



## The Life of a British Textile Icon: Celia Birtwell

### Description



## Celia Birtwell, 2015

Textile designer Celia Birtwell has made an indelible impact on British textiles, infusing them with her unique brand of vibrant, swirling and expressive patterns. She has led a remarkable life, playing a central role in defining the freewheeling optimism of the swinging sixties, and going on to develop a monumental legacy as one of the most definitive designers of her era. Reflecting on her design ethos, she attributes it to a combination of magical ingredients, telling one interviewer, “an artist has to use the eye, the hand and the heart. You can’t make do with two of them – you need the full set.”

Birtwell was born in 1941 in Bury, Lancashire. Her father was an engineer and her mother a seamstress, a likely background for a textiles designer to be. Birtwell began her art training young, as she explained in a recent interview, “I was just 14 when I went to study textiles at Salford School of Art.” She adds, “I was a rather naughty girl in ordinary education, and was saved by art school probably because I thought everyone was like me.”



## California Positive B, Furnishing Fabric, 1986

While she learned a range of skills including painting and printmaking, she quickly cottoned on that textile was going to be her passion. She remembered, “There was this lovely teacher who taught us how to print fabric, so I guess that’s where my love of textile design really began.” In her early prints nature was always a driving influence, one that came through family, and would stay with her for life. She wrote in her memoir, “My father’s love of nature has definitely had a big influence on my textile designs.”

