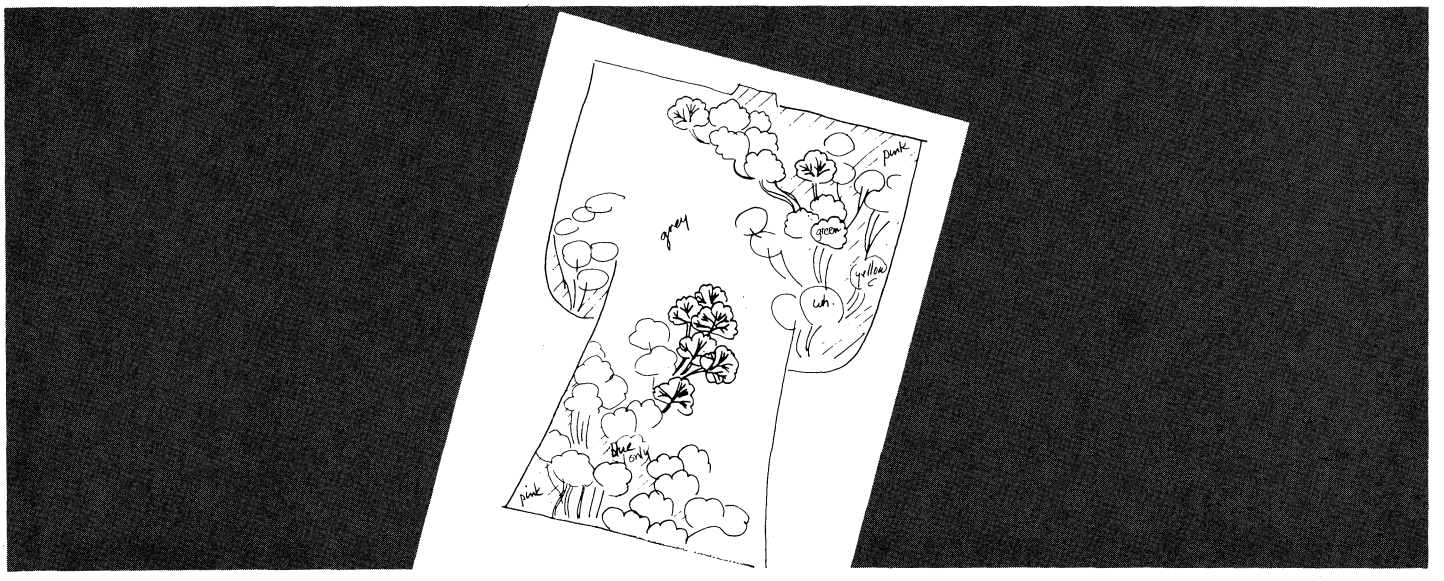
Alison Parsons – Textile Designer and Printer

An interview by **Bruce Parsons**



Alison Parson discute de son évolution comme artiste, du processus et des problèmes particuliers à l'artiste décorateur.

Q. Did you have any idea in the fifties that you'd be a textile printer and designer?

A. No, in the fifties I was going to get married and have children and wash dishes and live happily ever after. In the sixties, after we were all told to get out of the kitchen, I decided I had to be independent and earn my own way in life . . . I took stock of my talents – I could draw, I could use colour (I had graduated from Art School with a diploma in painting) and I had already done some work with fabrics. After the babies were born I began doing batiks.

Wanda Hicks, a friend of mine from art school, was interested in batik work, so together we formed a workshop and produced cushions, scarves, ties and sometimes dresses, and went into business together. We trotted our work around to craft guilds and sold it to stores on consignment. Once we got a temporary liquor license, had an outdoor sale of our own and sold every-

