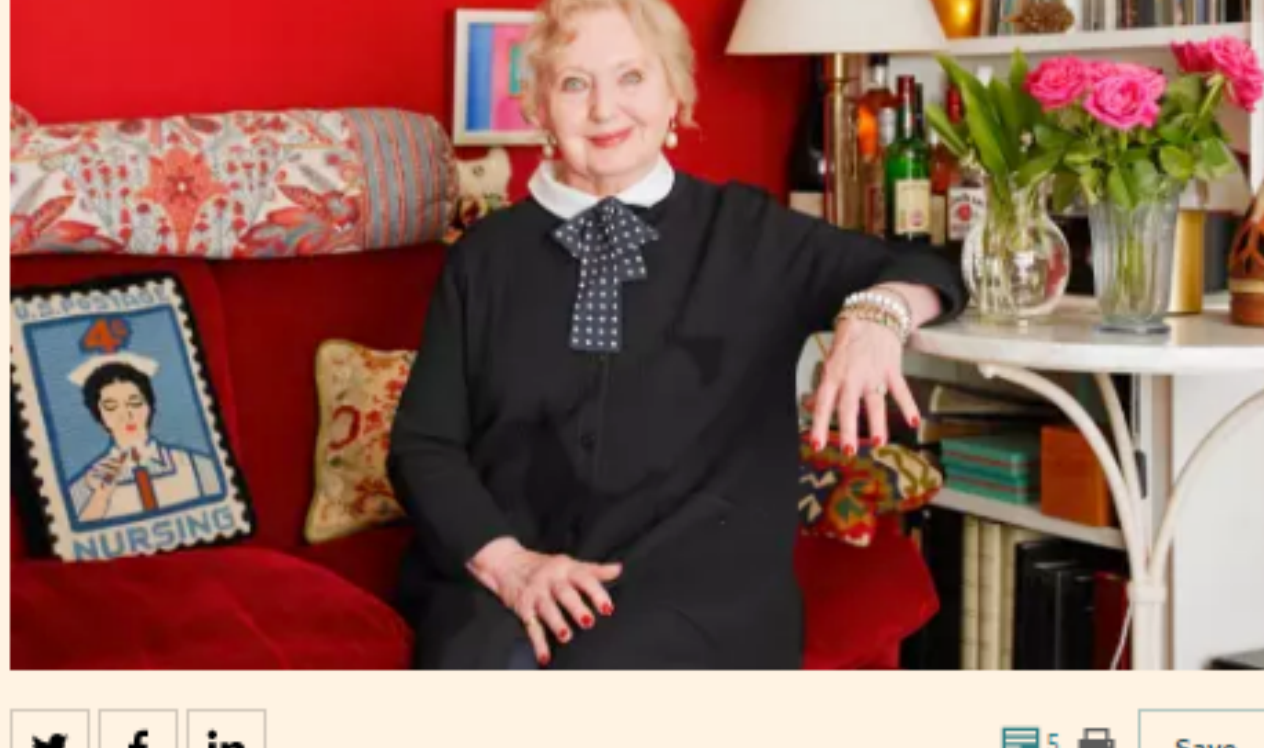


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Celia Birtwell: 'I was a rather naughty girl'



Save

MAY 29, 2015 by: [Lucie Muir](#)

I was saved by art school

I was just 14 when I went to study textiles at Salford School of Art. It was the last of the junior art schools and I loved it. I was a rather naughty girl in ordinary education, and was saved by art school probably because I thought everyone was like me.

The artist [LS Lowry](#) would often show up on the steps of the art school building, dressed in a long raincoat. One of his paintings hung outside the headmaster's office. I think he depicted that area — old Salford — brilliantly.

We did a bit of lithography, some printing and pottery, but I wasn't sure what I wanted to specialise in. I saw things in pattern form. I'm not a painter — that's something else. I'm always analysing things and looking at objects which are pleasing on the eye. There was this lovely teacher who taught us how to print fabric, so I guess that's where my love of textile design really began.

Meeting Ossie

In 1960, I went to London for a summer holiday and never went back. Somehow fate has always played a big role in my life; I seem to tumble into things by chance. I did various jobs when I first arrived in London. I had already met Ossie Clark [the womenswear designer and her future husband], at the Cona Coffee Bar in Manchester. We became pals at first. My mother really liked him. I thought he was very exciting but probably a lot of trouble. He was also amazing looking. He had these extraordinary clothes, wrinkle-pickers and a Beatles hair-do — long before The Beatles. That was the art-school look. We obviously liked each other, which was a plus.

When Ossie was at the RCA [Royal College of Art], I would visit him there. Lots of my friends are still from those RCA days and everybody automatically thinks I was a student there. I wasn't, but I've stopped arguing about it. I say to myself: "Oh, let them think it."



