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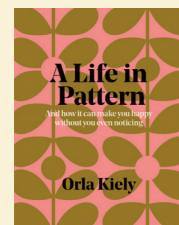
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Published to coincide with the exhibition



A Life in Pattern by Orla Kiely £25
Published by Conran Octopus Publishing

Coming Soon

Night and Day: 1930s Fashion and Photographs
12 October 2018 — 20 January 2019

This exhibition will explore the day and evening styles of the decade, complemented by photographs of the stars who championed them. With fashion as the lens, Night and Day: 1930s Fashion and Photographs will traverse the great period of social change that was the 1930s.

Whimsy

'For me, a touch of humour and quirkiness is important in design.'

The charm of many Orla Kiely designs is in their whimsical nature. In some cases she surprises us with a Dachshund-shaped chopping board or a skipping rope on a handbag.

Often patterns such as 'Elephant Maze', 'Henny Hen' and 'Bonny Bunny' are based on bold near-abstract renditions of animals. Pattern, her Conran Octopus book of 2010, details her approach to designing clean lines and graphic shapes; these, she stresses, are trickier than painterly patterns, being less tolerant of even the smallest of errors during production.

Her attention to scale means the same pattern can be re-sized for differing purposes and changing effects. It also provides another approach to the creation of surprising elements. Among the items in the special edition collections created for the Tate Modern in 2004 and 2005, are the Martian Dolls, both small in stature and large in concept.

"Curiouser and curiouser!"

Lewis Carroll, Alice in Wonderland (Macmillan: 1865)

'My love of fashion was also evident from an early age. ... fashion would become my window to the world, a way to voice my personal language, and to communicate my ideas.'

Orla Kiely's attention to detail comes to the fore in the unique installation she has created especially for this exhibition. Elaborating on her play with scale, showcased here are nine giant garments based on previous ready-to-wear collections in iconic prints. Collaborating with artist Sarah Strachan, Tiny Dolls have been designed and created wearing exact miniature replica dresses.

These "Wonderland" figures illuminate Orla Kiely's love of the unexpected, as much a feature of the 1960s and '70s as the 'mod' and 'flowerchild' fashions from which she has taken inspiration, designed by the likes of Mary Quant and Barbara Hulanicki. Step into the world of design details that feature on the garments and sometimes go unnoticed: a lace trim, a plastic flower power button or a velvet jacquard in a floral pattern.

Fashion

'I knew our silhouette should be clean and simple to give the graphic quality and colour of our print, space to be.'

Launching her ready-to-wear line in 2003, Orla Kiely now produces four collections: Spring/Summer, Pre-Fall, Autumn/Winter and Resort, the latter in 2016, named L'Orla and co-conceived with her long time stylist, Leith Clark. Each collection contains signature pieces: coats, dresses and knitwear linked through colour and print. These are presented in sets designed by James Hatt or in films during London Fashion Week.

The campaigns for the collections have been documented by leading photographers, Venetia Scott, Yelena Yemchuk, Lina Scheynius, Catherine Serval, Ben Toms, Julia Hetta, Sandra Freij, and Viviane Sassen. In these the vision of the collection becomes complete.

The Orla Kiely look has been described as appealing to confident, stylish and intelligent women. Among their famous clientele are Alexa Chung, Keira Knightly, Kirsten Dunst, Zooey Deschanel, Sarah Jessica Parker, Emma Thompson, Tavi Gevinson, and Catherine, Duchess of Cambridge.

Bags

'...I love the fact that a handbag can transform a look.'

In the mid-1990s when showcasing hats at London Fashion Week, Orla Kiely's father observed that few women wore them but they all carried a bag. So began a key offering, initially made in cottons, mesh and wool fabrics, then in Italian leather in strong, bright colours.

After experimenting with printed cotton bags for the summer, the need for a durable variation was answered in the Autumn/Winter 2001 collection, when the Orla Kiely laminated cotton bag was introduced. 'Stem' was recoloured in autumnal shades and, with an exceptionally quick turn-around by the factory, delivered just in time for Paris Fashion Week.

