

Museums

Eight years and 2m arachnids later, spider silk fabrics go on show in London

Garments made from silk of golden orb-weavers form part of exhibition of curious objects connected to natural world



The highlights of the exhibition are three of only four textiles in existence produced from one of nature's rarest materials: the silk of golden orb-weaver spiders (Nephila Madagascariensis). Photograph: John Brown

Tropical female spiders are the size of a child's hand, they can eat their puny male relatives for lunch and produce extraordinary golden silk that can be made in to textiles like nothing else on the planet.

That is the idea. But the execution of such a project was far more complicated. Around 2m spiders had to be collected from the highlands of Madagascar and their silk harvested over eight years to produce just four textiles.

It was, agreed textile designer Simon Peers, a crazy endeavour to embark on in the first place. "Over several hundred years you'll find strange people who have tried to do this and every time it has been found to be mad," he said.

"I guess we've just followed suit and somehow we pushed it a bit further than anyone else has ever done. I hope we have created some beautiful and wonderful things."

Three of the four textiles which Peers and entrepreneur Nicholas Godley helped create are to go on display in the UK at an exhibition of rare and curious objects connected to the natural world.

The London show will also include Chinese root sculptures, meteorites and a sapphire inscribed as belonging to King Seleucus (3rd century BC).



The spiders were collected each morning and harnessed in groups of 24. At the end of the day, the spiders were returned unharmed. Photograph: Artush/Getty Images/iStockphoto

But the star exhibits will be the three textiles: two shawls and a lamba - a traditional Madagascan garment - made from the silk of golden orb-weaver spiders.

The project involved 15 years of research, which included examining the efforts of people who had attempted similar things in the 18th and 19th centuries.

The eight years of production involved a team of 80 men and women being trained and employed to scour the highlands of Madagascar for spiders.

They were collected in the morning and harnessed in groups of 24, each placed in an individual compartment with equipment which could thread their silk on to cones. At the end of the day, the spiders were returned unharmed.

A golden cape which was produced was exhibited to acclaim at the V&A in 2012. Sir David Attenborough wrote in the catalogue: "It must surely be counted as one of the rarest and most glamorous of fabrics. Thank goodness the world still holds marvels."

Peers said the normally ephemeral silk had a wonderful golden translucence. "We have done nothing to the silk whatsoever, we have literally taken it from the spider. We haven't had to wash it or dye it or do anything with it except doubling it or tripling it or whatever to make the thread we need."

It has a unique feel to it, Peers said. If you close your eyes and ask someone to put the silk on your hand, "you don't feel anything, it is quite bizarre. All you feel is the heat from your hand reflected back, you don't feel the silk. It is almost like an invisibility cloak... it is quite uncanny"

The spider silk has remarkable properties of strength and elasticity, said Peers. "A lot of laboratories are working on trying to replicate the properties of spider silk, but without using the spider, because the results are so extraordinary."

Peers hopes they have managed to create beautiful and rare things which also have an art and poetry to them.

The Natural World show is at Oliver Hoare, Cromwell Place, London 22 September to 22 October.

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