

Rockin' rolls



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COLOUR WATCH

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Wallpaper isn't what it often used to be: old-fashioned, boring and a quick fix for flawed walls.

Now referred to as "wallcovering" because it's not always paper, it's more like art and design by the roll, the yard, the square foot or the tile.

And for those who agree with Scottish-based Timorous Beasties that "minimalism is dead," there is fun to be had when traditional patterns and colours are given an irreverent twist.

Timorous Beasties (the name is taken from a line in the Robert Burns poem *To a Mouse*) is a cutting-edge design duo: Glaswegians Alistair McAuley and Paul Simmons.

The pair founded the firm in 1990 and, in true William Morris tradition, started designing and crafting their own papers, textiles, cushions, lampshades and furniture.

It can take the company a day to hand-print four rolls of wallpaper, which is why one of them can go for \$160 to \$560 (the paper is carried in Canada by Ministry of the Interior in Toronto) and custom work can cost more than \$2,000.

Simmons, who says he never covers a whole room in a patterned paper because it would be too suffocating, has one wall of his own bedroom papered in a soft-porn pattern called *Oriental Orchid*.

Orchid is a visual pun, sporting what appears to be a traditional floral motif at first glance but is actually sexually evocative orchids in neon pink.

The blooms, moreover, partly conceal a naughty erotic image of two women having sex. Because the women are printed in a shiny varnish, they become less or more visible depending on the viewing angle.

The pair's flocked, black-on-silver *Devils Damask* also looks conventional until you stare at it a bit and the devils' heads



The Scottish design firm Timorous Beasties offers irreverent twists on classic patterns, including this naughty *Toile* print.

Paul Simmons's tips

» **Forget about rules.** Wallpaper is as much an art form as a furnishing and can be used to paper a whole room, adorn an accent wall, even fill in a frame like a print.

» **Don't feel the need to make the colour of the pattern match anything else in the room.**

» **Make sure you place the pattern the right way up. If you are in doubt, hire an experienced paperhanger, especially if the print is a complicated one.**

emerge. *Euro Damask*, which looks like a Rorschach ink blot and was designed when the European Union was breaking down borders, is, in fact, the shapes of different European countries blurred together.

However, their most famous (or infamous) paper has got to be *Glasgow Toile*. As with traditional toile, it depicts scenic settings such as parks and landmarks, but the frolicking lads and lasses of the 18th-century versions have given way to drug addicts shooting up, homeless people on park benches and youths peeing on shrubbery.

"We like to rethink what people have got embedded in their minds and present it in a new form," Simmons says.

Timorous Beasties isn't the only company rethinking traditional papers.

In the United States, Studio Printworks (whose products are available through Telio and Cie) commissioned Seattle-based artist Jessica Smith to create contemporary toiles in playfully named hues such as *Coffee Grounds*, *Suburban Beige* and *Jealousy* (a green).

Her tongue-in-cheek aesthetic also extends to her subjects. In *Trash Day*, for instance, a mundane activity in a suburban setting acquires a heightened beauty, while *Cars Go Beep*, which features SUVs, comes only in *Smog Grey* and *Enviro Green*.

Another Printworks artist, furniture designer Paul Loebach, turns cowboys on rearing horses alongside oil rigs and football helmets into a traditional damask pattern available in a dozen colours. The colours have such whimsical monikers as *Greenback*, *Petroleum*, *Oil Slick*, *Agent Orange* and *Show Stopper*. The last is a trendy brown on chartreuse.

Even do-it-yourselfers can get in on the irreverent action. Home Depot, for instance, offers decals designed by such noted designers as Charles and Ray Eames, Keith Herring and Ilan Dei for less than \$50. Each package contains 16 decals and can give a wallpaper effect to any wall.

While the edgier colour combinations offered by Timorous Beasties have been referred to as "William Morris on acid,"

Simmons says you don't have to like colour to like the wallpaper, as most also come in neutral, white-on-white or black-on-black colourways.

Whatever the combination, the blending of quality production techniques with a subversive, punk aesthetic has gained the duo huge success. Among other projects, Timorous Beasties is providing wallpapers for BBC Scotland's new offices in Glasgow and huge blinds and fabrics at the renovated St. Pancras International railway station in London. Last September, a damask in green and magenta was projected onto seven storeys of the Hague City Hall in the Netherlands for the Today's Art Festival. This year, the designers are covering one side of a shopping centre near the M74 motorway outside Glasgow with one of their designs.

No surface, it seems, is too big for wallpaper, now that it can be used like big art that needs no framing.

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Paper trail

Wallpaper first became popular in the 17th century as an affordable substitute for textile wall hangings, which is why traditional patterns mimicked brocades, damasks and tapestries.

In 1650, trade with China opened up and beautifully crafted papers printed with Oriental motifs made their way west. Soon, *toile de Jouy* – textiles depicting lads and lasses frolicking in pastoral settings – became popular in France.

After machines were invented in early-19th-century England to print rolls of paper cheaply and quickly, the wallpaper trade boomed.

At the same time, expensive wallpapers by Zuber Cie in France brought scenic destinations into the home printed on papers in up to 210 colours and 24 different widths.

By the end of the century, William Morris rebelled against the mass production of the day by restoring quality and craftsmanship to wallpaper and home furnishings.

Morris disliked synthetic colours, but the most popular Victorian wallpaper colour was green and a good natural green was hard to come by. Like everyone else, he used *Emerald Green* and *Scheele Green*. Unfortunately, they were made with arsenic, gave off a toxic gas when damp and killed people as they slept.

That (and not aesthetics) may be why famed wit Oscar Wilde, lying in his green-papered room at L'Hôtel in Paris, exclaimed on his deathbed that "either that wallpaper goes or I do." The room, however, is still green.

» JL