Today the Orla Kiely archive of bags showcases two principal characteristics. The 'Stem' range is generally produced in classic shapes and in shoulder and cross body versions. The main line is always reflective of the designer's latest concept, exploring different techniques and applied finishes in prints and embroideries.

Films

'... ideas develop organically and are always true to our vision whether that's through film or a runway show or a rooftop presentation.'

Since 2010 Orla Kiely has produced films to launch her seasonal collections. Some are in-house documentary-style presentations and others are short films that tap into the era and spirit that inspired the actual collection. These are created with like-minded collaborators such as Mercedes Helnwein, Boo George, Maximilla Lukacs, Liz Goldwyn, Gia Coppola and Geoff Searle.

Capturing a tone, colour or mood, they have been filmed all over the world, from a sun-drenched Palm Springs hotel to a castle in Ireland. Each one advancing a different storyline, the films reflect the Orla Kiely desire to tell their story according to their own rules.

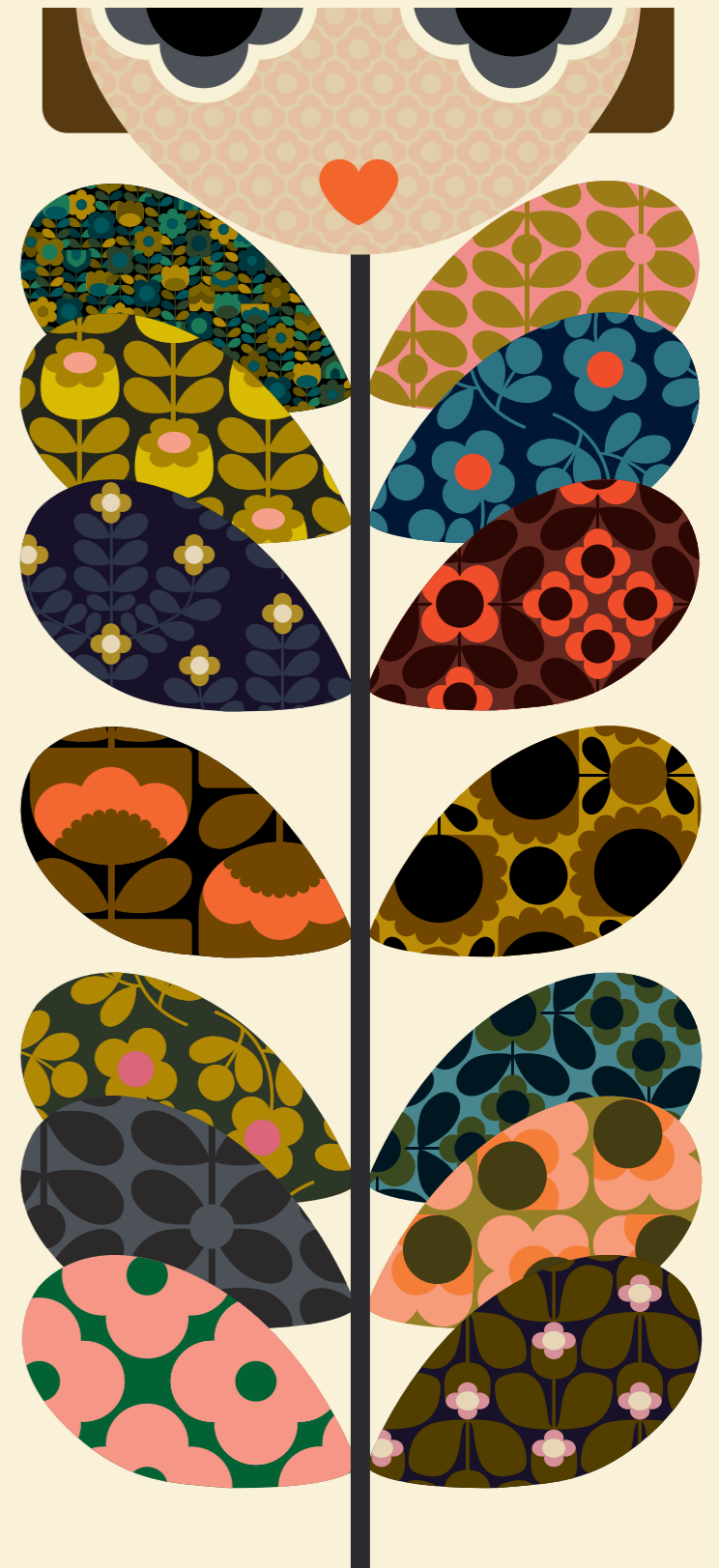
From Autumn/Winter 2017 Emma Summerton has acted as both campaign photographer and director. Atmospheric grainy films are shot on a Super 8, whether in the English country side or inside an ornate 1970's "rococo" London house with model Lily Nova.

