

How One Design Studio Is Keeping Traditional Craft Techniques Alive

Who would've guessed a boiling cauldron and molten wax could make such a delicate pattern?



DIANA BUDDS 11.16.16 8:00 AM

Designers Nicholas and Rachel Cope of Calico Wallpaper draw inspiration from all kinds of unlikely places. For their hand-painted Satori collection of wallpaper, they based the motif off of a traditional technique for using molten gold to mend broken ceramics. The subtle gradient of the Aurora collection was a reference to the horizon as viewed from a train car. And the

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abstract pattern on their Inverted Spaces collection is actually NASA satellite photography. To inform their latest work—a silk triptych commissioned by the design gallery Friedman Benda—the couple came back down to earth and riffed on a traditional dyeing technique for a pattern that nods to the Earth's crust.



Friedman Benda invited Calico wallpaper, along with a handful of other designers, to respond to the Japanese concept of wabi sabi—an aesthetic philosophy that finds beauty in imperfection. Calico's contribution would

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be a backdrop to the other work, so Rachel took a look at what the other designers were working on for context. "One of the pieces in the exhibition was made from paper, wood, and ceramic, so we knew the material itself would be important," she says. "The first thing that occurred to me was the batik process, which I learned from my mother when I was a child."

To create a light gray tone and marble-esque pattern, Calico first boiled a 24-foot-long swathe of Japanese silk in a cauldron filled with natural dye from Audrey Louise Reynolds. The Red Hook-based practitioner collected tree bark, sea salt, and rose petals, charred the materials, and turned them into the pigment. After boiling the silk, Calico then poured hot wax over the fabric, cracked the wax layer, then massaged more pigment into the fabric (this step alone took about 6 hours). After waiting for the pigment to set, Calico then re-boiled the silk to melt off the wax and reveal the pattern. Designing, prototyping, and fabricating the panel took about three months to perfect.



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Since opening 2013, Calico has become a go-to bespoke wallpaper company for interior designers. Their work finds a way into high-end homes, residential developments, hotels, churches, nail salons, and even onto chocolate bars. Who would've thought that wallpaper—usually the material of interior design nightmares—could be such a smash hit?

"Today, I think there's a yearning to see the artist's hand and to see the craft process," Rachel says. "With the advent of technology, we're in a the world where you're not necessarily seeing this as much; you're glued to your phones and devices. And I'm guilty of that, too. There's something really nostalgic about what we're doing, and I think it gives people a moment to kind of breathe and feel like perhaps they're transported to a different time."

[All Photos: Lauren Coleman]

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