

Peel back

JOCELYN WARNER IS STUCK ON WALLPAPER



Wallpaper / pattern, pattern / wallpaper – like the chicken and the egg, you can't have one without the other – well you can but stencilling is currently a reasonable offence. In many ways the revival of wallpaper is also a revival of pattern. The current resurgence shows a design period noted for its clean lines and facades and avoidance of overt decoration; most textures and designs in the 1980s were a pared down reflection of classical themes. Graduating in the mid 80s it was almost impossible to sell a decorative design in the UK; Europeans, especially the Italians were a little more receptive. The contrast today could not be more striking: pattern prevails in fast moving fashion and design trends and consumers are confident using patterned wallpaper to create an individual style.

Perhaps it was the dawn of a new millennium or a desire to bring nature inside and embrace its reassuring qualities? There are parallels in the Arts and Crafts and Art Nouveau periods when nature played an important part in creating new aesthetic content and repeat structures. The desire to represent nature and breathe interiors with the 'feel' of the outdoors is best communicated by wallpaper where the pattern can be seen in full, rather than hidden in the folds of draped fabric; as a result wallpaper has become a vehicle for designers from all creative disciplines.

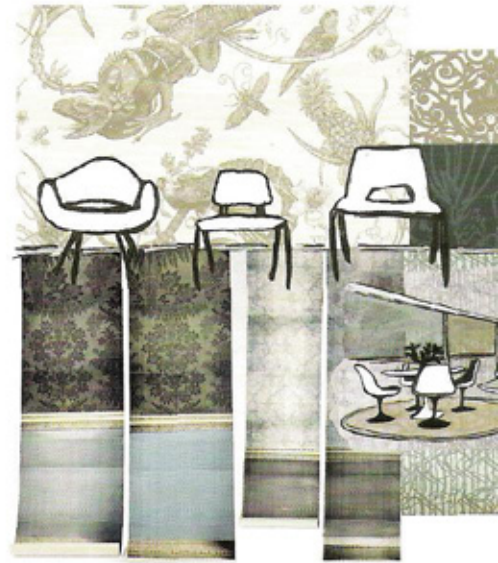
The 'paper' side of wallpaper is often overlooked but part of wallpaper's beauty is the quality of the print-image; paper provides a crisp and fresh edge and allows inks to shine and reflect light. The same print on fabric would look different. Of course wallpaper began by mimicking fabric, but today wallpapers are about the feel and look of paper, its graphic and 'stationary' attributes. There are other advantages too, the costs of

creating a collection of designs is reduced by working on paper rather than cloth. Arguably paper also grants designers a greater sense of freedom, encouraging experimentation.

We are so used to paper coming in rolls with a standard width of 52cm to the new wide width papers, up to 135cm, pioneered by designers such as Timorous Beasties that it's easy to forget that the first humble wallpapers were block printed onto small squares. These were painstakingly stuck together to create 'wallpaper' and sold through stationery shops that also sold writing paper and music scores. It wasn't until developments in the paper industry led to continuous paper that the roll of wallpaper was born.

The first commercially printed papers were made by highly skilled craftsmen who hand carved patterns onto wooden (often pear wood) blocks. Block printing was valued for the depth and body of colour; William Morris so valued the craft that he chose to continue long after the arrival of machine printing. The surface print machine (patented by the Lancashire firm Potters and Rose in 1839) combined with the invention of continuous paper heralded a new era for wallpaper manufacture. By 1850 the surface printer was capable of printing perfectly registered patterns in up to eight colours. This was the beginning of affordable wallpaper; produced in high volumes in an enormous range of designs – as the huge pattern books of the time demonstrate.

The period from the end of the Second World War to the mid-1970s was a high point for wallpapers. The invention of screen printing techniques offered larger repeat sizes and textural effects. Innovative styles combined with radical architecture changed the



way wallpaper was used – the feature wall and open plan living spaces were introduced. The Festival of Britain showcased many of these contemporary designs. Cole & Son set up one of the first ever screen printing studios in the late 1940s. One of the most impressive collections of the period was Palladio, a production from 1955-1975. It featured work by designers such as Lucienne Day, Deryck Healey and Roger and Richard Nicholson.