Lookbooks and Invitations

'Achieving that degree of consistency, that design signature, means that you must extend the same degree of control to every type of presentation you make.'

Each season over the past decade, Orla Kiely had produced a lookbook, which gives a complete visual tome of each new fashion collection. These lookbooks have been styled by Leith Clark and photographed by Nicole Nodland, Jessie Lily Adams, Damon Heath, Clare Shilland and Olivia Bee. They are given to buyers and press as an aide memoire and create an invaluable archival record of each season's collection.

In addition, a hint of what is to come is provided on each invitation, telling the story of what has inspired the collection. For example, the stamped library jacket gave a clue to a presentation that evoked a complete library, official librarian included. The safari set evoking the distinctive visual style of American film director, Wes Anderson, was announced with a tiger print postcard. A tea dance included its own dance card, perfect for marking those favourite styles.



Orla Kiely

A Life in Pattern

25 May — 23 September 2018

Introduction

‘Growing up in Ireland in the late 1960s and early 1970s was intrinsic to my creative DNA.’

Since receiving her M.A. from the Royal College of Art in 1992, Orla Kiely has built a brand that captures the spirit of a world that yearns for certainty in tumultuous times. Inspired by the upbeat designs of the 1960s and ‘70s, her nostalgia is ours: for those optimistic days of economic recovery, youthful discovery and innocent certainty.

Orla Kiely often recalls her vivid memories of her family kitchen with its olive–green Formica cupboards and worktops, entire walls covered with coordinating green and white patterned tiles, and a striking orange gloss ceiling. Her Irish environment has informed her creative work since she was a student of textile design in Dublin, from 1980–84. During this time she met her husband–to–be, Dermott Rowan, with whom she became partners in both life and business in 1994. As their business grew, so too did their family, with the addition of their sons, Robert and Hamish.

Beginning with wool felted hats commissioned by Harrods and soon expanding into handbag designs, in 1995 Orla presented accessories at London Fashion Week. Buyers from Japan placed the first orders. Working at her kitchen table while also designing freelance for Marks & Spencer and Designers at Debenhams, by 1998 her range had developed to include clothing. Goods were soon being shipped to Paris, New York, Dublin, Tokyo and Hong Kong, and that was just the beginning.

Today globally recognised as the designer of the iconic ‘Stem’ pattern that first appeared in 2000 – a year after she had set up a dedicated design studio – her distinctive patterns now appear on ready–to–wear, fragrance bottles, watches, jewellery, shoes, homewares, wallpapers and more.

Orla Kiely is among a distinguished group of influential designers who have defined the last two centuries. In the same way that C. F. A. Voysey (1857–1941) walked the visual world from William Morris to Modernism, Orla Kiely has walked the world from the Minimalism of the 1990s into a colourful world of 21st century pattern. This exhibition offers a privileged insight into how she creates a characteristic look of our era.

She herself says ‘I sometimes think that my brain works in repeat. I love the order and regiment of repetition, and how anything and everything can be patterned in this way, as if you are looking at the world through a prism or kaleidoscope. It is something that is very beautiful and inspiring to me.’

(This and all other uncredited Orla Kiely quotations taken from A Life in Pattern, 2018, and Pattern, 2010, both published by Conran Octopus.)

Twenty Years in the World of Orla Kiely

‘With few contacts in the industry, we slowly built precious relationships with fabric suppliers, print houses and handbag manufacturers.’

