
4.3.1 interview with wisdom keeper Drusilla Cole

[Drusilla Cole](#) is an author and artist, and for over 20 years was a Senior Lecturer at The London College of Communication and Central St. Martins, The University of the Arts, London, teaching on the BA (Hons) Surface Design and the MA Applied Imagination.

One of her specializations is in natural dyeing techniques using plants and minerals.

Drusilla is the author of [1000 Patterns](#) (A&C Black, 2003) and Laurence King's bestselling [Patterns: New Surface Design](#) (2007, reprinted in mini book form in 2012), [Textiles Now](#) (2008) and [The Pattern Sourcebook](#) (2009 and reprinted in mini book form in 2015).

Her books are a fantastic source of reference and inspiration for anyone wanting to create their own unique fabric patterns.



Image © Peggy

Carey 2016.

When did you first become interested in pattern design and what was your progression to lecturing at one of Britain's most prestigious creative universities?

Colour and Pattern Design has always been of great interest to me. My mother loved textiles and beautiful patterned fabrics were much in evidence in our house. In my teens I was lucky enough to buy for a local boutique and this led me to London and to meet Ossie Clerk and his textile designer Celia Birtwell and other designers of the time and they inspired me to choose

Textiles as my main degree, which I studied at Central School of Art & Design, London. I spent many happy hours in the dyeing room, learning how to use the various chemicals and dyeing the cloth I was to print on. Because I so enjoyed the process of applying colour to cloth, I was inspired to spend my personal time researching and using natural dyes, from plant, insect, and mineral sources.

Later, when I joined the Lecturing staff at the The University of the Arts, London I taught Surface Pattern Design and Textile Technology and passed on my knowledge of fibres, fabrics and dyes.



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You taught at The LCC, The University of the Arts, London for over 20 years. How did surface pattern design change during that time and how did you feel about the digitisation of the craft?

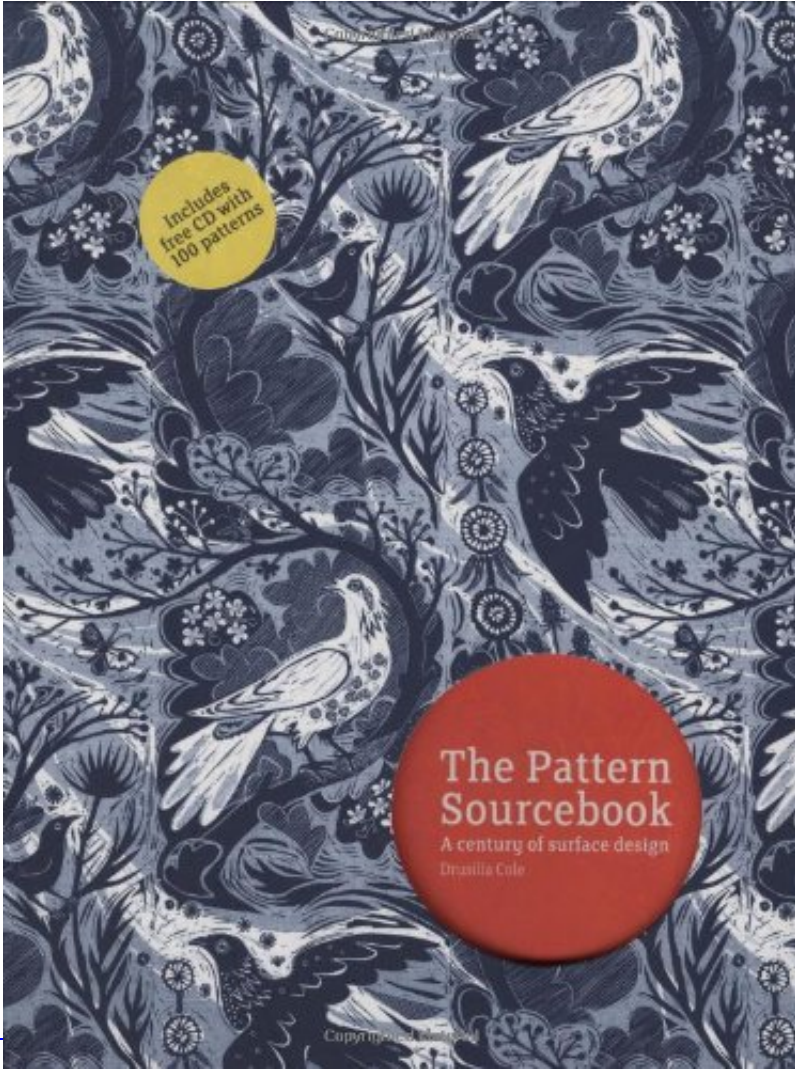
When I first started lecturing the students were using the traditional methods of surface design, i.e. paper and paint and hand pulled screen-printing, as a method of realising their design ideas. From about 2000 digital design began to take over in the department and I undertook a research project for the University comparing the outcomes of the two methods - Digital versus Screen printed textiles. In brief, the study showed that digital printing gave a very flat appearance in comparison to the screen printed application of pigments or dyes. What has changed since that time is the method of producing the designs, which is now entirely done digitally. Personally I prefer the appearance and craft of hand designing, using pencils, gouache and watercolour, but I can see the time spent on designing in that way is no longer viable.

