened with knitted and felted “pebble” buttons.









Boreray Cardigan

The Queen of the Waves wears a full outfit from her kist. She has added more colour to her Boreray pattern for the cardigan which is made to co-ordinate with her Sulaire Spencers. Ropes, seaweed and caught pebbles decorate the closure of her Linne belt and Dùn cuffs complete the outfit.







Sulaire Dress

To sail past Boreray is to feel that you are intruding on a world that belongs only to birds; every ledge of the towering cliffs is covered in gannets. The beauty and elegance of these birds is picked out against the strata of the cliff, and I wanted to embody the graceful lines of their necks in the Boreray fabric. The gannets were hand drawn at actual size, to give the impression of how they look within their colony from the sea below. The silk and linen mix fabric was hand dyed and then screen printed with the gannets appearing along the selvedge of the fabric. The first printing gave the outlines, the second added occasional and random blue eyes, the third pulled the dye from the fabric in the heads, making their bodies and beaks silvery-pale against the yellow fabric. The fabric was made into an empire line dress with a bodice lined in silk and a long wrap. The dress is plain apart from the gannets which dance at the hem, so no matter where the wearer travels, she will always appear to be standing amongst the cliffs of Boreray.





Woven Plaids

By the early twentieth century St Kildan women favoured plaids woven in dark blue with a windowpane check of blue and red. This is the Baile Plaid that our Queen of the Waves would have worn with pride on her journey over the ocean.







THE BREACAN PLAID IS WOVEN IN A CHECKED PATTERN OF WARM SHADES OF GOLD.





Accessories

An Linne is the expanse of ocean between Hirta and Boreray that covers the core of the ancient volcano at the centre of the archipelago. Beneath the waves, the surrounding stacs and islands are an underworld of technicolour beauty with seaweeds, anemones, corals and sponges coating spectacular arches and tunnels that the ocean has carved into the rocks. This world of glorious texture and colour is represented in our heroine's knitted felted and embroidered Linne Belt shown on the next four pages.

The Skildur Sporran, shown on Page 76 and elsewhere, is knitted, felted and then embroidered with underwater imagery to match the Linne belt. Double ropes form the handle and these are held together and covered at each end and at the centre with felted and embroidered knitting. This is a homage to the ancient St Kildan climbing ropes which were made from rawhide strips and covered with *peilid* (sheepskin) to protect them from the jagged cliffs. Quartz pebbles were highly prized in times past and so as token to wisdom and good fortune, little felted pebbles anchor the ends of the sporran's ropes.



ROPES, SEAWEED AND
CAUGHT PEBBLES
DECORATE THE CLOSURE
OF THE LINNE BELT.





IRON PENDANT BY NEVILLE OLROYD
WHO IS A CRAFTSMAN WHO MAINTAINS
THE VILLAGE COTTAGES ON ST KILDA



THE LEVENISH HAT

Levenish rises like a domed head out of the ocean and sits unadorned by any vegetation, marking the southern rim of the ancient volcano. It was a daily sight from the village and one cannot arrive or leave Hirta without sight of it. The Levenish hat is reminder of its shape and position in the scheme of the archipelago.





THE DÙN CUFF

The island of Dùn casts a curving arm along the Village Bay affording some protection from the southerly ocean storms. Its beautiful ragged outline is unique and memorable. The Dùn Cuff symbolises the island with the waving outline of the ruffle; the protective padding of the cuff; the strata in the rock formations, and the seabirds dotted throughout the rocks and clefts.





SULAIRE SPENCER
BREACAN PLAID
SKILDUR SPORRAN
DÙN CUFF IN GOLD

Yellow was the main colour produced through natural dyeing on St Kilda. Many plants produce the colour yellow and so many shades from a pale tint to deep gold can be achieved. This along with the unmistakeable warm gold of the sulaire's head inspired a whole outfit based on gold.





LEVENISH HAT
HIRTA GLOVES
DÙN CUFF





LEVENISH HAT
BORERAY CARDIGAN
SULAIRE SPENCER
LINNE BELT IN GOLD
HIRTA GLOVES
DÙN CUFF

*Along
the shoreline*















SHOE SCULPTURES BY
DENIZ USTER
AT OTHERSCAPES STUDIO





Credits

The St Kilda Project was conceived in 2017 by Alice and Jade Starmore. It is an ongoing, open-ended concept, the first instalment of which is: *St Kilda – Queen of the Waves*. Time and chance will determine what further instalments follow.

All woollen garments and accessories were designed and made by *Alice & Jade Starmore*

All photography and styling was by *Jade Starmore* who also designed and made the Sulaire Dress.

This publication was designed by *Graham Starmore at Windfall Press*

The shoe sculptures were made by *Deniz Uster at Otherscapes Studio*

Special thanks to our models *Amber, Emma, Iona and Rebecca*



Iona Mairead Davidson wearing a Breacan Plaid



Emma MacRae wearing a Sulaire Shawl



Amber Dollin wears a blue Sulaire Spencer
Rebecca Wyman wears a gold Sulaire Spencer





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