



The return of pattern in british graphic arts

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Studied illustration at Maidstone College of Art. He has worked as an illustrator and painter ever since, contributing illustrations to books published by most of the major UK publishers as well as designs for advertising, television and magazines. In recent years his work has focused mainly on the area of children's book illustration, painting for exhibition and writing on the subject of drawing and illustration.

*In 2004, Martin wrote *Illustrating Children's Books*, a major guide to the practice and theory of the art form. *Play Pen: New Children's Book Illustration* was published in 2007. The book is a selective survey of new trends internationally in children's book illustration. *Children's Picturebooks: The Art of Visual Storytelling*, written in collaboration with Professor Morag Styles is published in 2012.*

In recent years in Great Britain there has been an upsurge of interest in the work of our graphic artists of the mid Twentieth Century. The output of these artists spread comfortably across the fine and applied arts. The lasting legacy of the work of these artists and printers is becoming increasingly evident as we view the current landscape of British illustration and the current mania for all things 'retro' shows no sign of abating. This can be seen in all areas of design but is perhaps most evident in home furnishing and illustration.

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In recent years in Great Britain there has been an upsurge of interest in the work of our graphic artists of the mid Twentieth Century. This has manifested itself both in the publication of monographs on a number of the artists of the time and in the work of many present day artists and illustrators that recycles and reinterprets many of the motifs and preoccupations of that period, which is sometimes referred to as *Twentieth Century Modern*.

Artists of the period whose reputations have especially grown and been re-evaluated include Edward Bawden, Eric Ravilious, Enid Marx, Barbara Jones and Barnett Freedman. They are regarded as peculiarly British in nature and are generally not well known beyond these shores. The output of these artists spread comfortably across the fine and applied arts. All were exhibiting in galleries while also producing design and illustration for books, magazines, advertisements, and in most cases, also for wallpapers and other 'pattern papers' as they were known. A key player in all of this was Harold Curwen, whose Curwen Press printing establishment in Plaistow, East London had originally been founded by his grandfather, John in 1863. Curwen encouraged the careers of many of these artists at a time when the distinction between printer and publisher was not

quite as rigid as it is today. He commissioned them to produce a wide range of material, illustrative and decorative, for use by the printing company in their trade advertisement material as Curwen forged radical changes at the press to become a leading light in the revival of high quality printing in the 1920s. The Curwen Press also printed many of the most important illustrated books of the period. As one of the Harold Curwen's early advertising brochures proclaimed, their intention was 'to put the spirit of joy into printed things'.

It was Bawden and Ravilious whose work was at the forefront of this movement and in whom there is particularly fervent interest at the present time. The two met after Bawden left Cambridge School of Art in 1922 to take up a scholarship at the Royal College of Art in London. Here he met Ravilious, who was arriving from Eastbourne School of Art on the south coast, also on a scholarship. Despite being polar opposites in terms of temperament, they became firm friends. Enid Marx and Barnett Freedman were also studying at the Royal College and they were all taught design by the painter, Paul Nash, who referred to the group of students under his tuition at the time as 'an outbreak of talent'.

After graduating, both Ravilious and Bawden picked up commissions fairly quickly and exhibited paintings regularly in London. In the mid 1920s, the two rented an imposing Georgian house together in the village of Great Bardfield in Essex. When each of them later married, for a while the two couples shared the house, before Ravilious and his wife Tirzah eventually moved to another village nearby. Over a period of time, a number of other artists moved into Great Bardfield or villages very nearby. Many of these were former students of the two artists, who were themselves now teaching at the Royal College of Art. In time, a community of artists grew in the area and they began to hold summer 'open studio' exhibitions - each of them exhibiting their work in the homes and studios. These summer exhibitions became something of a national phenomenon with up to ten thousand visitors arriving in the village. Buses and special trains were laid on from London Liverpool Street station.

This group of artists was at pains to point out that they were not a 'movement', sharing a particular ethos or philosophy. The group included painters, theatre designers, textile designers and photographers. Nevertheless, it could be said that there are certain key activities or characteristics that loosely bind them together, and which underpinned much of the graphic work in the Britain of the 1940s and 50s. I would say that the most important of these are *printmaking*, *design* and crucially, *pattern*. Edward Bawden almost single-handedly elevated the linocut from a process that had hitherto been regarded

as a kitchen-table medium for children, to a serious means of image creation for professional artists. Bawden's genius as a designer/ image-maker lay in his ability to take complicated subject matter from natural or man-made origins and to simplify and reorganize into pictorial pattern. It was therefore only natural that, alongside his painting and printmaking, he would become involved in wallpaper and other pattern design. Along with John Aldridge, a Royal Academician painter who lived and worked in the village, Bawden set up a small venture to design wallpaper. The designs were made with repeat prints of linocuts, created in repeatable units and then printed in sheet form lithographically by the Curwen Press. They were then sold by the company, *Modern Textiles*. Titles of the designs included *Sahara*, *Pigeon*, *Riviera* and *Leaf*. All were highly pictorial in nature. Bawden had a long and prolific working life until his death in 1989.

