



# Paper trail

After years in the home-decorating wilderness, wallpaper is making a comeback among the design savvy. A husband-and-wife Martinborough company is leading the way.

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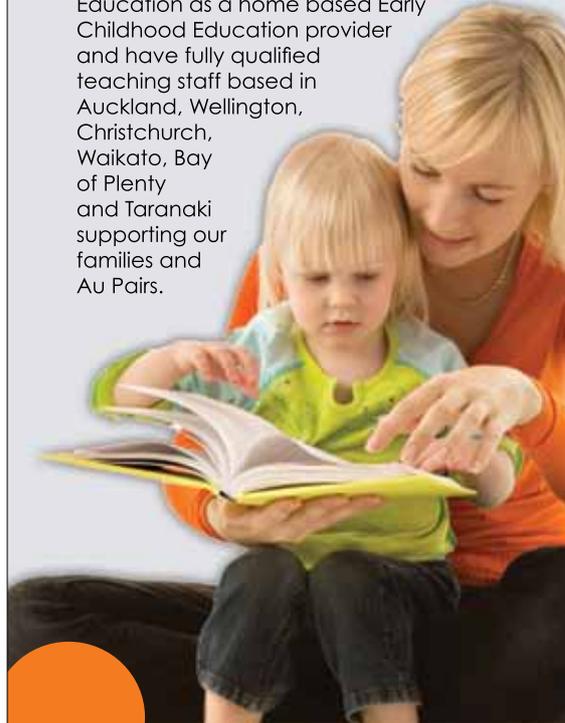
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### ◎ WHAT IS AN AU PAIR?

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### ◎ WHO IS AU PAIR LINK?

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It's handcrafted, made with love, no small amount of verve and style and it comes from Martinborough. And no, it's not wine – at least not in this case. Wallpaper.

Run out of an old winery shed in the heart of Martinborough wine country, PaperHands is a fledgling business producing lush and occasionally ever-so-slightly edgy papers for those who want a little wit on their walls. "Vices", for example, appears at first glance to be a gorgeous but otherwise unremarkable botanical print. Take a second look, however, and you realise you're seeing tobacco, hops, cocaine, coffee and other leafy emblems of western turpitude.

The business is the brainchild of Ben and Helen Masters, who arrived at the idea for PaperHands after striking out in their hunt for something unique for an extension to their Martinborough house. All the halfway decent papers they saw were imported and horrendously expensive, says Ben, an artist and retail designer. "We wondered, 'Why isn't anyone doing this in New Zealand?'"

But no one was, so they did, establishing a niche business supplying top-end retailers in Auckland, Wellington and Christchurch and selling directly from their website ([www.paperhands.co.nz](http://www.paperhands.co.nz)). They hope to cross the ditch later this year, and eventually to tap into the potentially very receptive UK market.

Their timing couldn't be better. After being consigned to the seventh circle of design hell in the 1980s, wallpaper is back in the slickest restaurants, bars and homes, although generally only on a feature wall or two. "I can't see people wallpapering their entire house like they once did," says Helen, "but I think we've moved on from the plain, painted modernist box."

How does their collaboration work? Helen, an award-winning winemaker with Ata Rangi, contributes ideas. Ben is the design talent. "Most of our designs are bigger and bolder than your traditional patterned wallpaper, which people can get anywhere if they really want it," he says. "For us it's about trying to come up with something different."

Like the name PaperHands suggests, everything, from initial design to the screening, is done by hand and papers can be custom coloured to order. "Getting the odd

imperfection is part of that, but the product still has to be reasonably consistent."

That has presented challenges. Early on, they got tips from a woman doing something similar in Edinburgh, but there was no one locally to tap for advice. Mason Handprints, established by the late, great textile designer William Mason, disappeared long ago after being sold to Resene Paints in the 1970s.

"We've really had to nut it out as we go along," says Ben. Right from the first screen they tried out. "It must have been 30°C that day; before we knew it the ink had started setting in the screen. I had to get the waterblaster out. It was chaos."

Thankfully, they've been able to build the business slowly. Living in Martinborough, they don't have the headache of a big city rent to pay on premises, and they both have day jobs. With two young children to raise, the biggest challenge has been finding time.

A tip of the hat from *Urbis* magazine, which named PaperHands best wallpaper for 2010, has helped build interest and orders, including from lodges and restaurants.

"The internet is an amazing help, too," says Helen. "We couldn't have started this business 20 years ago."

There are, however, some obvious barriers to growth, not least the public's aversion to the idea of hanging paper. As Helen remarks, everyone believes they can paint a room, but handling paper glue and soggy strips, and dealing with air bubbles?

"People have forgotten how to paper, so it seems like a big deal. But we wallpapered our house successfully without arguing, and it can be a lot easier than people imagine – you just have to be patient. So there's a bit of educating to do, but because we don't hold stock we're willing to wait it out."

Could the big wallpaper revival turn out to be a flash in the pan? Helen doubts it. "We've taken the painted interiors thing to the extreme, to the extent that I think that a lot of houses lack character. People are looking for things that add texture, character and meaning, and wallpaper does that. It's like an artwork, only it's cheaper."

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