

Grand designs



Trend-setting designer Orla Kiely is one of Ireland's most successful fashion exports, famed for a 'signature' look to suit every season **Interview: Penelope Parkin**





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ely creates a clean,
ash look which
appeals to the
fashion-conscious
n every continent

You can still hear the excitement in Orla Kiely's voice as she eagerly exclaims: "When it came to choosing a career path I always knew I wanted to do something to do with art. So I applied to go to the NCAD... and I got in!"

Eight years on from her studies at the National Academy of Art and Design in Dublin, the Irish fashion designer rocketed to fame when her parade of hats at the 1993 Royal College of Art catwalk show earned her a commission from Harrods.

With a business now in its 10th year and comprising 350 outlets worldwide, Orla was recently nominated for the British Fashion Council's Accessory Designer of the Year award. Undoubtedly one of Ireland's most successful fashion exports, she has wowed audiences worldwide with her original, cutting-edge designs for more than a decade. After working as a consultant for Marks and Spencer and then Debenhams, she is now concentrating on her own brand and the diffusion brand 'Orla Kiely etc'.

I catch up with Orla and her partner Dermott at Palladio, the design studio on Wigmore Street in London which displays her UK collection. The atmosphere is alive with anticipation. Zoë, Orla's PR, shows me into a second-floor room filled to bursting with Orla Kiely garments and accessories before the pair arrive.

The first thing I notice about Orla is how genuine, down-to-earth and caring she seems. Wearing a modern brown and electric-pink striped cardigan that hints at a colour

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Trend-setter

Dublin born Orla Kiely is one of London's leading textile, accessory and knitwear designers.

As down-to-earth as her designs are popular, Orla's key to success is a chameleon-like fixation on the development of different styles. A devotion to quality and practicality are factors to her current status as a rising star in design.

Orla has created her own style and vision, which is seen around the world as innovative and unique. She is a source of direction and trend to her industry and her ideas filter down to the high streets across the world. Success has been global and her business is evenly split between the USA, Far East and the UK.

The appeal of an Orla Kiely bag is immediate. Beautifully designed, many of the designs adapt into a number of variations. The fabric and material are the source that makes each piece a unique work of design. Her prints have crossed from accessories to clothing, creating the Orla Kiely look. Orla designs her own fabrics for her collection. She has developed a ready-to-wear collection of items which have pushed the boundaries and established a standard of their own, often inspiring the knitting industry and making Orla a commentator on style and direction.



Orla has carried out external examination work with both the Royal College of Art and the Chelsea College of Art. She has been appointed to judge the final year student collections for the Graduate Fashion Week Awards.

Orla has worked with many UK companies, adding her input into diverse areas including:

- Habitat UK, where she designed the best-selling ceramics range Scraffito
- Debenhams, where she designed a handbag collection for the Designers range
- Marks and Spencer, where she designed an accessory range for the Autograph label
- Heathfield Co, where a lighting range used her prints and fabrics
- ICI Dulux – Orla was appointed to the Dulux Design Council in March 2003



scheme used in one of her collections, she looks quintessentially Irish and has an easy, but preoccupied manner. Understandably so when you consider that she's just added the finishing touches to her 2004 Autumn/Winter Collection.

Waxing lyrical about her first taste of fashion design Orla tells me: "My father gave me a sewing machine when I was a little girl. I still have it! It was wonderful." Spending hours making clothes for herself and all her sisters she says they "had a very happy childhood playing near the sea, with holidays in France".

With her career path already mapped out in the sense that she always knew she wanted to do "something to do with art", Orla spent her years at college specialising in fashion and textiles. Here she was able to indulge her love of design, finding treasures in Dublin's markets and in shops such as Brown Thomas, which now stocks her current range.

Not that Orla missed out on "Dublin's busy social whirl", of course. With art college "in the middle of everything" she

easily managed to find time to visit "the usual haunts" such as Bewleys for coffee and Baily and Keoghs for drinks. She also gigglingly admits it was here, through friends, that she met Dermott. They subsequently dated for about a year before both moving on to pursue their careers.

Describing her background as "very much about print" it's unsurprising that Orla began her early career with flamboyant Dublin couturier Paul Costelloe. She describes him as "great fun to be with and very generous with his time". During her apprenticeship with Costelloe she helped him to re-design the Post Office uniform, later moving on to gain international experience in New York and then Dusseldorf with Esprit.