Eric Ravilious, in contrast to his friend, crammed a great deal of work into a much shorter life. Both he and Bawden were appointed as Official War Artists by the War Artists Advisory Committee. The purpose of this venture was, on the one hand to build a body of creative work that visually reported and commented on the war, and on the other hand to give some protection to important artists of the time. However Ravilious died in 1942 when the military plane in which he was traveling on a mission off the coast of Iceland disappeared without trace. He too had exhibited a fundamental sense of design and pattern in his work. Perhaps because of his short life, and the fact that he lived it to the full, a sense of myth has grown him.

During her time at the Royal College, Enid Marx learned wood engraving from her fellow student, Ravilious (generally referred to by his peers as 'Rav' or 'The Boy'). Marx possessed none of the innate flair or panache that is so evident in Ravilious's work but was blessed with an intellectually and artistically curious mind. In her later book illustrations, what she lacked in fluent draftsmanship is compensated for in rustic charm and a strong sense of pattern. It was this latter concern that dominated her long career, spanning over 70 years. From an early age she was an avid collector of decorative objects, fabrics, French patterned papers, designed things. In later years she wrote excellent books on the 'common' arts such as *English Popular and Traditional Art* (Collins, 1946) with her long-term companion, Margaret Lambert. She was a distant relative of Karl Marx and was possessed of a similarly rebellious spirit, which often got her into trouble as a student and in later life. She was still fighting battles in her late nineties. But it was her passion for pattern that brought Marx numerous commissions to design decorative book jackets, endpapers and wrapping

paper. Most famously, she was commissioned by the visionary art director Frank Pick at the London Passenger Transport Board to design the seating fabric pattern for use on all of the seats on London buses and tube trains. This iconic design, known as 'Moquette', was in use for decades.

Barnett Freedman's work has also enjoyed a revival of interest in recent years. Freedman, born to a poor Jewish immigrant family in the East End of London, suffered poor health for much of his relatively short life (he died at the age of 56), but achieved great prominence as a painter and illustrator and was especially celebrated as a master lithographer. With the encouragement of Harold Curwen, he became highly skilled at autolithography, a process whereby the artist works directly onto the lithographic plate, drawing each colour separation by hand, rather than relying on mechanical separations. His depth of knowledge of colour layering and separation was evident in his many book jacket designs and the commission to design the 1935 postage stamps to celebrate the Silver Jubilee of King George V. Such a fastidious and organised approach design lent itself well to the design of pattern papers. Freedman's designs for Curwen are characterized by his familiar use of softly graded tone from the lithographic crayon.

The lasting legacy of the work of these artists and printers is becoming increasingly evident as we view the current landscape of British illustration. The process of printmaking is becoming increasingly popular again, albeit often in tandem with digital processes when used in commercial illustration. The print and design quality of books is clearly growing ever more important as the book stakes out its territory as a tactile, aesthetic ownable artifact, as distinct from screen-based media. This is most clearly evidenced in the emergence of independent publishers such as *Nobrow*. *Nobrow* evolved from a screen-printing studio and still produce some books in this manner under the imprint *Nobrow Small Press*. These publications are limited to editions of 100. The company has now expanded into children's picturebooks, with their new imprint, *Flying Eye Books*. All of the books are characterized by exceptional attention to print and design. Pattern plays a significant part in the output of the company in the form of decorative endpapers, wrapping papers and patterned tapes.

As publisher Sam Arthur explains on the website: "Given that the company started both in the midst of the financial crisis (Nov 2008) and in the supposed 'dying days of print', our books had to be somehow different. It wouldn't be enough to champion new artists and content alone, the books themselves had to stand out, to 'deserve to be printed'... We publish books with their inherent qualities

as objects in mind, to that end we do everything in our power to ensure that they look good, smell good and most of all tell great stories!”

As well as independent publishers such as *Nobrow*, small ‘private press’ printer-p publishers still seem to be thriving. But one of the most noticeable examples of a return to aspects of the mid-Twentieth ethos is the branching out of illustrators into the worlds of textile and ceramic design to meet the burgeoning demand for pattern. A particularly good example of the revivalist mood can be found in the phenomenal success of the company, *St Judes*. Originally founded by artist Angie Lewin and her husband Simon, the venture existed for some years as a small gallery in the little Norfolk market town of Aylesham. As well as exhibiting prints and paintings by Angie herself, the gallery showed work by a range of British illustrators and printmakers who could be seen to be in the *Twentieth Century Modern* tradition but who are also highly contemporary in their interpretation of these traditions. The artists represented include Jonny Hannah, Rob Ryan, Mark Hearld and Ed Klutz. Angie Lewin’s own work can be seen to build on many of the preoccupations and motifs that underpinned the work of Edward Bawden well over half a century ago, with particular interest in the patterns that flow from the flora and fauna of the British countryside. *St Judes* now operates from Edinburgh, selling mainly online but regularly organizing exhibitions at a variety of venues under the title *St Judes in the City*.

