

Hanging Art

Hand Made in Martinborough - Reviving the crafty art of hand-screened designer wallpaper.

Interior designer by trade, artist by inclination, Martinborough resident Ben Masters has managed to combine the two creative disciplines with a new commercial venture in the town. By Simon Burt

Wallpaper designer and manufacturer 'PaperHands' was recently founded by Ben and his wife Helen, a winemaker, in the age-old tradition of DIY. In this instance, though, it was a case of not being able to find a suitable product for a renovation project at their own home and thinking "we can do this ourselves!" And by themselves they became, among the very few hand-screenerers of wallpaper in New Zealand.

"We felt very much alone in the beginning, with no-one to fall back on," Ben says. "It's been a long process setting up and there's been a fair bit of trial and error along the way." But with the help of local trades, as well as specialists in other centres, they're now producing distinctive decorative papers destined for specifiers and renovators far and wide.

With a large and eclectic collection of design ideas based both on what they themselves wanted for their own project and on what they thought the market might like, Ben and Helen narrowed them down to just a handful for their first commercial release. The 'finalists' were carefully illustrated in Ben's home studio and the resulting images broken down into the components required for printing onto lengths of plain wallpaper.

The printing process itself is an ancient art, involving pressing ink through a series of screens which gradually reveal the image on the paper as each colour is applied. Originally the screens were made with silk, and often human hair, stretched on to wooden frames, but today polyester filaments and aluminium sections are used to give a longer life. PaperHands' frames are built by specialists in Auckland and the mesh screens and the emulsion containing Ben's designs are applied by a company in Lower Hutt. The water-based inks are sourced from Australia and the specialised adhesive tables - each over 10 metres - and innovative trimming machine were constructed by local engineers and builders and are set up in what Ben refers to as "the shed" on a vineyard on the edge of town.

"Winter can be a challenge here," Ben says, with the inks requiring a drying temperature of 10 degrees in the large, open space. "There's often lots of scuttling around with fan heaters." Also a challenge is having two young children to care for while



Helen is busy crafting wine at Ata Rangi. But with daughter Stella recently starting school and son Harvey at daycare, Ben is managing to find a few more minutes in the day to apply to the business.

PaperHands wallpaper is unashamedly aimed at the top end of the market. "Our designs and colours tend to be quite strong," Ben explains, "so they're mostly used for a feature wall in a home where only two or three rolls are required." The company does, however, have opportunities within government and corporate office fit-outs where a New Zealand-made or New Zealand-themed product has much appeal. The fact that it is manufactured with natural paper rather than the commonly-used vinyl material and uses environmentally friendly inks is also a major selling point for the product.

PaperHands currently has four of Ben's original designs in production, each with a variety of colourways and a quirky title such as 'Oh Deer' (a kiwiana stag-head image) and 'Vices' (a botanical theme incorporating coffee, hops, juniper and cocoa). The rolls of wallpaper are made to order, with sales generated through retailers in the main centres as well as through their own website.



Ben at work in 'the shed'.

Simon Burt