By 1998 international orders were arriving from Saks 5th Ave, New York; Isetan, Tokyo; Lane Crawford, Hong Kong; Le Bon Marché, Paris; and Brown Thomas, Dublin. Other stockists since then have included Selfridges, Harvey Nichols and Fenwick’s, all in London. Beginning in 2004, limited–run collaborations were introduced, the first for Tate Modern. 2010 saw the launch of fragrances under global licensing by KMI Brands Ltd, followed a year later by bags, sleeves and cases for Apple, and limited edition Citroën DS3 cars.

Working directly with manufacturers in the UK, Europe and Asia, Orla Kiely has also collaborated with other companies such as shoemakers Clarks as well as fashion retailer Uniqlo. Other collaborators include Sainsbury’s, Habitat and Target — the design savvy American superstore — while under license she and her design team work with Harlequin on collections of wallpaper, Ashley Wilde on home textiles and Wild & Wolf on home accessories, distributing into stores such John Lewis.

Design Process

‘At the heart of everything I design is pattern.’

Overseeing every single detail within the design process, Orla Kiely is meticulous, motivated, focused and passionate. Prior to production, every aspect matters to her from the first phase of designing to making, mixing colours, creating artwork and sampling.

Each design is developed carefully by drawing and refining the essential organic elements that are the foundations of her instinctively satisfying repeating patterns. Nature — rendered more abstract and graphic — is always a core source of pattern ideas.

Unlike many textile companies, Orla Kiely rarely buys in designs. Instead, pieces are created in their London studio, where she and her team collaborate in response to ideas and concepts for the season. Only when the designer herself is satisfied, does the concept move on to the production stage. By this time, many more iterations of each idea have been rejected than approved.

Development

‘I believe in hard work.’

Once a concept has been approved there are still several stages before any product reaches the customer. Clear instructions are formulated through technical drawings that express an entire 360° view of the product, inside and out.

Selected manufacturers are then instructed to produce first prototypes or samples. The arrival of these in the studio is always the moment of truth. The team studies these items carefully, looking especially to see if the character of the design on paper is expressed in the sample and if the engineering of the product functions. Designs are adjusted if necessary or, if approved, signed off.

Alongside showroom appointments, selling platforms such as London Fashion Week, Paris Fashion Week and tradeshows in the U.S., where orders are taken six months ahead of delivery, quantify and inform the final production runs. The same process occurs with licensing partners across homewares and lifestyle products, building in enough time to ensure quality in design, form and function.

Promotion

‘I believe in a clear vision.’

The Orla Kiely product is sold in over 33 countries. Through strategic marketing campaigns and investment in photoshoots and film–making with world class photographers, film makers, artists and set designers, the company has garnered favourable attention from the world’s press. Their archive documents some 20 years of achievements in this competitive arena.

Orla Kiely clothing, handbags, accessories and homewares have been featured in films, TV shows and even a novel, ‘Girl on a Train’. Additionally covered in numerous magazines and newspapers, recent press credits include Vogue, Violet Book, Harper’s Bazaar, The Sunday Times, You and Grazia magazines. Orla herself has been profiled around the world in print, digital and broadcasting media.

Equal attention is paid to the realisation of their own retail flagship stores in London, New York and Korea. Situated in Covent Garden and Chelsea, the London stores were designed by Gerard Taylor, whom Orla met during his time with the Memphis Group in Milan (1981–88).

Community

‘I believe in the power of integrity.’

The Dublin–born designer has been called a ‘quiet force’ in the industry, and this energy extends well beyond the profit motive. In the background are numerous initiatives in relation to the environment, sustainability and charitable work.

Environmental projects have included reusable water bottles for Britta and the I Count Campaign, their 2008 Green Stem eco–conscious collection of handbags and Kenco Millicano’s eco coffee mug, 2013. Fifteen different Tesco ‘Bags For Life’ since 2011, contribute to Macmillan Cancer Support and a bursary for textile students at the Royal College of Art.

The Print Library

‘Pattern is not a trend for me, to be taken up one minute and abandoned the next when the winds of fashion change. Pattern is in me. It is my life.’