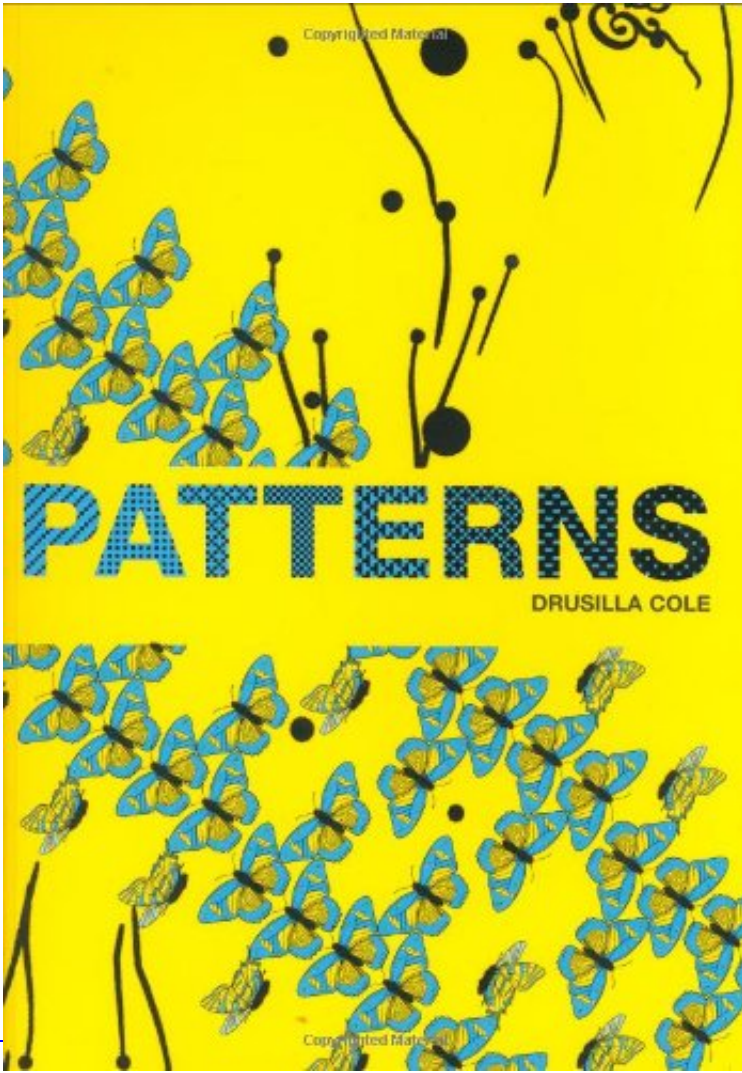


Lino printing blocks showing different colour layers and the final print by Drusilla Cole. Image © copyright Drusilla Cole 2017