With Ossie Clark, 1971

Our styles worked well together because they were opposites. My romantic painterly prints seemed to marry with his structured, brilliant shapes. From the outset, in 1965, I realised he had a real talent for constructing 3D forms and was an incredible pattern cutter. I know Yves Saint Laurent gets all the credit for creating the trouser suit but I really think it was down to Ossie.

We married in 1969 and worked together for 10 years. I think our real heyday was between 1967 and '73, with all the printed chiffons and the snakes-and-ladders motifs. Back then we used a dense, coloured pigment which would stick on the table. You would have to peel it off, but we always got the look we wanted.

Who's that funny blond guy?



With David Hockney, 1983

I first saw [David \[Hockney\]](#) walking along Portobello Road and remember thinking: "Who's that funny blond guy?" It was only when Peter Schlesinger became his partner that I really got to know him. Peter would often come round to my flat for tea and David would collect him. I think David and I instantly liked each other. I'm from Lancashire, he's from Yorkshire... then Peter disappeared and David was heartbroken, so I became his confidante.

I don't know how I feel about David's portrait of Ossie and me, "Mr and Mrs Clark and Percy". When I look at it, I can't separate myself from it. On the day it was painted, we went round to David's studio in Powis Terrace, Notting Hill. He had already taken photos of us standing in position as part of a series of double portraits but I was wearing a different dress in those shots — a powder-blue djellaba.

David painted Ossie's face several times. I also remember him painting the shag pile carpet over Ossie's toes because he couldn't get his feet right.

Starting over

Ossie and I divorced in 1974 and I went back to teaching, which I'd done in Salford. Later I started designing again but couldn't really find the enthusiasm without Ossie. In the early 1980s I was told about a shop to rent in Westbourne Park Road. I thought it would be lovely to work for myself again and, since I love a challenge, I decided to specialise in home furnishings. That was in 1984 and the shop ran for 25 years.

Back in fashion



In her studio, 1969

Another chance meeting occurred in 2001, this time with the design duo Suzanne Clements and Inacio Ribeiro. They were working as creative directors for Cacharel at the time and commissioned me to do four print collections. It was good to be back in fashion. Shortly after, I made a decision to be more commercial and do more licensing projects. My prints then appeared on everything, from tents for Millets, the outdoor brand, to packaging for Boots the chemist.

We used a lot of Ossie's shapes in my 2006 collection for Topshop. It was a huge success and brought me to a whole new audience who I'm sure had never heard of me. My printed silk dresses for Uniqlo was another fun project.

Last year, I was asked to design prints on socks and tights for Jonathan Aston's 50th anniversary collection. It was quite tricky, as I had to wrap the patterns around feet and legs. [Zandra Rhodes](#) was designing on the same line. We go back years. One Christmas, many moons ago, we went away to Italy. We sort of fell out after that trip. Everyone thought it was over our careers, when in fact it was because of nothing more than a disappointing holiday.

Then Valentino happened



My daughter-in-law Bella, who works for me, kept saying I had to shine at the top end of fashion. That's when [Valentino](#) happened. The designers, Pierpaolo Piccioli and Maria Grazia Chiuri, are a damn good team. Bella and I were invited to Rome to see the studio and couture collections. They're housed in this stunning building with high ceilings and gorgeous things everywhere.

They asked me to do something around Botticelli's "Primavera" for pre-fall 2015, so I did lots of drawings of plants and flowers. I've never seen my work on such exquisite fabrics; brocade, jacquard, embroidered lace. All the Valentino prints are new, I've not used any archive. For the AW15 show, I came up with a mad dragon pattern, the "funky dragon". I like him — he's pretty bizarre. I still paint prints in gouache by hand before I put them on computer and wriggle them around. If I didn't paint them first, they would have no soul.

Letting go of the past



Celia Birtwell in front of David Hockney's 'Mr and Mrs Clark and Percy' (1970-71)

I moved recently, and now have less room — and even less time — to worry about many of my treasures from the past. I've had my collection of Ossie's clothes for many years. They are beautiful, and should be in the hands of those who love clothes and will be able to fully appreciate them, so I have reluctantly decided to put my collection up for auction. I'd be delighted if the beautiful dress

I wore in the picture "Mr and Mrs Clark and Percy" could be bought by a museum, so many people can enjoy it.

Keeping things simple

The tiny cottage I share with my partner Andrew in Shropshire has a garden, big enough for him to keep bees. It is an isolated place — sometimes you never see a soul. I like to get my paintbrushes out and paint cards for my grandchildren and friends. People think I have a huge studio but I don't. I have a small desk, paints, a lightbox and paper. That's all you ever really need.



Celia Birtwell was speaking to [Lucie Muir](#).

Birtwell's archive will be auctioned in the *Passion for Fashion* sale on June 23, [kerrytaylorauctions.com](#)

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