

Clare Taylor - 1960s vinyl wallpaper

CLARE TAYLOR: Hello. I'm Clare Taylor, and I'm a lecturer in art history at The Open University. And I specialise in the history of design in the home. I'm particularly interested in how we choose to decorate our rooms, especially in what we choose to hang on our walls.

And the item that I have today is not from the collection of a museum or gallery. Rather, it belonged to one of my female relatives. But it isn't a precious item such as an item of jewellery. Rather, it's a roll of wallpaper made probably in Britain in the 1960s.

It's actually not wallpaper at all, but rather a vinyl wall covering, as the paper has been coated in vinyl. Which gives it a silky, slightly textured surface, helping the pattern reflect the light. This process also makes the paper much stronger than it would be otherwise. At the ends of the rolls, the coating is starting to separate slightly from the paper below.

Vinyl coating was a new manufacturing process introduced in the early 1960s, which was used both for its visual effects but was also advertised as a surface which could easily be wiped clean. Over the vinyl, the paper was machine printed with specially developed inks in a total of six different colours. So these two processes, the vinyl coating and the printing of the pattern, made it more expensive than machine printed wallpapers but cheaper than hand printing with a silkscreen, lino, or wooden blocks.

On the back, the paper is discoloured slightly. But on the front, the colours are still vivid and bright. Indeed, it's the very bold and vivid colours that first strike me.

And this is quite a large repeat. It's quite a large-scale design. So the distance from the centre of the red, centre of the flower, to the centre of the next red flower is just over 60 centimetres. So in wallpaper design we call that a repeat.

And the designer of this paper is unknown. There's nothing on the back to tell us who designed it, the pattern name, the pattern number, or the name of the manufacturer. That might well have been on the packaging, but I don't have that anymore.

But we can tell quite a lot just from looking at it about how the paper was designed. As I said earlier, it uses six colour inks forming the design over the pink background. And the designers use these in a very clever way.

So for the leaves, brown and grey have been used. And some of the leaves are also picked out in purple, which have also been used for the buds of the flowers. But the main thing that strikes you is the three very large flowers in colours of red, orange, and yellow with the red centres.

And the designers very cleverly arranged the petals of the flowers in a slightly different way to create more of an idea of variety, but without having to use more than the six colours. And there's a second way that variety is introduced as well. Where the grey is overprinted over the brown of the leaves, it's given a slight outline. So it looks as if actually a sort of black line of ink

has been run around the stems as well. So all of these are very clever devices that this unknown anonymous designer has used.

The purpose of this piece of wallpaper seems quite obvious - to hang on the wall. But in what kind of room, and on all the walls of the room? The wipe clean surface suggests that it could well have been intended to be hung in a kitchen or bathroom, where it could not only be cleaned but would resist damp.

But the very bold, vibrant, large-scale design suggests that it might have been used to make a statement in another area of the home, perhaps the living room or even a bedroom. And the colour pink is a colour that's often gendered as feminine. It's also possible that this kind of design was intended to be used on a single wall in the room, perhaps the fireplace wall with plain walls around. And it's also worth bearing in mind that this kind of design may have been intended to complement a curtain design as well, perhaps to cover a large area of glass such as that we associate it with the airy designs of 1960s architecture.

But it also has a wider purpose as well. And that's to do with British design in the 1960s. Flower power is a term associated with the hippie movement of the 1960s.

And in wallpaper designs, it's often used for these kinds of big, flat florals in bold designs, these very free-flowing designs. So it's also a reference to that and the world of British design centred in London, particularly in the 1960s and what we call the counter-culture - alternative movements in politics, culture, and music. And it's interesting to note that another flower power design produced by a German manufacturing firm, Rouche, was actually called Carnaby after London's Carnaby Street.

And paper is used as a very innovative material in the 1960s. There's paper furniture, similarly. And plastics are used in very innovative ways. Plastic blow-up furniture is designed in the 1960s. So this choice of materials is also about those new movements in design which are particularly associated with the youth market in the 1960s.

So the pattern gives us insights into 1960s design in Britain, and particularly how that was promoted through relatively cheap materials, such as wallpaper, to a wide audience. However, it can also tell us things which are particularly interesting for those of us studying and researching the history of design. And in recent years, we've become more interested in what you might call everyday objects, particularly ephemeral objects such as wallpaper, so objects that previously would be just covered over when you tired of them or stripped off the wall.

And although you can see these in museums and galleries around the UK, for example at the Whitworth Art Gallery in Manchester and the Vienna in London as well as in historic houses up and down the country, it's only recently that wallpaper started to be studied as a serious scholarly subject. But how about this particular wallpaper and what I might know about its particular purpose? I know that it was never hung on the wall.

But why was that? Did the person who chose it decide they didn't like it? Did they buy too much and it never needed to be used, or perhaps they over-ordered it?

I can't really answer those questions. But what I do know from my study of a much earlier period, the 18th century (so the 1700s) is that bold and gaudy patterns, as they were called then, were still popular in a very expensive form of wallpaper, wallpapers imported from China. And they were very much admired for their bright backgrounds, particularly a strong pink colour which were overprinted in scenes of flowering trees and birds. So what we can say is that taste for bold, bright patterns is nothing new.