

## Interiors

# A passion for pattern

Tess Newall has taken time off from painting murals to design a collection of wallpaper and lampshades, finds Eleanor Doughty

Photographs by Alun Callender

**A**s a small child, Tess Newall would paint on the floor of her mother Sally Oyler's studio. Aged seven, she graduated to depicting a sunset on her bedroom wall, 'red at the bottom, and sponged to become yellow at the top'. Turning that childhood whim into a highly successful business painting murals and furniture was well timed; the demand for Arts-and-Crafts-inspired decorative painting about which she is passionate is on the rise—and, with it, what she describes as a 'positive shift in the value that people place on the handmade and the hand-painted'.

The revival of murals, Mrs Newall says, also coincides with 'people being braver with colour'. Plus, she adds, 'people working from home want to feel that they are in a place that is inspiring and thoughtful'. The problem is that the amount that any painter can produce is finite, so she recently launched her own collection of wallpapers and lampshades with a similar feel to those that she paints by hand. Her Folk Flower collection came about when experimenting with a potato print, using only three motifs to create a pattern reminiscent of traditional folk decoration. The wallpaper has been traditionally surface printed, giving the texture and imperfection of the original artwork. Handmade lampshades with complementary trims complete the collection. →

**Tess Newall's new Folk Flower collection is reminiscent of traditional folk decoration**







**Above:** Tess Newall merges hand-painting with other techniques such as stencilling in her exquisite work. **Right:** This Bloomsbury-inspired fireplace panelling and fire screen is part of a collaboration with Kit Kemp



Brought up in East Lothian, the designer travelled to Sri Lanka after leaving school to help with the tsunami relief. It was there, on a beach, that she applied to read archaeology and anthropology at Oxford, having become fascinated by Sri Lankan cultural traditions. After graduating from Oxford, she went to work at creative agency WPP. One of her accounts was Marks & Spencer and 'I loved being on their shoots, where I would help the set designers and prop makers'. Through this work, she met the set designer Clementine Keith-Roach and began work as her assistant, going on to design and paint sets for films. In 2018, when pregnant, she completed her last film job, *Vita & Virginia*, about the Bloomsbury Group.

She fell into decorative painting—a career she didn't know existed—almost by accident, when her husband, the furniture designer Alfred Newall, was working with interior decorator Beata Heuman. 'I had painted a mural for a friend which Beata saw, and she asked if I could paint a border here, or a mural there,' says Mrs Newall. Soon enough, she had found a new outlet for her creativity and, in a short period of time, has painted everything from bedrooms decorated to look like circus tents to cabin beds at Frampton Court in Gloucestershire.

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The decorator Isabella Worsley has worked with her on a number of projects, including the decoration of treehouse hotel Callow Hall in Derbyshire. 'Tess has such a lovely softness to her designs,' she says. 'I love how she works with different formats, merging stencilling and hand-painting and dappling—it's the blending of all of those techniques that gives her really lovely end results. She is such a joy to work with, always excited by what she's doing.' Mrs Newall has also collaborated with Kit Kemp, the creative dynamo behind Firmdale Hotels, owners of the Ham Yard in London and the Whitby in New York.

The Newalls both work and live together, with their three children, and, says Mrs Newall, 'we bounce off each other'. They're not in competition for work; indeed, they often come as a package, with pieces made by Mr Newall and painted by his wife. For Mrs Newall, who was brought up on illustrations by Arthur Rackham and Elsa Beskow, painting is a calling. 'I love the satisfaction of it, I really do. I'm excited about the product collection, but I never want to stop painting.' In retrospect, she feels lucky that she gave up her place at Chelsea. 'If I had gone to art school, a tutor might have said that my work is too decorative.'

She defends her trade against those who might not consider decorative painting to be 'proper art'. 'Some people think that my time is purely spent painting flowers on walls, but I work really hard five days a week. When you're out on a job, you're leaving home at 6am with a car full of paints, ladders and scaffolding towers. It's much more physical than people realise.' Perhaps, she reflects, you've got to be quite tough to be a decorative painter. 'Often, I'm painting in very awkward situations, and I like that challenge—although I do have a sore neck a lot of the time.' Visit [www.tessnewall.com](http://www.tessnewall.com)