Five years later Orla enrolled at the Royal College of Art in London. Studying knitwear for two years, she was glad to take a break from working life and produced a range of hats for her 1993 graduate collection. Her subsequent runway show earned her an immediate commission from Harrods and a mention on TV programme 'The Clothes Show', effectively launching her solo career.

Now reunited some 10 years after they first met, Orla and

Orla finds inspiration all around her — the stem print (tote bag, above) is one of her best-selling looks





Dermott have formed a partnership that appears to work exceptionally well. It leaves Orla free to concentrate on the design side of the business, which she loves. Asked what it's like living and working together, she says: "I think it's good because our aims are completely different. The things Dermott does I wouldn't be able to do, so I'm very lucky that I've got a business person that I trust implicitly and the same, I think, goes the other way."

So what makes Orla tick? She pauses for a second, then conspiratorially confesses: "I get bored very easily, visually you know we're all exposed to so much, so what makes me tick is kind of a desire to keep moving and changing and evolving. You know, I have some signature prints, but I still have this need to move things on."

Orla's trademark design is undoubtedly her 'stem print', a best-seller that Dermott describes as: "our equivalent of the Burberry check". This year there are flowers on it and last year it was blown up to cover a sofa for the spring/summer catalogue. It even covers a sofa produced for last year's catalogue that the pair now have at home.

Moving on to her 2004 collections, displayed on Dermott's laptop, Orla animatedly explains: "For summer we did gardens in a very simple way, doing trees to get the sense of a boulevard. One of the prints even features a watering can." She also confesses to a love of putting colours together. Pointing to PR Zoe's tunic print she adds: "This season I love the blues with the reds. That's always nice and quite fresh."

Curriculum vitae

1993 Orla commissioned by Harrods to produce a range of hats following her finale spot on the graduation catwalk at the Royal College of Art. This was followed by a collection of soft accessories, which sold well. In the following years a comprehensive collection of bags was developed and the customer list expanded to include key London stores.

1994 The Orla Kiely Partnership was formed with Orla's husband Dermott Rowan. Orla showed as part of London Fashion Week for the first time, securing her first export orders.

1995 Orla appointed as a consultant to the Marks and Spencer design team, a position she resigned in 1998 to allow the launch of a diffusion range for Debenhams.

1996 Orla expanded her accessory collection to include both fabrics and leather.

1997 First export orders to the USA store Saks Fifth Ave. Showed in Paris for the first time. Introduced her first knitwear range. Started working on the Designer in Debenhams range.

1998 Expanded her range to include clothing.

1999 A new design studio opened in Battersea.

2000 The company's legal status changed to Kiely Rowan Ltd. A comprehensive business plan of production, management and IT was carried out to deliver the required quality and volume to the expanded business. Started working on the Marks and Spencer autograph range

2001 The Palladio Associates were appointed to look after sales to the UK market.

2002 Orla Kiely and the Itochu Corporation established a formal relationship for exclusive distribution in the Japanese market. Sales of her own-brand products retail value exceed £4m. Orla wins the UK Fashion awards for accessories. First Orla Kiely shop-in-shops opened in London and Tokyo.

2003 Appointed to the Dulux Creative Board. First Flagship Orla Kiely store built and opened in Tokyo. Orla Kiely nominated for Best Accessory Designer at British Style Awards, September 2003.