Nevertheless the technique could accommodate only a small percentage of buyers. The larger market bought mass-produced wallpapers. The introduction of Photogravure and Flexographic printing in the 1960s saw volumes increase further. The high definition engraving techniques of Gravure and Flexographic printing produced fine washes and tones; initially on vinyl. The new process met a rapidly increasing demand for wallpaper. In 1961 132 million rolls of wallpaper were sold, compared to 44 million in 1940. Collections were expanding, many contained over 50 designs with co-ordinating fabrics and plains.

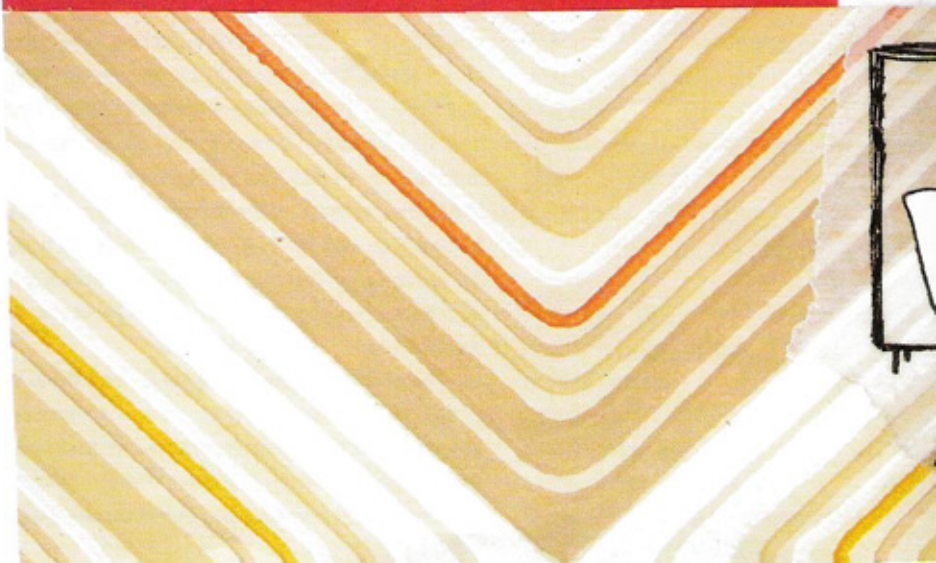
The earlier innovative designs of this period were soon overshadowed and diluted by mass production. The lower end of the market was 'manufacturing' rather than 'design' led and collections were reduced to traditional small scale prints. Wallpaper became

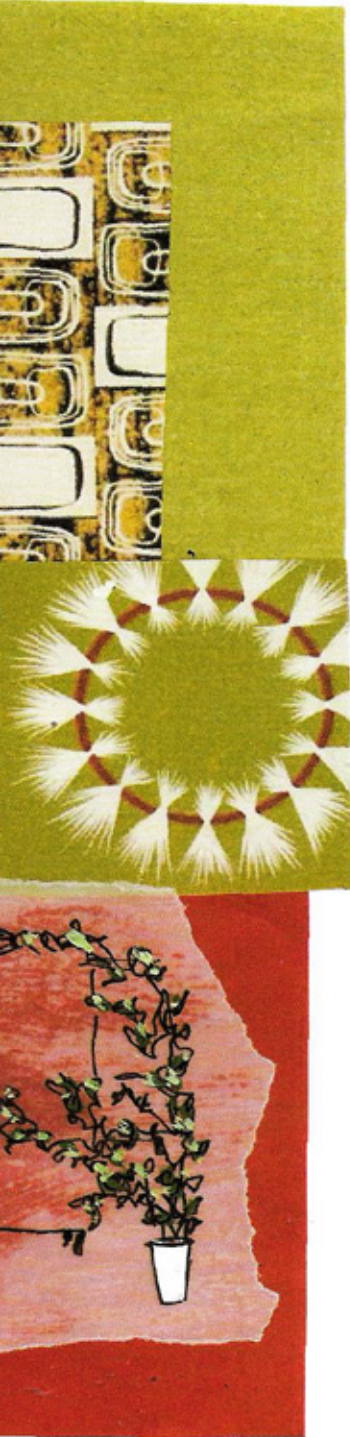
background to the fabric collection and coordination became the key word of the era.