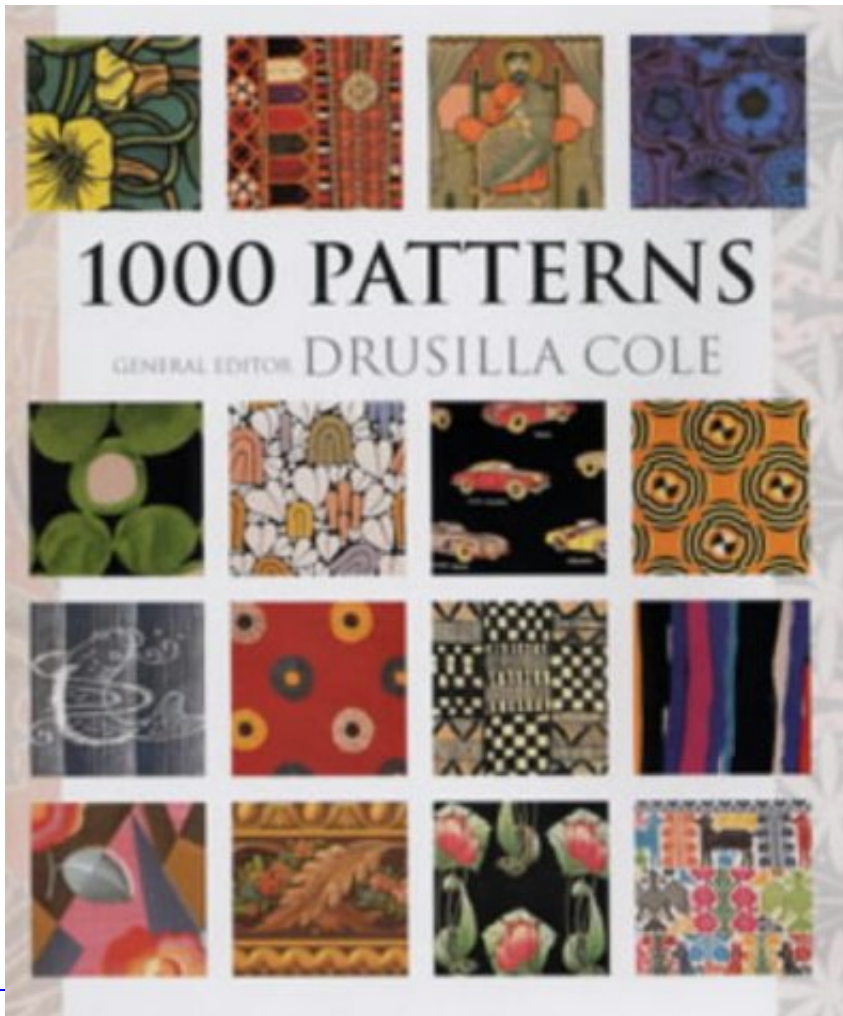
You are also the author of numerous pattern related books. What lead you to documenting pattern this way and what did you enjoy most about the process?

Researching and writing my books was a most enjoyable process altogether, although they took a huge amount of time and effort. To source my designs I trawled the internet, visited degree shows and exhibitions and explored archives. I was lucky enough to be given access to the archives of the Macclesfield Silk museum and to be allowed to take many photographs of the stunning hand painted and printed designs I found there. I included a large number of them in my book **The Pattern Sourcebook**. I was especially inspired by the samples of natural dyed and printed textiles which were there, particularly those collected in the Indian subcontinent in the 1870s by Dr. J. Forbes Wilson. I am continually inspired by the happy conjunction of colour and pattern and found the entire process exhausting but ultimately very rewarding.









Whilst teaching, how did you enable students to find their own unique design style? What kind of prompts or exercises did you find would encourage originality? How did you teach students to discern the line between inspiration and plagiarism?

Teaching in a London University meant the staff were able to encourage students to explore the rich cultural heritage on display in our many marvellous museums, such as The Victoria & Albert and British Museums. Even somewhere not so obvious as the Imperial War Museum would yield rich pickings for the students' sketchbooks and inspiration. Our teaching team took great care with the setting of projects which would encourage original thinking. The early (first year) projects would be quite restricted, concentrating on learning basic skills and would increase in complexity as the course progressed culminating in the third year to an open brief which the

students set themselves. All through the process the differences between original work and plagiarised work - or 'overly referenced' work, as it was often referred to - was discussed and occasionally some work was deemed to be too close to the source.



Naturally dyed, block printed from India circa 1870s and collected by Dr. J. Forbes Watson. Image taken by Drusilla Cole at the Macclesfield Silk Museum © copyright Drusilla Cole 2017.

At what point in your career did you begin being interested in natural dyes and how have you used them in your own work and teaching?

