

TEXTILE MESSAGES

The distinctive designs and 'alphabet' of Allegra Hicks have developed from her lifelong exposure to a broad canvas of inspirations, she tells *Alba Arikha*



It all began with a dove in the South of France. One of Allegra Hicks's earliest memories is of visiting the Musée Picasso in Cap d'Antibes with her parents. 'I was very lucky in that my parents had a strong interest in design and art. I think I must have been five years old,' she says. 'There was a Super 8 film of Picasso drawing a dove. It was a one-line drawing, executed in a second. It established such a strong connection between the artist and the viewer that I think it was the first time I became aware of art as a form of expression. That it isn't only about what you see, but what you feel, what you hear. It was later, when I began design school, that I was able to recapture that memory. Because your memory connects you.'

Memory and connections are an important theme in Hicks's work. The Italian-born designer grew up surrounded by art and design in a modernist house in Turin, inspired by Frank Lloyd Wright. After finishing the *liceo classico*, the notoriously selective Italian secondary school system, she went to study design in Milan, followed by the Parsons School of Design in New York and a stint working as assistant to artist Donald Baechler. 'The combination of the old-fashioned education I received and the craft I

later learned at art school were instrumental in making me realise that intellect and creativity very much feed on each other.'

She enrolled at the Van der Kelen school of decorative arts in Belgium, where she studied *trompe l'oeil* and fresco mural techniques. 'It was there that I was able to understand the language of decorative art, which is much more difficult than applied art,' she says. 'The more you learn, the more your eye becomes clearer: you don't see, you look. This gave me a new point of view, a bi-dimensional one, and that's when I started to think about what my vocabulary could become.'

That vocabulary was established in 1995, after the launch of her first fabric collection. She had by then moved to London, where she had her first child with husband Ashley Hicks, an architect-trained furniture designer whom she had met in New York.

The collection, followed by the opening of her fashion and accessories shop in 1999 — a Kaftan collection, cruise-clothing, homeware, and rugs — cemented her Boho-chic reputation, and amassed a coterie of devoted followers. But Hicks eventually decided to close the shop and concentrate on what really mattered: 'What I adore are textiles; they are the DNA of my work. I never considered myself a fashion designer, nor did I ever have much to do with fashion. I'm much more of a lifestyle designer.'

Current projects are the design of a new rug collection and floor coverings for the Rug Company, with whom she has a long-standing relationship, and with Made.com, where she recently launched a range of furniture and home accessories entitled the Lulu collection. In addition, Hicks does a lot of bespoke work, 'from rugs to embroidered walls and wall hangings to accessories and furniture.'

Embroidered walls are a concept that is entirely Hicks's own: 'It's a new thing of mine. I apply fabric to the wall, like a tapestry. I've recently done a view of Naples, also one of London — it's a bit like a *grisaille* painting [producing a three-dimensional effect]. Every commis-



sion produces an entirely different result. 'I like it when details unexpectedly come together and end up forming a perfect letter in my alphabet.'

So what is the Hicks alphabet? It is, in essence a multi-dimensional, kaleidoscopic dialogue of colour, shapes and textures: pools of mauve silks and ruby embroideries, printed linen and cut velvet, where celadon waterfalls and meadow-weave patterns blossom in unlikely colour combinations: greens and oranges, browns and blues, purples and reds. There are also motifs with more earthy tones such as charcoal or beige, bathing in atmospheric names like 'Passage: Acqua' or 'Panarea Midnight Blue' (the

FROM HER ATLANTIS RUG (FAR LEFT) TO HER BRASS FLOWER TABLE (LEFT) ALLEGRA HICKS (ABOVE) IS A MATERIAL GIRL

island of Panarea is a favourite destination). Hicks does her own sketches and produces her fabrics in various countries: 'In Italy they do very good woven fabric; in Belgium they do fabulous cut velvet; in India they do amazing silk embroidery; in England it's printing [she is distributed by Turnell & Gigon].'

She derives her inspiration from art (Rothko, Matisse, Picasso, Botticelli and Mughal art, among many others), travel and architecture, but especially from nature: 'Nature never gets colour combinations wrong.' Those combinations feature prominently in her designs: details of a leaf. A stone. A raindrop. Bamboo. A brass three-tiered table is shaped like a petal. 'Shapes are very simple,' she explains. 'What interests me is the way we perceive them. I like to set patterns against each other and to reconstruct and reformulate them according to my vision.'

RULE-BREAKER

Hicks has created a conversation between those shapes and patterns. Her vision and style are her trademark, and it begins with the woman herself: listed among the ten best-dressed women in the world, Hicks, with her high cheekbones and impeccable poise, is an elegant beauty who would not have been out of place in a Renaissance painting.

She is fluent in three languages and her taste is broad. 'Eclectic. Organic. Vintage. In fashion I love the 1940s and the 1970s. In terms of interiors, the 18th, 19th, and 20th centuries. The wonderful thing about life is that everything is fluid and the rules can be broken all the time.' She has an innate gift for how best to break those rules. 'I love to put things together. I think a house is very much an expression of oneself. I don't believe you can only have one theme in a house. You need contrasts. The old, the new, vintage finds, inherited pieces like a commode and a painting, for example, the magic is to make them work together. And as a lifestyle designer, I'm very aware of that.'

For the past few years, Hicks has added a new contrast to her life. After her marriage with Ashley ended, she met and married Neapolitan Roberto Mottola di Amato, returning to her country of origin. Home is now divided between London and Naples. 'It's opened a completely different door,' she says.

She has been particularly struck by the multi-faceted landscape of Naples, its connection with nature. 'One lives with the elements here. There is such a mélange of grandeur, culture, simplicity, a connection with rawness, and of course the sea and Vesuvius, which is the ultimate element and encourages life to be lived in the moment. One of the beautiful characteristics of the Neapolitan people is that they really know how to live in the moment. There is no stillness in Naples, always a sense of movement.'

There is no stillness in Hicks either. One senses that with Naples as a backdrop, and a reconnection with her roots, that artistic dialogue will only be further explored. Picasso's dove has a long flight ahead. *f*