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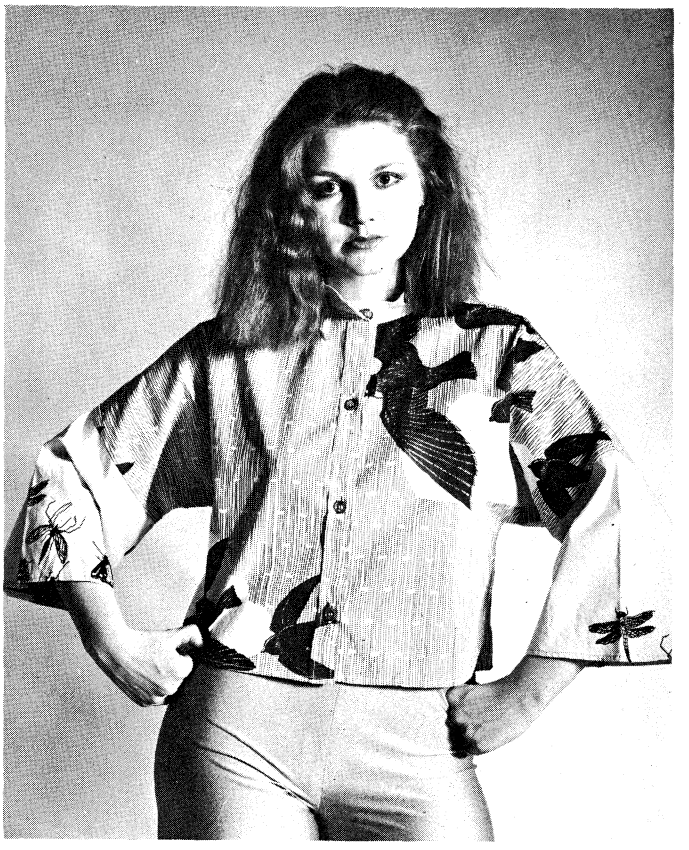

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thing we made. . . . In general, though, we just couldn't compete with mass production.

Q. In the meantime, were you doing any other work?

A. Yes. For quite a few years I taught painting in night classes and drawing in special workshops. This, plus the batik experience led to a job co-ordinating the textile department at the Nova Scotia College of Art and Design in 1972. I taught batik making and drawing and arranged for other people to come and teach macramé and off-loom weaving.

Q. How did you get into print-making?

A. I really felt that if the students were working with fabrics, and we were running a shop called the textile department, we really ought to be doing some screen printing on fabric. I arranged for a visiting artist to introduce us to the process. He built us a table and got us launched. At that time there was an on-going debate about whether crafts were arts. I decided that textile printing was a decorative art, and having made that decision, we studied the history of the decorative arts of many cultures — Japanese textiles, medieval illuminations, oceanic art, Haida Indian artifacts, Art Deco, etc.

Meanwhile, I built two twenty foot tables in our basement and produced 20-foot lengths of fabric.

Q. Since moving back to Toronto, has your work taken any new directions?

A. Yes. The biggest difference is that all the fabrics I do now are made into garments. This came about because my first marketing attempt here was in a Craft Show. I had brought both garments and lengths of fabric and I quickly saw that my work was more approachable as a garment. Home sewers, I think, tend to be conservative and hesitate to take chances, especially if a fabric looks unusual. People are more willing to experiment with a finished garment they can try on to see how it looks and fits.

Q. Where have you shown your work?

A. I did three craft shows the first year and found them quite successful. Through them I made other contacts and attracted some private customers. Last year, I made samples of two or three garments and took them around to stores hoping to interest them in buying outright. Creeds, two Bowring stores, a store in Ottawa and one in Regina gave me orders last year.

Q. Tell me about your set up.

A. I have a thirty foot table. Usually I can print two 10 metre lengths a day; if I'm pressed, three.

Q. What kind of ambitions do you have for your work?

A. Oh, as ambitious as I ever get is a production two or three times bigger than this one, printing 60-90 metres at a time. And it would be nice not doing the garments. I have decided one thing: I see it essentially as a one person operation or, at most, a family operation. Most textile designers have someone else doing the printing. I see myself as a printer; I enjoy the process, my designing happens there, so I don't foresee turning it into a big operation.

