

# OUT OF THE DARKNESS

Wendy Bray's sunny fabric designs, made between 1948 and 1951, represent an escape from postwar austerity. But, as she recounts here, when her ageing portfolio recently came to light in the attic, little did she suspect that retailers would be queuing up to reproduce its contents. Photography: Antony Crolla



Mostly obscuring the ragged homemade portfolio of 1948 is 'Happy Blondes', which Wendy submitted for her National Diploma of Design in 1951 (now a BA). In roughly contemporary snaps of Rome, she can be seen wearing it made up as a dress



Top: designs from the 1950s portfolio include 'Umbrellas', inspired by the French cartoonist Peyret, and an original collage for the fabric 'Mermaids' (1948), complete with Bird's custard-powder beach hut. Above left: 'Emma Rose Stripe' (1955) draws on the 'live line' of René Gruau. Above right: Wendy wears a Souleiado lace-print shirt. Opposite: the designer submitted 'Housescape' for her diploma



**THE SMALL** collection of 25 fabric designs on these pages dates, almost entirely, from my time at Croydon Art School, which I attended from 1948-1951 during the grey days of postwar Britain. The portfolio remained intact for 60 years, mainly because it slotted neatly down the side of a tea chest and travelled with me to nine different houses in ten years. This was the rhythm of my life from 1955 to 1971. The designs then remained hidden in an old rectory in Warwickshire, where I raised my children, for a further 30-odd years. They came to light again when we were looking for 1950s colours to complement a chandelier of similar vintage which had also been languishing in the attic. My portfolio had a surprisingly contemporary resonance, so, like Rip van Winkle, it awoke to find that its contents had become relevant today.

When (as Wendy Crosley) I was studying for my national diploma in the early 1950s, art and design reflected an escape from austerity, and utility clothes and furniture – a make-do-and-mend world where rationing still continued and everybody was thin. Our artwork was presented on soft, raggy sugar paper, and both sides had to be used. There was limited access to paints and the teachers were typically former soldiers. Art students indulged in colour and playful fantasy, and the quaint idiom of the Neo-Romantics: John Minton, Paul Nash and John Craxton all had a potent influence on me. Their mannered figurative imagery inspired ‘Umbrellas’, worked for my

final exam paper as a curtain fabric for a child’s room. I was also good at the push and pull of the loaded brush and employed it all the time in designs such as ‘Emma Rose Stripe’, inspired by Dior’s fashion illustrator, René Gruau.

The life room was freezing but it was all heaven. The Chelsea Arts Ball was the highlight of New Year’s Eve. On fantastic floats designed by Croydon’s art students for the midnight parade skimpily clothed girls had to be protected by rugby players, so rumbustious was the crowd. We’d escape, still clothed, to the cavern under the Albert Hall arena, where a whole other party carried on until dawn.

The last year at art school was hard, with two years’ work crammed into one. There were silk screens to be shellacked; dyes to be mixed; three yards of fabric to be printed (I chose ‘Happy Blondes’); mordants and steaming; a dissertation on Indian chintzes to be written and illustrated. For the final exams we had to submit a group of seven designs and, paper being rationed, we had to fit them all onto two half-imperial sheets. Of this group, the collage ‘Mermaids’, with its Bird’s custard-packet beach hut at thruppence ha’penny, represents a turning-away from wartime privation. ‘Balloons’, meanwhile, nods to the achievements of the Montgolfier brothers.

After Croydon I got a job surprisingly quickly in the studio of Courtaulds, a big textile company overlooking St Paul’s and the still-battered city of London. The then low-rise city was punctuated only by the surviving Wren

church steeples, of which the roofless, gaping shell of St Vedast Forster was just below the studio windows. There were many spaces, bombsites empty of anything but the huge water tanks that had been used for fire fighting. We used the grassy pathways through the buddleia and fireweed as short cuts between the city blocks. St Paul’s had stood proud in the bombing of the city, but the surrounding devastation was still very apparent.

My start in the Courtaulds studio coincided with the Festival of Britain, when the country heaved itself to its feet and celebrated its victory in the war. The mess of the Thames’s left bank had been cleared up, the Skylon stood free as air and there was the fabulous new Festival Hall to replace the racketing echo of the Albert Hall. Scandinavian design had become all the rage, and the abstract motifs of Lucienne Day (*Wol* June 2011) cleared a path away from the government’s age of utility, which we had endured for so long. This was a celebration of the creative arts that trumpeted: Britain can indeed make it.

In April 1954 I was sent to Courtaulds’ Essex factory to get acquainted with the manufacturing side of textiles, and there in the carding room was my future husband, a management trainee. Marriage came next, plus a brief spell of freelancing, and in 1956, the little portfolio began its 20-year journey in and out of Britain.

Downsizing is the discipline of a lifetime. When a capacious Victorian rectory tolerant of collections and chil-

dren’s disorder has to be replaced with six rooms and a bathroom or two, many choices need to be made. My house is now an arcaded Victorian cow byre, and it contains the concentrated essence of my family’s lives. It is about those people and the traces they leave, their achievements and disappointments. Small collections turn up in unexpected corners. Treasured photographs, rugs and furniture are the trophies of past travels. There is an artist’s table, a child’s high chair doubling as a stool, a folding easel, an old French-polished box of paints, a heap of canvases and the old design portfolios. They lay undisturbed in the attic for 30 years until my daughter rediscovered them and showed them to Adam Gilchrist, owner of Veedon Fleece, the carpet manufacturers. His enthusiasm was the engine that turned ‘Feathers’ and ‘Happy Blondes’ into elegant rugs, which in turn drove a renewed interest in my work among the vintage-design market.

The rediscovery of the little portfolio has not only created a window of recollection into my young life, but it has led me to revive those skills for use today. To my delight, the designs are also being transformed into wallpapers (The Art of Wallpaper), furnishing fabrics (Sanderson), even endpapers for a book (Persephone). And – who knows? – maybe wrapping paper and greetings cards are just around the corner ■

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The blue-grounded ‘Montgolfier Balloons’ and ‘Balloons’ – the former a furnishing fabric, the latter a dress fabric – are close cousins. The two other designs come from Wendy’s spell in New York in the 1970s, when she took a refresher course at the city’s Art Students League

This ‘ideas’ ringbinder dates from the designer’s first year at Courtaulds, 1951, in the bomb-damaged capital. Seed heads and plants face brocade and ribbon stripes, while tucked in behind is a Restoration laurel wreath enclosing a sun that portrays Wendy’s sister’s face