

Decorating With Amped-Up Floral Patterns

Floral décor is acquiring new, magnified appeal as traditional purveyors of fabrics and wallpapers—from Laura Ashley to Liberty—up the scale of their patterns



IN LIEU OF TINY FLOWERS | A guest bedroom designed by Madcap Cottage featuring overscale ‘Baron’ wallpaper by Thibaut.

PHOTO: JOHN BESSLER

By David A. Keeps

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WHEN DESIGNERS Jason Oliver Nixon and John Loecke, creators of the Madcap Cottage décor brand, decided to refresh their 1840s upstate New York home, they made an unconventionally conventional choice: a turbocharged take on traditional florals. They covered walls in an extroverted peony-print wallpaper, upholstered furniture in fabric crowded with gregarious geraniums and hung drapes whose “stripes” were formed by a regiment of roses. This bouquet of florals all came from Laura Ashley, the British fabric

and wallpaper firm that dominated American decorating during the heyday of “Little House on the Prairie” and Ralph Lauren denim skirts.

But these patterns deviate from the demure Laura Ashley look of the 1970s. “Laura Ashley brought an English country sensibility to American design,” said Mr. Nixon of the firm’s original florals. “Now they are changing the scale, tweaking the colors and backgrounds and creating patterns that have a more painterly, organic feel.” The refreshing results, he added, are “a terrific tonic for [Americans’] hectic schedules and hyper-technological world.”

With all the attention being paid to heritage brands, it’s perhaps unsurprising that, after 60-plus years, Laura Ashley has become revitalized. With 450 retail stores around the world, a hotel in England’s Lake District and a new U.S. website, the design house is re-engaging those who grew up with it as children in the 1970s and ’80s. Its rebirth is arguably part of a movement. Decorators have lately been referencing gutsy floral interiors—Dorothy Draper’s Greenbrier Hotel, Diana Vreeland’s red “garden in hell” living room—and embracing bold flowery prints by other storied fabric houses including Pierre Frey, Rose Cumming and Liberty of London, which launched a new Interiors Collection this January in Paris.



LIBERTY ART FABRICS—INTERIORS JEFFERY ROSE TREE FABRIC, \$220 PER YARD, THOMAS LAVIN, 310-278-2456

PHOTO: F. MARTIN RAMIN/THE WALL STREET JOURNAL, STYLING BY ANNE CARDENAS

A Bolder Liberty Print | “All the top-end British companies are pushing the boundaries,” said Libertyc Interiors Head of Design, Emma Mawston, of this newly designed, hand-drawn pattern. “Currentlyc there is a real vibe for large botanical creations.”

PEONY GARDEN FABRIC, \$48 PER YARD,
LAURAASHLEYUSA.COM

PHOTO: F. MARTIN RAMIN/THE WALL STREET JOURNAL, STYLING BY ANNE CARDENAS

Potent Peonies | “We continually pull from our history but do it in new ways,” said Penne Cairoli,c president of Laura Ashley. “Our signature lorals have grown from ditsy-small to oversized designs,c and we’ve added new colorations like amethyst, chamomile and duck egg.”



NOTABLY INDISCREET FLORAL FABRICS

ROSE CUMMING CHESTNUT LEAVES FABRIC BY DESSIN FOURNIR, \$96 PER YARD, ROSE CUMMING, 785-434-2725

PHOTO: F. MARTIN RAMIN/THE WALL STREET JOURNAL, STYLING BY ANNE CARDENAS



Statement Foliage | “There’s nothing happier, more vibrant, nostalgic...and passionate than acdramatic loral. It’s an instant mood elevator,” said designer Sasha Emerson, who prefers patterns where retro meets modernism. “Rose Cumming’s use of lorals was always restrained,” said , president of Dessin Fournir.

But if these florals don’t exactly sync with old-school Laura Ashley delicacy, neither are they the mod, graphic, stylized blossoms of Marimekko, Lily Pulitzer and a host of contemporary design houses. Rather, despite a bump-up in the scale and color of many patterns, they represent the more intricately naturalistic 19th- and early-20th-century floral renderings found on vintage wallpapers and chintz, a glazed-cotton fabric that was last seriously in vogue when Anna Wintour declared it so as the editor of House and Garden in the late 1980s.

The New York design firm Tilton Fenwick has dubbed the look “granny chic.” “We are trained in very traditional design and are admirers of some of the most classic floral patterns,” said co-owner Suysel dePedro Cunningham. In a range of projects, including its own offices, the firm is using historical fabrics in line with the new Miracle-Gro aesthetic, such as Pierre Frey’s Le Grand Corail (designed in the mid-1800s by the firm Braquenie), an oversize floral featuring thick, virile stalks and blooms as big as cabbages. “In our design work, we can’t think of a place where we wouldn’t use floral prints,” Ms. Cunningham added. “Walls, headboards, even lampshades.”

The appeal, even to those who are not deprived of flowers by drought, is plain. “Post-recession, people are suffering from frugal fatigue. They want something joyful and happy,” said Los Angeles designer Kathleen Di Paolo, who grew up in a room “that was decorated top to bottom in forest green Laura Ashley fabrics.” That company’s new bigger, brighter floral prints trigger nostalgia, she added, “but it’s a nod to the past with a modern flair.”

Indeed, with the advances of digital printing, “floral prints can be offered in new exciting looks that a younger generation identify as theirs,” said Liberty Interiors Head of Design, Emma Mawston. Trading on its vast archives, which include prints by William Morris, the master of the British Arts and Crafts movement in the late 1800s, Liberty fabrics have been retooled (and in some cases magnified or designed from scratch) for 21st-century interiors, said Thomas Lavin, who represents the collections at his showrooms in Los Angeles and Laguna Beach.

Not every traditional fabric house is revamping its offerings, however: prints by Rose Cumming, the groundbreaking decorator who took Manhattan by storm in the 1920s, have always been overscale. “They’re timeless and convey a sense of elegance that’s hard to replicate,” said Chuck Comeau, president of Dessin Fournir, which in 2005 acquired Ms. Cumming’s floral designs. He said that younger generations, who came of age in a time of minimalism and stark modernism, are particularly responding to the prints.

Updated or not, oversize florals can be used in new ways that “move the design needle forward,” said Mr. Nixon, who drafts them for both period settings and clean-lined contemporary spaces, often as upholstery to breathe new life into antiques and midcentury furniture.

But unless you’re Mario Buatta, New York-based designer and self-proclaimed Prince of Chintz, be careful not to overdo it. “Mix florals with stripes and solids, and play with scale,” Los Angeles interior designer Sasha Emerson advised. “I would never do a whole room in the same pattern. But I might wallpaper an entire room in a crazy floral, go very modern with the furnishings, throw in a Noguchi lantern and call it a day.”