The dilution of design and flooding of the market sparked the move away from pattern to white walls. This and the oil crisis, which stagnated the housing market, contributed to the demise of wallpaper. Manufacturers who had committed to high volume production were unable to adapt to the drop in demand; many disappeared along with their skilled labour forces. For two decades wallpaper became the suburban choice, beloved by those who favoured the Laura Ashley country house style complete with border trims and utterly abhorred by 'sophisticated' loft dwellers.

Around the turn of this century, a small entrepreneurial group of designers, mostly British, for whom wallpaper was a means of expressing a visual identity initiated the dawn of a new aesthetic. Publications such as Li Edelkoort's 'View' and 'View on Colour' inspired designers with a brighter vision of pattern and colour. 100% Design brought these designers together: In 1999 there were three companies selling contemporary wallpaper, by 2007 there were 29 including Deborah Bowness, Timorous Beasties, Tracy Kendall and Natasha Marshall.

A vital factor in the emergence of this group was the arrival of affordable digital tools: computers, printers, and scanners. Software such as Photoshop with its ability to work in layers meant that repeats and colourways could be realised much faster. Mixing digital tools with traditional screen printing techniques created a new language for pattern. A language picked up by designers from fields outside textile design, including graphic and product, who were proficient with digital tools and attracted by print and the visual nature of wallpaper.





Today designers have far more control over the marketing process; it is possible for small studios to design and print small ranges and promote them on websites and blogs. International wallpaper distributors watch the British market for fresh designs and are prepared to work with small set ups as well as established design companies. Digital 'print to order' enables companies to minimise stock and take fewer financial risks.

Once again feature walls have become part of contemporary design but there is also a trend to 'personalise' and create a crafted look. Products from designers such as Rachel Kelly and Inke Helland echo episodes in wallpaper's history such as the borders and cut-outs from the 1920s currently on show at the Whitworth (see page 30). This vogue for the personalised is prompted by a desire to retain and showcase human, non-digital design qualities. There is greater co-operation between designers and manufacturers. Minimum orders have been reduced to make it feasible for small companies to use high volume machine processes. While these developments may not be revolutionary in their process, new gloss, iridescent, metallic and light sensitive inks add a sense of novelty.

As British manufacturers worked more closely with entrepreneurial companies, established wallpaper companies returned to earlier triumphs. Cole & Son relaunched their Contemporary collection from 1946 under the creative guidance of Karen Beauchamp and impressive knowledge of Anthony Evans. The success of the move added inestimable financial value to their extensive design archive.

Another British firm, Graham and Brown, merged elements of both past and present. Still run by the two families who founded the business in 1946, they began

exhibiting at 100% design with collections commissioned from students at the Royal College of Art and Central Saint Martins. Their marketing campaign 'What we want' promoted their design focus and collaboration with designers. Habitat have also chosen the high profile designer route collaborating with fashion designer Matthew Williamson and others.

In the future it's probably safe to predict a continued growth in customisable products such as kits and bespoke digital prints. Inks and papers will advance with more light and heat sensitive inks, eco friendly papers, wide width and easy hang non-woven papers. The number of 'end to end industries of 1' – design companies able to create small run wallpapers in house will increase too. In fact commentators have suggested that we could see 100 years of expected change telescoped into the next 25 as technological advances enable ever more rapid development.

It would not be unreasonable to expect vast changes in both 'paper' and 'printing'. One of the 'holy grails' of research over the past decade has been digital paper; paper that mimics the weight and flexibility of paper but is capable of displaying text and graphics like a computer monitor. Initially only sold in small rectangular sheets and connected together to make larger displays (a return to the early days of wallpaper), Polymer Vision have already announced the world's first rollable displays. Within a few decades these displays will become cheaper to produce and will find their way into homes bringing with them a new type of wallcovering downloadable from the internet. But with in all of these possibilities there remains a place for wallpaper and its aesthetic qualities of print and paper that make it unique amongst wallcoverings. ●●●