2004 New store opening in Korea. New collection to be launched in collaboration with The Tate Galleries.



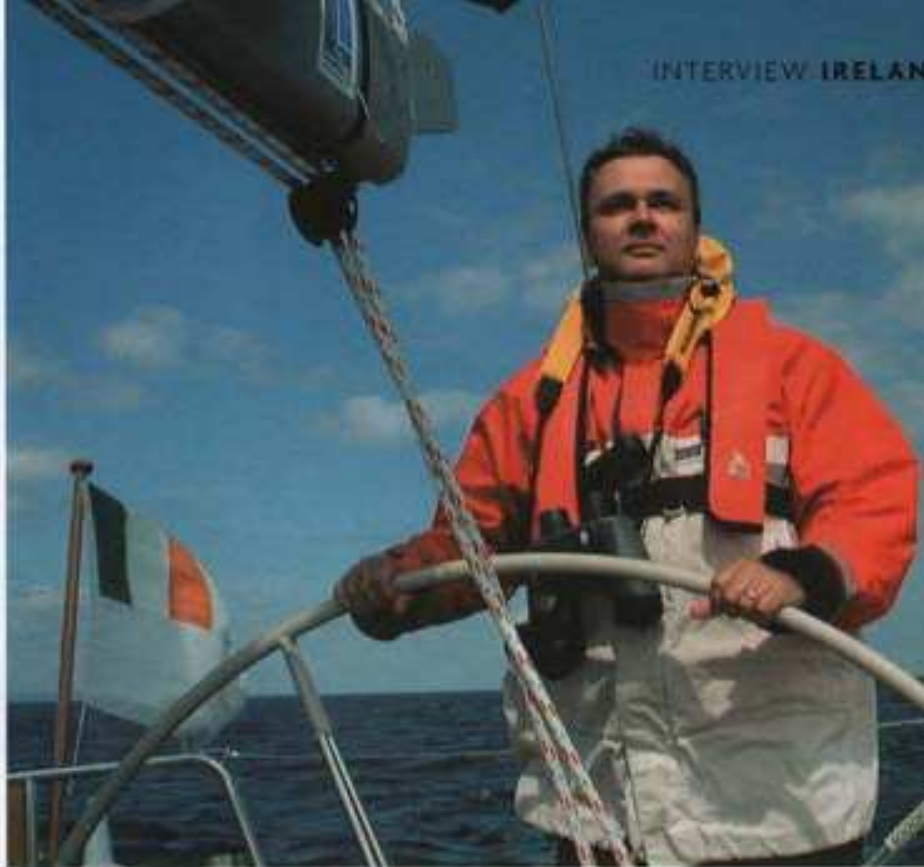
Like many designers, Orla admits to being inspired by everything, whether that be markets, museums or simply wherever she goes. She also confesses to a love of the '60s and '70s. Ask her to choose a favourite amongst the vast array of garments in her current range however and she reveals the fiercely protective pride she takes in her work, replying: "I love them all. You cannot ask me to choose from among my children!"

Despite Orla's inherent passion for her work, I wonder how, after 10 years in the business, she manages to create a new collection every season. At this point Dermott loyally chips in, explaining: "Orla's a genuinely creative person who is capable of redesigning everything every season and still holding on to her own signature look. And there's not many people in this business that can do that."

The designs have certainly stood the test of time as far as Orla's agent John-Marc Flack is concerned. Managing Director of US Image Consultancy 'Showroom Seven', he recently told her: "Orla you're the trend." Quite a compliment from a man whose agency reportedly controls one per cent of world sales!

Such is the worldwide demand for Orla's designs that people are rapidly becoming Orla Kiely fans. Consequently she has had to adapt her collections to suit different markets. The Americans like four seasons a year, so she adds a 'High Summer' section and a 'Christmas Party' range to the traditional (elsewhere in the world) Spring/Summer, Autumn/Winter split. Similarly, the windows in the Japanese stores are reorganised every week to ensure that the same shopping experience is never repeated.

Keeping up with the export side of the business in fact seems a little like a three-ring circus. To this extent, Dermott says he feels "a massive responsibility to bring Orla's talent to the world and make sure that it gets to its rightful place". Meeting the challenge admirably, he has expanded the business across three continents in a year. Orla's designs are stocked by all the big US department stores, 12 Swiss



outlets and recently stores in Korea, Jakarta and Singapore.

Quizzed about their inevitably hectic routine, Dermott says: "No way do we have a typical day." But he concedes that if there were one, it would start with the children going to school. The pair then head off from home at 8.30am – their office in Lavender Hill is close to home to avoid time wasted in traffic. With two collections a year to produce, this leaves Orla free to spend a lot of her time designing.

So what do the pair do when they're not working? Well, Orla admits to being a keen visitor of Irish landmarks and a couple of years ago spent time on Lambay Island which was originally home to one of Ireland's earliest Christian monasteries – she says the garden there was amazing. Another favourite is Powerscourt garden, 12 miles south of Dublin in the foothills of the Wicklow Mountains, where she especially enjoys walking in the grounds with her kids.

Orla's favourite place in Ireland is Galway and she enters a dream-like state as she attests to the west of Ireland's beautiful countryside and beaches. Orla's mother lives there so it's a frequent haunt at holidays and for family get-togethers. Another favourite is Brittas Bay in Co Wicklow, which is popular with day-tripping Dubliners. On the subject of western Ireland, Dermott quips: "The Ballymaloe cookbook saved our marriage. The roast lamb in garlic is fantastic!"

Looking out of the window at the bitterly cold London weather I ask Orla if she's ever tempted to move back to Ireland. Crinkling up her nose with a pensive expression she replies: "Yes maybe... or a Caribbean Island." 🍹

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Dermott flies the flag – and ensures that the Orla Kiely brand makes its mark on the world's fashion stage

