

VIEW



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and quantify within the grand design scheme of things. And named designers are very much the thing, as that pushes commercial values, which power the art market. Yet the majority of design work, in the 1950s and now, is anonymous commercial work, done on a freelance basis and sold to clients by designers working in very similar positions to Sheila. Her work represents the other side of the story from designers like Lucienne Day: which makes it all the more positive that an exhibition has happened.

A visit to Pallant House is always balm for the artistic soul: they exhibit lots of mid-20th century art, and very often design and craft, too. This exhibition of Sheila's design work on paper fills the De Longhi Print Room at Pallant. The designs stretch around the room at waist height – allowing you to get up close and nose with the work, to spend unhurried time with it and to get to know Sheila's design hand. It is interesting to see textile and wallpaper designs as just numbered drawings and not as 'named' designs. The exhibition shows a slice of the design process we don't normally examine in great detail, as we're usually wandering off to look at the curtain, wallpaper or chair featuring the final thing. Seeing designs in the raw, as it were, means you need to decide for yourself what the patterns represent, how they were used, what they remind you of.

What is clear though is that Sheila's art and design skills were unarguably accomplished. Her pen and brushmanship is tight and confident

and she had an undoubted eye for repeat pattern and proportion. Her client base proves this was the case, as she sold designs to Liberty, Crown Wallpapers, Marks and Spencer, Turnbull & Stockdale and Gordon Fraser, amongst others. She worked, straight out of college, for several decades. Hers was piecework, done on a freelance basis. Her attempts to gain permanent positions in design studios were unsuccessful and resulted, in at least one instance, in her being told that should a role even be vacant, that a man would be preferable. By all accounts Sheila never talked up her career, even to close relatives. She just got on with it.

The dates and styles of Sheila's work in this exhibition place the designs firmly in the mass market. Often what might look like a 1950s pattern is dated well into the 1960s. Sheila was designing using high-end inspired motifs but using them once they were a bit more respectable and acceptable to the mass market. Her work does not represent the cutting edge of design that made it into the yearbooks, design exhibitions and magazines. Rather this work was what you and I would have seen in our local department stores and on mass-market textiles made into cotton dresses and sold in trusty old Marks and Spencers. These were designed for, and to sell to, the middling classes. They are just (and not too) abstract enough. ♦♦♦ Jane Audas

Far Left; Untitled 1, circa 1950-59, Private Collection - Jill Wharton

Centre Left; Untitled 3, circa 1950-59, Left; SB 1471, circa 1970-79