Since establishing her brand with partner Dermott Rowan in the 1990s, a library of Orla Kiely patterns has been built. Colour and texture are the key components in a graphic approach that sees motifs pared back to a seemingly simple but carefully constructed forms, then assembled into systematic and orderly arrangements.

The company’s ever–changing collections of seasonal prints now exceed over 500 artworks that range from novel interpretations of animal forms to iterations of flowers and plants as seen in iconic prints as such as ‘Stem’, ‘Flower Oval’ and ‘Shadow Flower’. In fact, many designs created by others in a similar vein are often described as very ‘Orla Kiely’ or ‘Orla Kiely style’, appellations that confirm the widespread recognition of her signature style.

Stem

‘Stem has been good to us. It has been the land on which the house was built.’

The now–iconic ‘Stem’ pattern started as a quick sketch while brainstorming print ideas. Since its introduction in 2000, it has been reinvented every season through changes in colour, scale, texture and many other graphic devices. Used on a myriad of products, it has even in recent years patterned a London Transport bus. Iterations designed over the years have also incorporated flowers in a variety of shapes and sizes, to refresh the pattern continually. The result is a library of designs, each different, yet keeping the same shared sensibilities.

Few patterns become so well known. The reason for the success of ‘Stem’ may well be found in The Bases of Design (London: George Bell & Sons, p.353), written by Walter Crane in 1898, when he was principal of the Royal College of Art: ‘A form of ornament once found...is repeated. The eye grows accustomed to its recurrence. It becomes established by use and wont, and is often associated with fundamental ideas of life and the universe itself.’

Colour

‘My taste for colour has been influenced by my childhood.’

Orla Kiely is conscious of her debt to the Irish landscape. Her love for greens from moss to seaweed, the greys and browns of huge skies and rolling hills, the mustard yellow of gorse and the wild flowers on roadside verges, all merged with colourations initially inspired by the fashionable tones of the 1950s and 60s, now mutated in response to 21st century aesthetics.

She developed her colouring skill in a New York design studio, where during 1984–5 she mixed gouache paints by hand. She learned the subtleties of colour: how to affect the tones, how to make a colour chalky or clean or dirty.

This experience is reflected, not only in Orla Kiely ranges, but in books that include — for children Numbers, Colours, Shapes and Creatures (Egmont 2011 and 2012) — as well as the Conran Octopus Colouring Book of 2016.

Lifestyle

‘As a backdrop to everyday life, homes have many practical roles to play.’

From their first floor Victorian flat, which doubled as a design studio, office and distribution centre, to more spacious London living, Orla Kiely’s aesthetic has led to the creation of spacious, Modernist–inspired pattern–filled homes. Her admiration for mid–century British, Irish and Scandinavian architecture is reflected in her 2013 book, Home, published by Octopus Publishing Group.

Equally, her love of 1960s’ design is apparent in items produced in tandem with other design–led firms that themselves oversee the manufacturing process to high standards. One such is Heals, through which Orla Kiely launched their first homeware range in 2004. And as re–workings of mid–century classics go, there may be non more appropriate than her collaboration with Citroën when, in 2011, they revamped their DS3 line with a limited edition model sporting an Orla Kiely modernist–inspired interior complete with an orange desk light.

Detail

‘Detail, no matter how subtle, can make all the difference. My fussiness frustrates even me on occasion.’

Orla Kiely products make an impact from a distance, but they are also rewarding to look at in close detail. A wide range of materials vary the tactile qualities from hard and glossy to soft and textured. Whether embroidery, knitwear, towels or printed doodles and scribbles, all offer rich surface embellishments. Clasps, buttons and key–rings are just some of the small elements made special by Orla’s attention to every aspect of her ranges.

Detail is also considered in the continuity of design, which results in an item such as a paperclip formed into the same shape as the pattern on its container. In addition, whether in a handbag or sunglasses, the juxtaposition of contrasting textures, patterns and colours are an equally important part of the Orla Kiely style. Even the seemingly ephemeral packaging is carefully considered and has become an important aspect of the brand.