

To say textile designer Aleta Bartel-Orton has an eye for colour is perhaps an understatement. By her own admission, most printers 'grow to hate me' – it can take up to 16 colour strikes before she accepts a colour match. But her fastidious approach to colour is why interior designers turn to her for fabric colour schemes when dealing with customers including the Princess of Jordan and Lord Rothschild.

As a textile designer with exacting standards, it is surprising to hear of her newfound enthusiasm for digital printing – and plans to shift her entire production in this direction.

But she is unequivocal on the matter. It is the way forward for fashion, for interiors, and for reigniting the UK's role in the textiles industry.

'I had the very same preconceptions to begin

with,' she admits. 'I only associated digital printing with photographs on roller blinds.'

But after refusing to try it for some time, she decided to let a printing house provide a sample for her. The results were impressive.

'Even the bleed that occurs with natural dyes is transferred on to the fabric; at the same time you can achieve a finer outline to the patterns than with a hand-blocked article,' she enthuses.

Bartel-Orton's penchant is for interior textiles that bring natural colours into the home. While studying fabric design in her native Canada, she researched natural dyes, and learned to admire the subtleties they bring to the colour palette.

'Once your eye becomes more attuned to natural shades, going back to colours that are chemically produced can make them appear garish.

'Unfortunately the colours that saturate the lower end of the market are often bright dominant colours, which are not as suited to our Northern lights; you rarely find these colours in Scandinavian design,' she explains.

Natural dyes however, are not always practical or feasible to use and Bartel-Orton's challenge is to imitate natural palettes using reactive dyes.

Working with interior designers, she is looking for transitions in her working method that will improve business and aesthetics.

'With digital printing, there is no minimum order for quantities; you can print bespoke colours, and work in infinite sizes.

'Repeats also work out perfectly. Working mostly in floral and striped patterns this is crucial. When printing by eye, repeats are ever-so-slightly

Switching to digital textile printing has allowed Aleta Bartel-Orton to stay ahead of copyists and looks set to boost the UK industry, says Rachel Calton

Natural progress



out of line – not infinite,’ says Bartel-Orton.

When working with interior designers who are very demanding, consistency is also important. ‘With hand-printing, no two batches ever match exactly which, when someone wants to order fabric to match existing furnishings, is a problem.’

The turnaround time for producing patterns using digital is also a lot shorter, and Bartel-Orton is looking to create more new patterns a year than previously. Bringing out more new patterns also doubles as her defence against inter-industry copying.

‘In an industry where it is impossible to keep your designs exclusive, the only way to avoid imitation is to stay ahead. As soon as people have copied one colour combination, I just have to make sure I’ve moved on to a new one, with new patterns to communicate it.’

‘Like the fashion industry, the interior industry is beginning to pick up pace in terms of trend cycles. To be able to bring out more designs a year means I will be in a better position to keep on top of this.’

‘With hand printing you have to cut new screens for every new motif; with digital I can use existing motifs to vary my designs, and can shrink and expand them to fit different fabrics and new design specs,’ she says.

Although shifting some existing designs over to digital has meant investing in a design twice, with digital printing costing around a quarter of the price for the quantities she works in, there is no question that the move will be cost effective. It will also bring quality control close to home, and means

designs can be turned round closer to a month.

‘Going over to digital means that I can afford to have my prints done in the UK, which cuts down on the many channels of communication that working abroad entails.’

‘When I am evaluating, and reevaluating colour strikes, it helps to have someone who shares your ambition, and can make the process of backward and forwarding manageable.’

Macclesfield, once the fashion capital of the UK, now houses one of the UK’s biggest remaining textile printers – RA Smarts – which has, over the past two years, made the transition to digital printing.

‘When I was working with countries such as China and India, shipping time could be four to six weeks. For air freight there was huge premium to pay, now I can TNT things for £5.’

‘I have been told that when working in very high volumes, it is still less expensive to screen print fabrics in China, but it too is gradually making the switch. China is technically quite up to date, so I am sure they will be not that far behind with digital printing. Once it is an option that is readily available, the advantages will undeniably push the industry in this direction.’

The only setback for digital printing at the moment is that, because it is a new, developing technology, not every hurdle has been jumped.

‘You can’t print using white pigment. It is not a dye like the other colours, it is thicker in consistency and the jets have not yet been developed for it.’

But this is not holding Bartel-Orton back; as

consumers demand an ever more natural approach to all aspects of living, from what they eat to the way they decorate their home, her application of digital means to obtain natural results is, for the moment, only driving business forward.

