



WONDER WALL

It might be one of the world's earliest expressions of art, but our love affair with decorative wall painting is far from waning. Kathryn Conway meets one of the city's brightest talents in this artistic medium to soak up its enduring appeal





OPENING PAGES: PORTRAIT OF FLORA ROBERTS WITH HER SIKA WALLPAPER DESIGN FOR LEWIS & WOOD © LEWIS & WOOD; A WILD FLOWER MURAL FOR A PRIVATE CLIENT © FLORA ROBERTS.
FACING PAGE: PEACOCK AND FLOWER MURAL FOR A PRIVATE CLIENT © FLORA ROBERTS. THIS PAGE, TOP: A MURAL FOR K&H DESIGN © K&H DESIGN;
BELOW: A WOODLAND MURAL COMMISSIONED BY NINA CAMPBELL FOR ELLENBOROUGH PARK HOTEL IN CHELTENHAM © NINA CAMPBELL

For as long as human beings have roamed the earth, it seems we have had an incessant yearning to make our decorative mark. Earlier this year, scientists made the remarkable discovery of a stencilled hand in a Spanish cave that was reportedly thought to be at least 66,700 years old – the work not of European Homo sapiens but of Neanderthals. Go back further still to the epoch of Homo erectus and, if the 500,000-year-old zigzag engravings on a shell found in Indonesia are to be believed, then our ties to making symbolic art are not only prehistoric, but may also challenge the very basis of our evolutionary understanding of the cognitive functions of early humans. Indeed, while we, the planet's 21st-century inhabitants, might think of ourselves as free-thinking, demiurgic individuals, you only need consider the aesthetic prowess of ancient civilisations – particularly the exquisite frescoes found in the Roman Villa of Livia that date back to 30BC, for example – to appreciate how little our decorative tastes have changed.

One woman capitalising on our predilection for beautifying the environments we inhabit is Flora Roberts. A muralist and textile artist, her skilled brushstrokes have adorned the walls of London's best private members' clubs, hotels and restaurants and she has worked collaboratively with a number of fabric and wallpaper manufacturers to realise her designs as statement-making wallcoverings. Driven by their desire to add a unique touch to their homes, private clients too have fallen in love with Roberts' ability to articulate their personality through the artistry of paint, commissioning bespoke pieces that quietly whisper 'this individual has impeccable taste' to whoever might be viewing them.

"I don't want to seem arrogant, but after years of practice I think I've become quite good at interpreting what clients want," says Roberts. "Of course, there are general parameters that one should obey – you opt for something a little more calming in the bedroom, while in a living space, you try to create something that is a little more active and sociable. But, I did a mural recently for a jewellery designer and her friend who are both quite strong characters and I felt my response to what they wanted was informed by their personalities and what they were interested in."

THE POWER OF PAINT

Once studied in detail, you notice that Roberts' work, somewhat unusually for an artist, shifts in style. Each of her pieces is ultimately preoccupied with the natural world, with bringing flora and fauna, in all its colourful vibrancy, to life. But while there is a whimsical Impressionist quality in some, there are others depicting flowers rendered in such exquisite detail that you want to close your eyes and imagine breathing in their heady scent. "I've always found it interesting that whenever I am painting a plant from life, it's as if my paintbrush follows the energy of the plant and





the way it is growing,” says Roberts. “It feels quite Zen and there have definitely been times when I have lost track of time while I’ve been painting.” She adds: “I wouldn’t call it spiritual, it just interests me how much I can lose myself in my work.”

Roberts has a rich catalogue of subject matter to draw from, of course. Growing up in Scotland surrounded by the country’s breathtaking landscape, Roberts’ early life was informed by time spent outdoors. Her mother and two sisters painted as she grew up and while Roberts jokes that her love of art was “driven by boredom”, her innate talent with the brush was nurtured and then mastered at the Glasgow School of Art and later the Royal College of Art (RCA) in London. “What I took away from my time at the RCA was the confidence to know that I could do my own thing afterwards,” says Roberts. “Just having that inner belief to be able to look someone in the eye and say ‘this is what I do and you should take it seriously’ was huge for me.”

TRANSFORMING SPACES

It was her sister, Amy, who gave Roberts her first big break, when the budding artist repaired a mural of a tiger on the bathroom floor of Amy’s flat in London. “I finished the mural and I thought, ‘what else can I do?’ So I started doing little pieces around the flat and then, suddenly, one of my works was photographed by British *Vogue* magazine and this sparked a wave of interest,” Roberts reveals.

Sophie Mechaly, founder of fashion house Paul & Joe, was one whose curiosity was piqued and she promptly commissioned a mural for her brand’s boutique in Notting Hill (which has since closed). “I was given a really beautiful chandelier – worth a lot of money, I imagine – and was told to take it apart and use it to create a collage on the wall,” explains Roberts. “I created flowers in an antique style and a peacock in a tree around the chandelier pieces and then I added butterflies that were painted as if they were flying everywhere. It was girly, but quite sculptural.”

As her artistic practice has developed, so too has the breadth of Roberts’ commissions. Not only is she busy developing wallpapers for the likes of Lewis & Wood and Zoffany, but she recently worked with British Land to produce a mural for a swimming pool, a project that proved to be rather a challenge. “Originally, the team wanted me to hand-paint a mural, but there isn’t a paint on earth that is going to survive the effects of chlorine for very long,” says Roberts. “So, I came up with the idea of painting this illustrative piece in the style of [book illustrator] Arthur Rackham – very English and lyrical – off-site and then photographing it to scale before printing it on to tiles. The end result was amazing – I’m delighted with it.”

Roberts joins a long line of creative individuals who throughout history have transformed spaces with their artistic flair, but by keeping the craft of decorative wall art alive, she is ensuring it can be enjoyed for generations to come.