Q. Do you see any advantages to such a small operation?

A. Generally speaking, it's more expensive for me to produce fabrics than the big mills that produce thousands of metres a day, in spite of their huge overhead . . . my fabrics are two to three times more expensive. My real advantage is that I don't have to be geared up and ready to go a year before the new fashion season starts. I can almost wait until the new fashions have hit before I start producing them. Furthermore, because I'm producing fewer things and for a specialized market, I don't have to appeal so much to the mass market.

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Q. How much does the fashion industry influence your work?

A. The fashion element is a crucial one, even if your work is somewhat unusual. *IM International* is a trade publication that gives you a one to three year advance on fashion changes. It previews every major designer and photographs and analyzes all the components of their fashions from the shape of the collar and length of the skirt, to the weight and surface designs of the fabrics. I tested it one year and looked for the things they said were coming. It amazed me to see what they predicted didn't just occur in high fashion stores but right down to Woolco.

Q. Take us through the whole process of designing one length of fabric to a finished garment, say, a kimono.

A. To begin with, I am pretty much aware of the fashion trends of the season – what colours and fabrics are acceptable, so those things are in the back of my mind.

I employ two basic kinds of motifs: those which are organic and those which are geometric. Most geometrics I use are on very large screens and print over the whole surface of the fabric. They produce a ground or grid. Some are stripes; some are interlocking patterns. . . . In addition to these, I have a whole series of screens, most of them smaller, which contain organic motifs based on life forms – plants, animals, birds, insects, that kind of thing.

Q. What are the sources for these motifs?

A. They vary. I do drawings from nature; I go to the museum a lot, especially the textile shows, and make sketches of anything from early French woodcuts to Persian plates and Japanese lacquered boxes. There are several sources for the geometric patterns. Again the Japanese are a wonderful source because they weave geometric patterns into their fabric. One of the ones I use is from an ivory inlaid jewellery box from King Tutankhamen's tomb. In a modern city there are lots of such patterns – fences, window patterns in high rise buildings, grill work over sewers. . . .

Q. How do you make colour decisions?

A. My colour decisions are nearly always based on contrasts between warm and cold colours. I generally work in three tones – a pale, a middle tone and a dark tone. Then, it will be essentially warm colours with a contrast of cool colours or essentially cool colours with a contrast of warm.

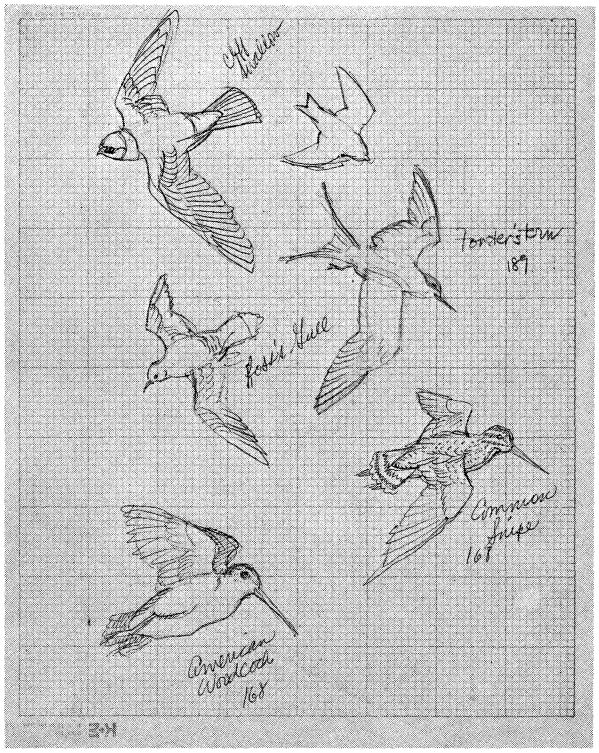
The first step, after pre-rinsing the fabric, is to dye it so that it's not white, which is hard to work with. My preference for the dye colour is probably a beige or a grey, something rather neutral. Then I will choose the main motifs, for instance, the swallow pattern, a rather large bird, and a screen of smaller birds which goes with it. I might decide there will be a leaf pattern. At this point I decide whether my colour will be essentially warm or cold.