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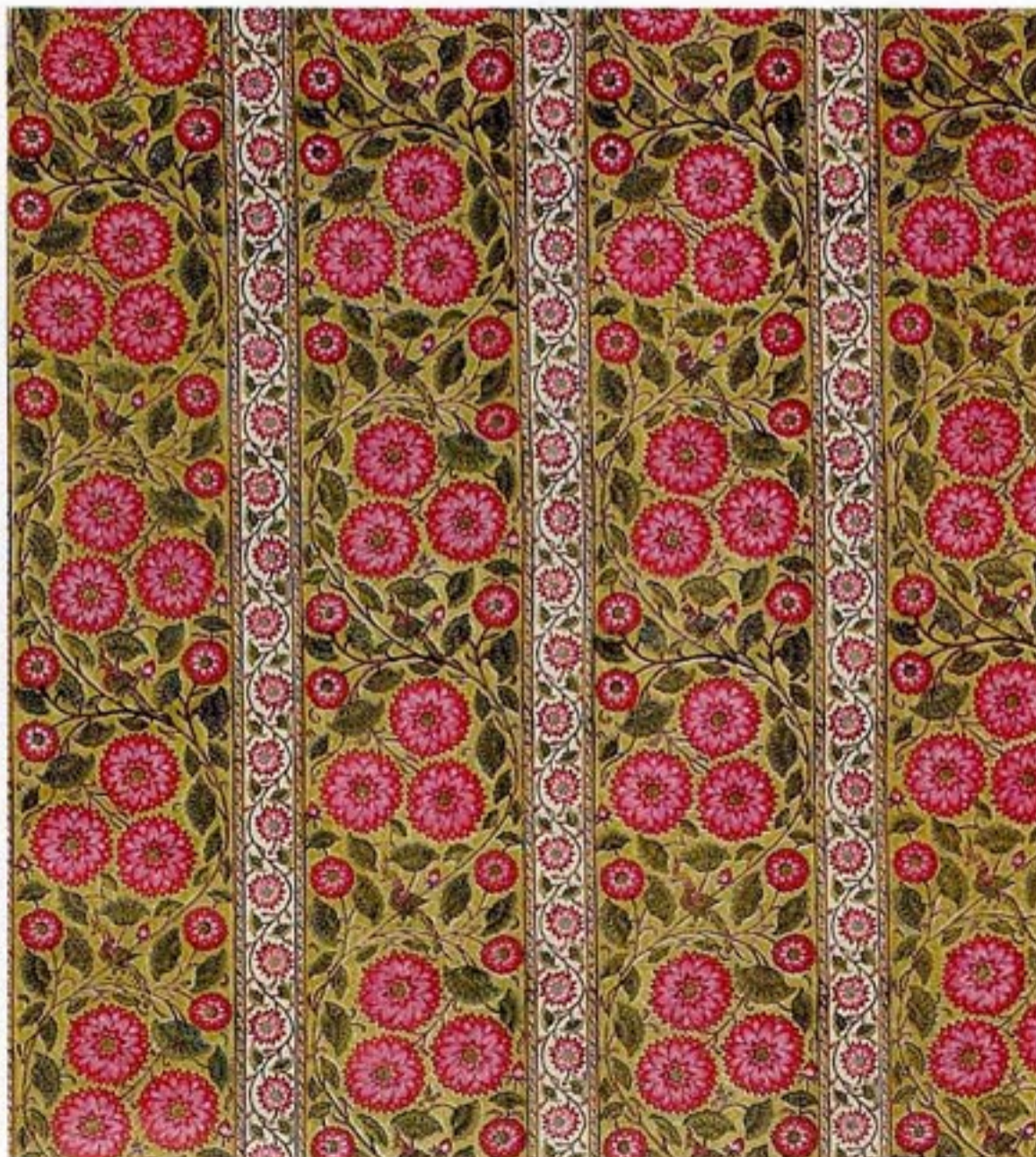
Interior motives

Aleta Bartel-Orton came to the UK after studying at the Nova Scotia University of Art and Design to manage a fashion company.

She soon made the transition into interior design under the banner of her own company, Aleta in 2003; allowing her to put her own designs on to the market, at the same time as distributing Indian block printed textiles by Brigitte Singh.

Her work is mainly with interior designers but recent collaborations, including one with an outdoor furniture wholesaler, mean that her designs will be appearing on products on sale in John Lewis and on a range of outdoor tiling.

Long term, Bartel-Orton harbours a desire to put her own interiors range of cushion covers, curtains and lampshades on to the market through top end boutique retailers.



Aleta Bartel-Orton surrounded by her textiles, from left: Red Larissa; Blue Iris; Grey Iris Buta; and Red Lotus Floral stripe