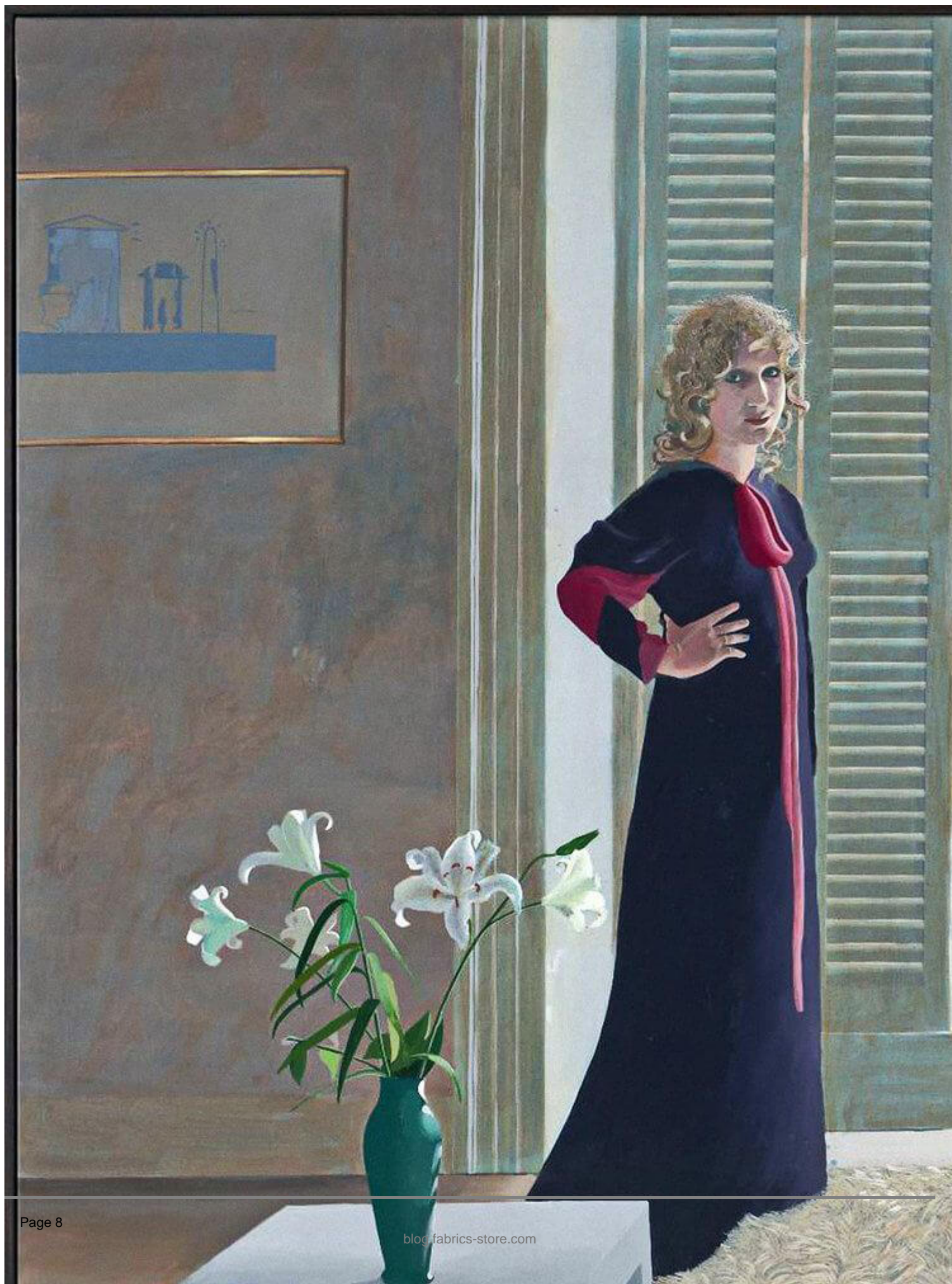




## Animal Trellis B, Furnishing Fabric, 1986

Birtwell happened upon a signature style young too; a vibrant, painterly approach to pattern with a Fauvist touch, recalling the light, sparking vivacity of Raoul Dufy or Andre Derain. Comparing her prints with painters seems a suitable introduction, given that she has predominantly focussed on painting her designs by hand first, before translating them into the happy-go-lucky prints that would become so synonymous with the spirit of the 1960s. She says, “I... paint prints in gouache by hand before I put them on a computer and wriggle them around. If I didn’t paint them first, they would have no soul.” However, she is keen to point out: “I’m not a painter – that’s something else. I’m always analysing things and looking at objects which are pleasing on the eye.”







## David Hockney, Mr and Mrs Clark and Percy, 1970

Two relationships became definitive in Birtwell's career; the first was that between herself and her first husband, the womenswear designer Ossie Clark, and the second was with the Pop Art painter David Hockney. Birtwell first met Clark when he was a student at London's Royal College of Art and they immediately connected. They began working together in London during the mid-1960s and spent the following decade taking the British fashion world by storm, merging his structured eye with her billowing floral patterns. She says, "My romantic, painterly prints seemed to marry with his structured, brilliant shapes."



Floating Daisy pattern by Celia Birtwell on an Evening Dress designed by Ossie

It was around this time that Birtwell also befriended Hockney, and the development of their friendship has been immortalized in Hockney's paintings over the years, most famously in the iconic, if slightly unnerving *Mr and Mrs Clark and Percy*, 1970. He paints his friend with care and pathos, but he also celebrates her inimitable design vision and impeccable dress sense, showing just how intertwined her work as a designer is with her sense of self.





## Celia Birtwell for Valentino 2015

Following her divorce from Clark, Birtwell carved her own niche as a textile designer, opening a hugely successful home furnishings store on London's Westbourne Park Road where she remained for 25 years. Since then, she has taken her textile designs into the fashion industry, producing a suite of four print collections for Cacharel in 2001, commercial ventures for Topshop and Uniqlo, and a dazzling array of indulgent florals for Valentino in 2015 based around Botticelli's *Primavera*, 1477-1482, which were translated into "brocade, jacquard, embroidered lace." Now in her 80s, Birtwell's pace at her home in Shropshire is slowing down, but the strength of her legacy lives on, and on, through the sheer visual power of her textiles, fabrics and patterns that are so widespread today.

### CATEGORY

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