

Isabella Cawdor, who immediately decked their walls in Armitage's 'Tansy', 'Angelica' and 'Jungle Birds'. I first saw her work a few years ago. I have never stroked wallpaper before; but there is something so velvety, sensuous, so utterly beguiling about the texture and design of Armitage's work that I wanted to be enveloped, surrounded and cocooned by it.

Born in 1930, Armitage went to art school, but an early marriage and pregnancy took precedence over a career. 'Paintings and babies don't go together,' she says, before adding: 'Anyway, having babies is hugely creative.' The family lived in a cottage close to the Thames. 'We didn't have a garden and I used to push the pram around the streets of Chiswick looking at other peoples'. When the children got a bit older and went to school, I decided to make wallpaper covered with flowers so that I, too, could have a kind of garden in the house.'

She made her early designs by etching into lino, before covering the surface with ink and placing the block face-down on cheap paper. Then she stood on it 'for an age' until the image took. Soon, Armitage had covered her walls with a fantasy garden, but realised that this way of working wasn't very efficient. So, in the early 1960s, Armitage found an old press in Brixton and bought it for £160. She still uses the machine, but now works side by side with her daughter, Jo. It is a laborious process – the same roll is often printed and over-printed with different, hand-mixed colours. The paper and lino blocks must be carefully aligned; one mistake, and the batch is ruined.

On a good day, Armitage can produce between four and six rolls only. It's skilful, backbreaking work. 'I wish when people, occasionally, complain about slight variations in colour, they could understand how difficult this is,' Jo says, coaxing the wheel over the paper. As if by magic, birds, cobwebs, fronds and petals appear in duck-egg blue. In the next pass, a greyer colour will highlight the background and create a pagoda.

The studio is just big enough for two people. A large chest holds old offcuts. Paint pots sit on open shelves. Stacked lino blocks wait for their turn on the press. Rolls of paper are curled up in one corner. Grubby cloths are heaped on the floor. A colour swatch is pinned to the wall. An ancient Roberts radio is the most modern object in the room.

With her pudding-basin haircut, buttoned-up shirt and long skirt, Armitage looks like Dora Carrington, but has more in common, perhaps, with Vanessa Bell, a co-founder of the Omega Workshops, the interior-design element of the Bloomsbury movement, which aimed to create beautiful, functional objects and do



away with the divisions between the decorative and fine arts. Armitage's influences can be traced all the way back to the masters of 17th-century woodblocks and to the late-19th-century arts & crafts movement; her hero is William Morris.

Armitage's drawing studio, a table in the corner of the family's kitchen, is located a few doors away from the printing press.

The walls are hung with her paper and drawings; cushions

are made from linen printed with her own patterns. 'I have done about 30 or 40 designs over my lifetime,' she explains. 'The older I get, the longer it takes. It would be easy to be lazy and sit in the sun, but I love drawing.' These days, she works for up to an hour and a half at a time. Armitage shows me preliminary sketches and scraps of inspiration for a new wallpaper: a photograph of an Elizabethan stately home, a watercolour of a biplane, a kitchen garden, horses and riders wending their way along a tree-lined track.

She works on an idea until that moment when 'I know it's right; when I get that feeling'. Her wish is 'to inspire people to

go back to the drawing board'. Computer-based design is, for her, a poor relation as it offers too much choice, too quickly. I suggest that she uses her design as a form of personal escape that started years earlier with her fantasy garden. Armitage nods. 'I suppose I am making my own [inner] world. Chiswick is Chiswick. I have been here all my life and not travelled much. I rely on books and imagination.' While she is unlikely to allow a machine to mass-produce her wallpaper, there are plans to permit another manufacturer to replicate her designs on linen and in a larger format. She fetches the prototypes, rolling out examples of patterns on the table, talking about new colourways and ideas with excitement. It's hard to believe she is an 83-year-old great-grandmother. 'I didn't used to think [my work] was important, but I see that there is so little of this quality around,' she says in her half-fierce, half-shy way, flashing a broad grin, which she immediately hides with the back of her hand.

Arriving home, I walk around wondering where else to hang her paper. Hot off the press is a new design: wildflowers scattered on gold-backed paper. It could go anywhere; the temptation is to put it everywhere.

Visit www.hamiltonweston.com; wallpaper can take up to three months to create.

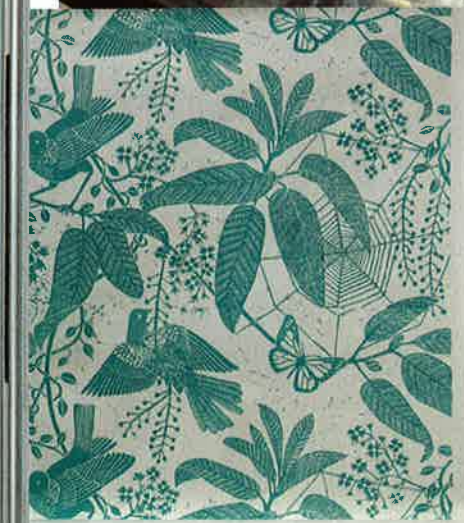
ON A ROLL

Recognition has been a long time coming for Marthe Armitage, but her hand-printed wallpaper is now gracing homes across the globe.

HANNAH ROTHSCHILD meets her

Marthe Armitage had to wait 72 years for a first sniff of success. For nearly five decades she worked alone, designing and hand-printing wallpaper on her kitchen floor or in a tiny shed in Chiswick, west London. Although friends liked and bought her work, Armitage failed to find a wider audience. 'I showed it to decorators, but none of them got it,' she says, remembering long, fruitless walks in central London knocking on design-shop doors. Then, 11 years ago, a rave review in *The World of Interiors* acted like a spark to kindling; soon her paper was hanging on some of the hippest walls in Europe, America and Australia.

The actress Tilda Swinton and the model Stella Tennant were among the first to champion Armitage's work; they showed it to friends, the garden designer Miranda Brooks and entrepreneur



A selection of Marthe Armitage's hand-printed papers; paint pots in her studio; and her floral inspirations. Centre: Armitage in her garden. Opposite: printing one of her original designs