

Book review

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Casey, A, 2014, Lucienne Day – In the spirit of the age, Antique Collectors Club:Woodbridge, Surrey

In this beautifully illustrated publication that includes over one hundred pages of colour plates, we encounter numerous designs, both the familiar and less well known, produced by Lucienne Day during her pioneering career as a textile designer.

Casey's monograph offers us an understanding of Day not only as an international award-winning printed textile designer at the forefront of post-war British design, but also as an individual. To this end Casey is supported ably through a foreward written by Paula Day, the only child of Lucienne and her equally accomplished, furniture-designing, husband Robin Day. The book tells how the couple met at the Royal College of Art in 1940, her final year at the College. Despite being offered an extra year of study, due to the war's impact on London and the RCA's relocation to the Lake District she did not take this up. She stayed on in London instead and was called up for National Service and worked as an underground telephonist in Croydon, where she lived with her father. She married Robin in 1942 and they set up home together in Chelsea.

Fascinating details emerge of the social and economic context of the time and her experience of trying to build her career. For instance, after marrying Day, Lucienne maintained her maiden name Conradi but found that some new

clients agreed to see her in the expectation that as she was 'foreign', her designs would be of a better quality. Some of the other challenges that Day faced are identified; for example, it was eight months from leaving the RCA before she sold her first design. A manufacturer from the North contracted her to produce a design a day for a month (she posted one daily); they were manufactured but she was never credited for them - she found the fashion industry, based mainly in Manchester at the time, hostile and exploitative. These descriptions of the post-war textile industry make fascinating reading and reflecting upon them now is both heartening and depressing in equal measure. They could easily be a description of a contemporary graduate experience in an industry which, on the whole, still undervalues the contribution of textile designers. Despite these early experiences, Day's determination to succeed saw her develop and grow, leading to her work for the Festival of Britain in 1951 which she notes was the beginning of her career.

The Festival of Britain enabled Day to develop a new approach and it is through the iconic design 'Calyx' that she became known. The fabric was designed for Robin's low cost furniture to be exhibited at the festival. Calyx, was produced by Heals hesitantly, they only paid her half her normal fee. To their surprise, but not Day's, it won two awards almost instantly – the first at the Festival of Britain, followed within a year by a prestigious international design award in America, won for the first time by a Brit! This design established Day's long relationship with Heals and the visionary Tom Worthington who eventually went on to run the company. Day produced around four to six designs a year for Heals; her last design for them was produced in 1974, four years after Worthington retired, following which she decided to step down from commercial design. During some forty years Day designed for several manufacturers and retailers as well as broadening her work across a range of product types, namely wallpaper, carpets and ceramics.

It is interesting, though not surprising, to hear the breadth and variety of what inspired Day in her work; artists such as Miro and Klee; grasses seen at Lake

Garda and calligraphy are amongst some of the influences described. Casey also informs us of the types of media, the processes, what the different design stages were. This all makes fascinating reading, although the more visually-orientated amongst us might be somewhat disappointed to only *read* about these and not to see Day's explorations illustrated. There is some frustration in not being able to see a few snap shots from sketch books and drawings, which would undoubtedly have offered insights into her design methodology and allowed the reader to marvel at her undoubted drawing and craft skills.

Day's career diversified after she retired from commercial design into developing 'silk mosaics' which she exhibited and produced commission work from. Many of these pieces are now held in permanent collections around the world. Although she retired completely from artistic practice in 1999, aged 82, there has been an ongoing resurgence of interest in Lucienne Day's work. In 1999, Habitat reproduced her work on fabric and Glasgow School of Art's commercial division 'Classic Textiles' began producing re-scaled and re-coloured versions of her iconic designs for a new generation influenced by the vintage and retro trends. Day was also, during the next few years, seduced into producing design ideas for charity products - tote bags and mugs.

On the Design Museum's list of approximately 200 influential and significant designers, Lucienne Day's name is there alongside Robin's. She is one of only two textile designers on the list, the other being Timorous Beasties. This stands as a huge testament to her as a designer. Day's impact demonstrates that in a generally anonymized and opaque industry there is value, of all kinds, in taking an individual and unique perspective to commercial design practice.

This book offers a clear and well researched view of the career and life of Lucienne Day, documenting her achievements in relation to the context of the times and ensuring that her creative and pioneering legacy continues to inspire yet another generation.