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Learning to adapt

Vicki Thomas Associates have been around for 30 years which is pretty good going after the gift design consultancy was founded almost accidentally. Here the eponymous Vicki Thomas looks back over the past three decades and where her consultancy is now.



BACK IN 1984 Mary Wilson, a ceramic designer in Stoke-on Trent, asked me: "Will you be my agent?" arguing that the research I was doing meant I had valuable contacts across a range of companies.

The interview was part of my master's degree at the Royal College of Art and Victoria & Albert Museum looking at the gift trade in the Victorian era 1850s-1880s compared to the 1950s-1980s.

I displayed my findings at the Royal Degree Show, resulting in a job offer to work as a buyer of accessories for a furniture store, and a ceramic consultant asked if I could come up with the next Eternal Beau, the best-selling dinnerware pattern of the 1980s.

Maurice Janis, then of the Giftware Association, circulated a copy of my research among the board, claiming I could see the "wood from the trees". Cutting a long story short, I started a consultancy, rather than an agency and, ever since, I have continued to research, generate projects and work alongside an interdisciplinary team of artists and designers.

What changes have we seen in patterns and imagery over the last 30 years? Fashions are certainly coming full circle. The country images of A Diary Of An Edwardian Lady and delicate china patterns like Eternal Beau are being seen again, with a different twist linked to the hit costume drama Downton Abbey and the revival of the tea shop.

In our first decade we saw the growth of gift shops of all kinds in places like London's Covent Garden and historic properties up and down the UK.

This was the decade in which Andrew Brownsword established his greetings card company, now part of Hallmark. Crabtree & Evelyn and The Body Shop were presenting foods and toiletries in new ways, stressing their distinct qualities through their design and presentation.

We designed novelty teapots, worked on pewter ranges and developed bespoke gifts and greetings cards for charities' mail order catalogues, such as Oxfam and Unicef.

There were traditional producers such as Royles, Gordon Fraser and Wedgwood showing their wares at the Spring Fair with the new designer-led companies exhibiting at Top Drawer.

We worked with the Design Council helping firms as part of the Thatcher Government's Enterprise Initiative, developing environmentally-friendly potpourri ranges, soft toys and pop-up cards.

Artists used books like Contact to get work in from

art directors and studios. The 1990s recession coincided with motherhood for me and I slowed up just as the economy did too.

The Star War films of the 1970s had changed the role licensed merchandise in the gift trades significantly and 1995 to 2005 saw my consultancy far more involved in licensing and more likely to licence our own concepts rather than sell our artwork outright.

We worked with Hestair Hope creating characters that could be used for MacLaren Prams and Kiddicraft Toys. For the RSPCA and BBC we were creating images for a wide range of products linked to the popular television show Animal Hospital.

Illustrations were commissioned for school and picture books and publishers were asking us to take two-dimensional characters and turn them into toys. Maybe motherhood skewed my view of the decade but there certainly seemed to be a demand for children's designs.

Colour copying and digital printing started to become cheap and accessible, so we designed imprints and for scrapbooking. The technology also affected how art was presented and shared.

For adults we licensed images and patterns into the housewares sector for useful gifts as larger retailers increasingly wanted to

compete with gift shop and had the ability to launch own-brand coordinated collections.

This was the era of licensed characters and designer brands on bedding, stationery and giftware of all kind, with my team working as ghost designers for celebrities.

This past decade has seen the effect of the internet and the demise of the High Street as shoppers move to buying on the web while simultaneously looking back to arts and crafts.

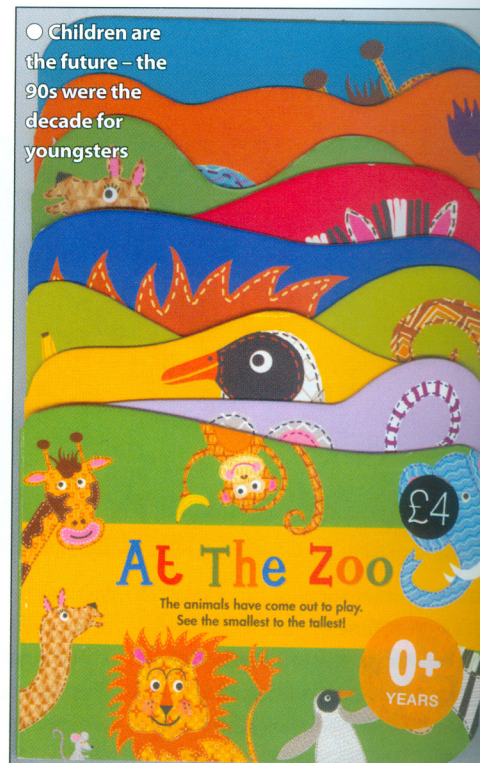
Fewer artists use agents these days as they can represent and network themselves online. We still work with artists like Clinton Banbury and Kinuko Craft but in a different way, we're licensing their artwork and developing and adapting their back catalogues for our markets.

While many of the British manufacturing companies that were around when we started have simply become brand names now owned by larger global conglomerates, there's a new wave of companies out there looking for design, though it's for online businesses and niche markets.

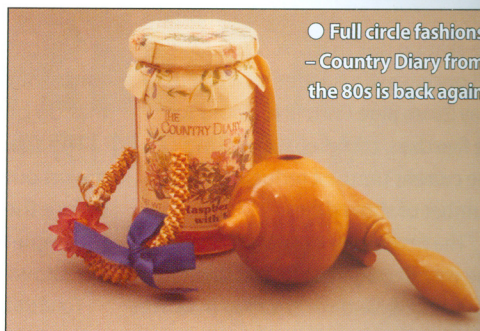
Artistic talent is a gift and central to these new types of sharing economies, we are learning to adapt to the new ways of creating and trading.

“There’s a new wave of companies looking for design”

● Children are the future – the 90s were the decade for youngsters



● Full circle fashions – Country Diary from the 80s is back again



● Technology strikes – arts and crafts with the age of the internet

