

Lengths of fabric from the new Tobias and the Angel collection – Angel Hughes's first foray into digital printing – hang in the workshop, a c1840 mill building on a country estate in Surrey. Maria Yiannikou's animal patterns complement the denser, single-colour designs taken from the blocks Angel acquired 20 years ago from Yateley Industries for the Disabled. Both are printed on painstakingly sourced Scottish linen

UP WITH THE NEW

Angel Hughes is famous for venerating time-tested hand-block-printing modes of making lovely cloth. But the Tobias and the Angel owner was aware that digital technology was key to the process being cost-effective. So how to update without compromising quality?

Charlotte Edwards finds out how a familiar *Wolf* face, a textiles graduate and Angel's well of knowledge have raised a fresh collection to the rafters. Photography: Antony Crolla >



ANGEL HUGHES doesn't really do new. 'Everything I buy is second-hand,' she says, looking around the treasure-trove rooms behind her shop in Barnes, southwest London. Out front, Tobias and the Angel sells the things she has mined from the past: antique homewares, vintage textiles given new life as accessories or Christmas decorations, wooden furniture made to traditional designs. On the last day of a heatwave, the proprietor is keeping cool in a dress made from printed cotton over a century old, patterned with roses once dark brown, now faded to palest pink. 'Isn't it pretty? I've loved old cloth my whole life. I stole clothes of my mother's, made out of pyjama silk. When I compare most modern cloth with what I've played with in my life...' Her voice trails off in disappointment.

Angel is perhaps as surprised as anyone else that she has spent the past few years immersed in digital technology to develop Tobias and the Angel's new fabric collection. For two decades, she dedicated herself to block-printing by hand, on antique textiles and on paper for lampshades, boxes and books, testing various dyes, learning how to prepare the lengths of grubby old linen. 'I had to teach myself how to do it,' she says. 'I made my life as difficult as possible, because I wanted it to be good enough.' A great number of her prints come from the archive of Yateley Industries for the Disabled, a Hampshire-based initiative that founded a block-printing workshop for young women in 1937. When Yateley abandoned printing 20 years ago, Angel and her long-time collaborator Mark Betty drove there and bought up their inventory of some 3,000 blocks. Dense, single-colour patterns with a strong repeat, mostly on lino, they range from grandly intricate designs produced for clients to simpler, more rustic motifs. Angel is especially fond of the 'very bold and fabulous' blocks designed by the workers themselves, often labelled with the girls' names ('Ethel's' or 'Betty's').

But how to make the most of these thousands of designs without wasting the precious time and resources required to print by >



Top: below shelves stacked with Angel's block collection, Maria Yiannikou's 'Bird Chatter' design covers a cushion (left) and the chaise; the green seat cushions are a Yateley design, 'Chambers', while the pattern on the blue cushion on the far right is called 'Ethel's'. Above: Maria's 'Deer Deer' and 'The Hare' flank Yateley's 'Globe'. For the team, the challenge of a digital collection lay in capturing 'the life in the surface' of hand-blocked cloth



hand? Angel and Mark had plenty of ideas for expansion, but couldn't see how to realise them without compromising quality. Screenprinting didn't come up to scratch. Computers were all right for some, but she was sceptical about achieving what she wanted that way. 'I get heartbroken when I see what's produced elsewhere,' she sighs. 'A lot of it looks OK on a screen, but not when you get hold of it in real life.' And yet she knew that digital printing, on new cloth, would allow her to produce fabric to order quickly, in four or five colours, and with very little wastage. The breakthrough came when she met a friend's daughter, Phoebe Brown, a Royal College of Art textiles graduate who not only shared what Angel calls her 'nerdy perfectionist attitude' but knew how to go about digitally capturing the subtleties of the block-printed cloth.

While Phoebe put in 'many, many hours of boring, gruelling work' developing the collection, there was another fortuitous meeting. Knowing that her former colleague Maria Yiannikou had been tentatively experimenting with block printing, *Wol* creative director Jessica Hayns persuaded Maria to join her on a one-day course Angel runs in her workshop in Lingfield, Surrey. 'Halfway through the morning, Jess said to get my own stuff out,' Maria says. 'It all happened so quickly. Angel said: "Would you do a collection with me?" I felt like when my husband proposed.'

Maria's fledgling designs – busy birds and leaping hares, fluidly drawn and framed by scrolling branches – were a perfect fit. 'I looked at them and immediately loved their scale,' Angel says. 'They are so much more open than my Yateley patterns; I thought they would be a wonderful addition.' Maria hadn't used the right dyes, tools or fabric, and her designs didn't exactly repeat, but 'it didn't matter,' says Angel, 'because I could see what I wanted in it. I thought, yes! That's it! It will give you that movement.' Maria, whose starting point was her collection of King Penguin natural-history books, agrees. 'I like pattern when it's about life. When I was editing >



Top: curtains in 'Lawford', a cockerel-strewn pattern, hang in the workshop kitchen. The chair on the right is covered in 'Red Check', also from the archive range, while Maria's 'Penny Partridge' supplies a tablecloth. Tobias and the Angel chairs surround the table. Above: printed on cotton, patterns from the two archive ranges taken from Angel's treasury of offcuts include (from top): mustard 'Damask'; 'Red Check'; orange 'Damask'; orange 'Nursery'; 'Bold Stripe'



the Inspiration pages for the magazine, I always liked it if there was a portrait or an animal or a figure in among everything else.’

An Italian and linguistics graduate who began a career in finance before joining *WoI* as managing editor, Maria hadn’t really drawn anything since her art A-level. Printmaking didn’t enter her head until she came across the Folly Cove design collective in Cape Ann, Massachusetts, while researching stories for *WoI*. ‘There was something about it,’ she says. ‘I just wanted to do it. Today.’ Having made the occasional lunch-hour linocut at her desk, she returned to it after she left the magazine, rolling out cotton or linen on her dining-room table at home in north London while her two daughters were asleep. ‘I really wasn’t confident, but I was happy – and dirty.’

Now, five patterns by Maria featuring British wild animals have joined a selection of Yateley designs and two groups of prints drawn from Angel’s apparently boundless archive of vintage textiles for Tobias and the Angel’s first digitally printed collection. One of the archive ranges comprises smart, versatile checks and stripes; the other, called ‘Biddy’s Basket’, is almost a biography of Angel (real name Biddy) in cloth form. It features straight reproductions of what Mark describes as ‘things she refused to sell; things that were absolutely inviolable’, including dancing bluebells, strutting cockerels and a loose floral pattern called ‘Nursery’, a re-creation of the shredded curtains in the abandoned nursery at Lawford Hall in Essex, where Angel was once a tenant.

As you would expect from a collector of antiques, she is already imagining her own textiles in their old age. ‘I want someone like me to go into a junk shop in 20 years and spot a piece of our printed linen and say: “That’s really nice”’ ■

From £219.20 per m. Launching at Focus/18, the new range will be stocked by Turnell & Gigon (020 7259 7280; turnellandgigon.com). Tobias and the Angel. Ring 020 8878 8902, or visit tobiasandtheangel.com. Maria Yiannikou. Visit mariayianikkou.com

Top: many of Angel’s Yateley blocks are rather ‘moth-eaten’, she says – others are no longer usable. ‘We’re getting to the point of having to recut them, because they’re wearing out.’ A sample blanket of Yateley patterns covers the table in front of the windows, which have blinds in ‘Chambers’ and Maria’s ‘The Hare’. Above: Angel with Maria (left) and Phoebe (right). ‘Harpton’, behind them, was originally produced for the Duchess of Devonshire