I choose the geometric ground and usually print it quite pale so it only adds texture to the fabric. If the main motif is in cool colours, say, greys and blacks, then the ground is printed very pale in warm colours, for instance, pale ochre. After I've printed the pale ochre grid over the grey dye, I would probably then print in the main component of the overall pattern – in this case, the birds, which will go in . . . in black. Since the piece is essentially cool, I want more cool tones in it, so I will probably print a leaf pattern in a grey which is darker than the dyed grey but lighter than the black of the birds.

Then I stop to look at it. I can't really tell talking about it what choice I would make next.

Q. Do you ever find yourself in trouble at this point?

A. Often, often. That's why it's not predictable. I will have predetermined to do certain things and look at it and decide the next thing I was going to do is not what is required.



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The fabric has to dry after you put each colour on. There's always a waiting period. Then it gets taken off the table, hung up and steamed. After that it gets washed to remove the excess dye. Then it's dried, and cut and sent to a seamstress.

If this is a kimono, the main print will probably not be the only fabric in the kimono. Another fabric perhaps, of completely different colours and motifs will probably be used in contrast. If I'm doing a show or making up half a dozen or more kimono, I will print a dozen lengths of fabric and cut them all into kimono and lay them out on the table.

Then I run back and forth and switch sleeves and switch bands. In the end . . . some will be conservative – just contrasting bands – but sometimes a whole half side will be different from the other half . . . often the end result is quite a surprise to me.

Q. What other garments do you make?

A. Men's shirts, vests, children's dresses and smocks, pant suits, jackets. . . .

Q. Do you think these things have any relevance in the art world? Do you consider them art?

A. Well, I call myself a decorative artist. I don't question that I'm an artist. I do realize, however, that the concerns I have in making things are entirely different from the concerns that many 'fine artists' have. It's my perception, and I may be wrong, that artists are often concerned with ideas as opposed to images. Generally speaking, it's the artist's job to challenge a culture or a society and to help explain it in whatever way he or she can. I think that most serious artists are involved in questioning their culture and in seeking ways of being truthful about analyzing it and seeing where we ought to go. So artists and scientists are often years ahead of popular culture in their vision. I think decorative artists tend to reflect the times in which they live. I don't think they form the vanguard the way so called 'serious' artists do. That's where I see the difference. I see myself as a reflection of society, not as a harbinger of change.

Q. Do you feel your work has a social purpose?

A. Well, I like to print. I like what I do so I'm always looking for some rationale, some good, solid social reasons to back it up. I think there is one in that it provides an alternative to mass production. I think the vision of the artist is important in a society which is conditioned mostly by markets. Most of the things that we're encouraged to value and buy have been designed and presented to us by market consideration. That's reason enough for the individual artist and craftsman to create things.

But I have a serious problem, especially living in a place like Toronto, which is so rich in marvellous consumer goods. There are so many beautiful things to buy, some of them the products of mass production, that it's sometimes very difficult to add to that glut.

When I go to museums and look at the things that other cultures have made, I realize that it's through the objects that cultures produce that we see them and understand them best. Pre-Columbian art, for instance, is the only thing we have that tells us about those peoples. So it makes me realize the work we do has some importance. . . . The pleasure of making is given, it's always there – that's not a problem. And the pleasure of research is not a problem either because the history of various cultures and the wealth of material available through books and museums and travel is so stimulating and alive, it's impossible for me to question it at all. It's only when I get right down to this very moment and get buried in the goods we're producing in this particular decade that I question my own work and that of other artists.

Q. Do you think that people who see hand made work find it like a signal to look more closely because it was carefully thought out by one person, not a consumer business. Do you think it has a take-a-second-look effect on the buyer?

A. Sure. And the other thing about hand made work is that it contain flaws. There's always a flaw, and the motion the hand makes is more interesting to people than the motion a machine makes. The regularity of a machine is boring. The variations and the errors contained in a hand made thing give it humanity.