Given the pattern-led nature of Angie Lewin’s designs, it was a natural development for the company to branch out into fabric and wallpaper design:

“We started with the simple aim of producing two of Angie’s designs and taking it from there. Since then *St Jude’s* has become a small but thriving business. We were delighted to be named winners in the *Elle Decoration* British Design Awards in both 2011 and 2012.”

Further outlining the ethos of and influences behind the venture, the company goes on to state:

“We take an interest in fine art and commercial design, but we are particularly inspired by work produced in the middle ground between the two. We love Edward Bawden’s graphic design and illustration work for London Transport, for example. And Eric Ravilious’ ceramics for Wedgwood. It appears that some wonderful and unexpected things can happen when a talented individual meets a visually aware organisation. This is very much the spirit we try to foster at *St. Jude’s*.”

Donna Wilson is another whose pictorial pattern design has burgeoned into a mini-industry. Originally from Scotland, she graduated from the Royal College of Art little more than ten years ago. After generating a great deal of interest at her gradua-

tion exhibition in London, in 2003 she set up her company ‘Donna Wilson’, creating designs for cushion covers, blankets, soft toys etc. In 2010 she was named Designer of the Year by the magazine, *Elle Decoration*. The studio now employs a team of workers making enough of Donna’s designs to meet the demand from major high street stores such as John Lewis. Of course it remains to be seen whether fast growing small businesses such as Wilson’s will or can become as huge as design brand phenomena such as Cath Kidston and Orla Kiely.

An interesting recent project that compares to the above venture on a smaller scale is Chris Haughton’s *Node*. Many will be familiar with Haughton’s brilliantly ‘simple’ picturebooks published by Walker Books such as *A Bit Lost* and *Oh No George!* Haughton has also worked for a number of years with the *Fair Trade* organization. Having travelled widely in India and Nepal Haughton set up *Node* with Akshay Sthapit, a Kathmandu based entrepreneur ‘with a passion for social projects’. The two set up *Node* to ‘combine great design with great fair trade projects’. Theirs is a non-profit venture that is designed to bring work to a deprived region of Nepal. Working with Kumbeshwar Technical School in Kathmandu, the two commissioned 18 leading illustrator/ designers (including Donna Wilson) to create designs for rugs that would be hand-produced by the workers in Kathmandu and sold at the Design Museum Shop in London. The outcome of this ethically led project is a series of stunning hand-made rugs featuring designs by artists such as Beatrice Alemagna, Jon Klassen, Chamo, Kevin Waldron and Haughton himself. It is to be hoped that projects such as this will lead the way as an example of the potential of illustration, so often seen as a trivial embellishment, in the field of social change.

The current mania for all things ‘retro’ shows no sign of abating. This can be seen in all areas of design but is perhaps most evident in home furnishing and illustration. Sometimes this is manifested simply in subtle visual references but frequently it can also be seen in the wholesale reuse and recycling of artworks from the 1940s and 50s. It is also evident in the publishing and republishing of works by hitherto forgotten greats such as Alain Grée, whose works have become suddenly ubiquitous again, late in his career, appreciated now in a rather more postmodern sense than in their original, seemingly uncomplicated and charming manifestation. Grée’s work and that of many from a younger generation of designers who are influenced by him, lends itself extremely well to use in a range of decorative contexts in addition to those for which it was originally created.

In my capacity as Course Leader for the MA Children’s Book Illustration programme here at

Cambridge School of Art, I see an increasing number of Masters students applying their work to a range of design contexts beyond the book. I am showing a few examples here. In the early stages of this course, students devote their time to self-proposed thematic observational drawing projects. Even at this early stage of making acquaintance with their individual methods and preoccupations, it is often easy to spot those who have a natural tendency to seek out the pattern and texture in their chosen subjects. An outstanding artist whose work I would classify in this way is Laura Carlin. Carlin graduated from the Royal College of Art in 2002 and as well as her excellent book illustration work she creates various craft-based artifacts in ceramics and other media. Her most recent picturebook, *The Promise* (text by Nicola Davies, published by Walker Books, 2013), explores the patterns and rhythms of urban living, contrasted with the rhythms of the natural world. Her work, which is deeply rooted in the British tradition of drawing from observation, invariably leads us into the interesting area of borderland between representation and pattern. The book’s endpapers, traditionally a home for pattern papers, perfectly illustrate this, taking the pattern of the man-made and urban at the start of the book and the patterns of the organic/ natural at the end. Using pattern in this semi-narrative way on the periphery of the picturebook is what the children’s literature academics refer to as ‘peritext’.

The various works of students that can be seen here give some insight into the ways that pattern is used to decorate, to describe and to tell stories. As a teacher, I am fascinated by the different ‘ways in’ that each student will find when dealing with drawing from observation and using this to underpin developing approaches to narrative illustration. Many of our students now come from the Far East—especially China, Taiwan, Japan and South Korea. Here, graphic traditions have a particular emphasis on surface pattern and design rather than Western modes of representational painting.

As more and more students from an increasing number of cultures join the course (at the last count, we had students from 29 countries), and they continue to fuse their own cultural influences with a knowledge of British graphic traditions, it will be interesting to see how the continuing cross-fertilization impacts on the British children’s publishing industry. The process has already begun.

Bibliography

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