



MEET THE URBAN ARTISANS

Cambridge Imprint

Following simple, traditional printing methods, this innovative team combines vibrant colour and striking patterns to create stylish stationery

WORDS BY MICHELE JAMESON ● PHOTOGRAPHS BY CORDELIA BERESFORD

HIDDEN BEHIND SHOP FAÇADES IN the heart of the historic university city of Cambridge is a rabbit warren of studios and workshops that belong to Christ's College. This glorious collection of old buildings seems to attract and inspire the remarkable number of creative artists that work here, including Cambridge Imprint, three artisans who produce exquisitely patterned paper, books and boxes in bold and bright, vintage-style hues. Decorated with flora and fauna – from schools of mackerel, leaping hares and curvy cats to ferns, seaweed and oak leaves – the enchanting selection of stationery is a homage to nature. Sisters Jane, 57, and Ali, 49, and their life-long friend Claerwen, 45 (who is married to their youngest brother), all grew up in Cambridge and have been creating for as long as they can remember – Jane a textile artist and art teacher, Ali a ceramicist, Claerwen a painter. Over the years, they discovered a

natural synchronicity in their interests, and their shared enthusiasm for typography and the sequence of a pattern led to the decision to collaborate.

What started as a sideline three years ago has developed into a full-time business, and their products are now sold in more than 100 independent shops all over the country and abroad. As the sound of someone practising the piano filters through the walls, the trio work at their old mahogany laboratory benches, which they salvaged from a nearby school; skips are also a rich source of furniture finds. Taking inspiration from far and wide – American quilts, 20th-century English block-prints and Japanese paper are all huge influences – they set to work creating items such as covered notebooks and portfolio files with grosgrain ribbon ties in their studio, a curiously crumbling and spacious Victorian building. The old walls are papered with prototypes of patterns and colour variations – sap-green frolicking ducks and rabbits; acid-yellow

ABOVE,
FROM LEFT
Claerwen,
Jane and Ali
at work in
their studio



Paper designs include acid-yellow fish and Prussian blue seaweed

swimming fish and Prussian blue fronds of seaweed – while tins of custom-mixed ink and sheets of decorative paper sit stacked in great piles. Growing up with art collector and curator Jim Ede’s house, Kettle’s Yard, on their doorstep enabled them to go for regular art lessons and soak up the inspiring atmosphere, and they continue to visit this influential place.

Cambridge Imprint’s design process is decidedly traditional – the women start with just a pencil and paper, erasing and re-working a project when necessary. “The virtue of paper cut-outs is that you can draw with blocks of colour, and easily rearrange elements when needed. Occasionally we use an ancient black-and-white photocopier to change the scale or make lots of repeats – but that really is the full extent of our technological support,” Claerwen says.

All three women work on their own pieces, asking for feedback from each other as an individual pattern develops. When the distinctive design reaches

ABOVE
Finding the right colour shade and stencil combination is key to producing an effective design

completion, it is then drawn onto a silk screen, and the negative spaces are blocked out by hand. They all mix their own colours and start printing – endeavouring to find the palette that will bring the design to life. Any natural flaws merely add to the charm of the hand-blocked design and are referred to as ‘happy accidents’ at Cambridge Imprint. The prototypes are then transferred to their products using small-scale digital and litho processes.

“Our intention is to design things with all the care and attention possible, but so that they can then be manufactured,” Claerwen says. “This is all done in England by small firms, which are painstakingly committed to the quality of the final product.” The paper is printed in vegetable-based spot colours by a company that welcomes their involvement: “We all get on the floor to help proof the colour on the press as it’s rolling.”

Such passion for their craft and fervour for keeping their business hands-on has led the women to look to future plans and premises. Fabric and ceramics are in the pipeline, both of which are sure to be every bit as beautiful as their paper creations. 📄

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