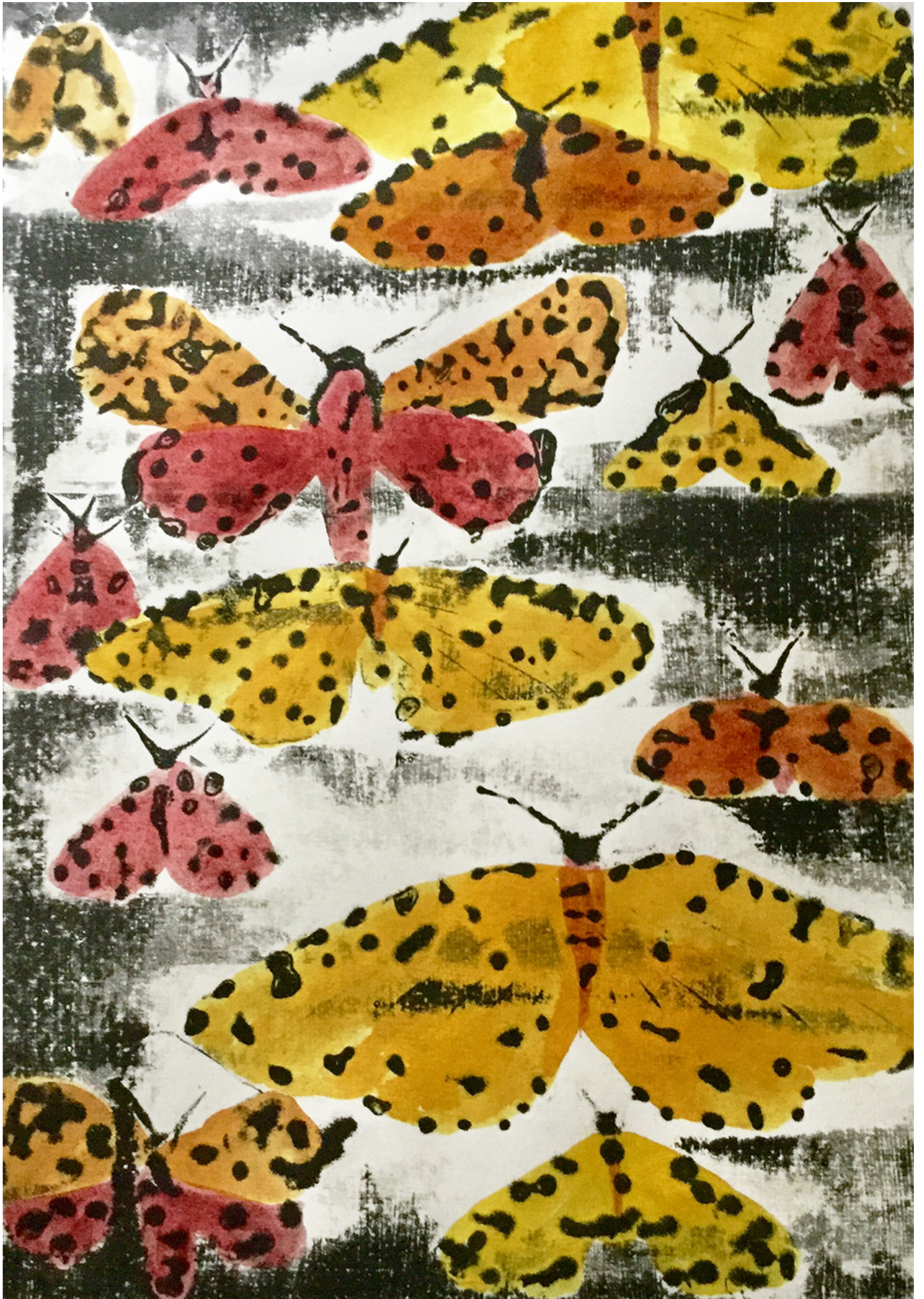
In the 1990s I participated in a project based on the use of natural dyes in printing undertaken by a member of staff at Middlesex University. This inspired me to incorporate natural dyes, thickened with gum tragacanth, into both my teaching and my personal practice. Since taking early retirement in 2009, I have concentrated less on printing with dyes and much more on using them to dye fibres and fabric. I have enjoyed seeking out the sources of natural dyes in my own area, experimenting with lichens and mushrooms and often using the Weld that grows extensively locally. I have used those in conjunction with natural extract dyes, finding these to be quick and easy to apply.

What do you like and dislike about natural dyes? Do you think there is an argument for using sustainable synthetic dyes too? Is sustainability a concern for you?

I love the subtle colours of natural dyes and the way they combine so well together. I dislike the ignorance that surrounds natural dyes, the casual way they are described as fading or pallid. Natural dyes applied correctly require expertise and perseverance to be successful, and most do not understand the length and depth of the skill involved in their preparation and application. Synthetic dyes require a great many chemicals and all too often these chemicals leach into the water table, which I find inexcusable.

Do you have a favourite natural colour and dyeing process?

Indigo remains a favourite dye, I find the colour deeply satisfying, in all its shades. The method I prefer is the one from G?sta Sandberg's 1989 book *'Indigo Textiles'* entitled 'Recipe and Instructions for a Hydrogen Sulphite Bath'. I've tried other methods over the years , but come back to this one as I know it works!



'Cinnamon Moths' a Collagraph painted with natural dye inks by Drusilla Cole. Image © copyright Drusilla Cole 2017.

Who have been your inspirations and influencers during your career?

William Morris is a hero of mine, I am continually amazed by his vision and energy and the enduring legacy of his extraordinary output, especially in the way he virtually saved the knowledge of natural dyes application from extinction. I also like the great artists and designers of the Wiener Werkstatte -e.g. Dagobert Peche and Josef Hoffmann and later Josef Frank who have all been very influential to me by way of widening my horizons. Contemporary favourite textile artists and designers include Georgina Von Etdorf and Cressida Bell. Phyllis Barron and Dorothy Larcher were two remarkable women craftswomen working with natural dyes whose block prints on linen are still eye-catching and noteworthy.



Image © Drusilla Cole 2017

Since retiring, how has your own work evolved?

When I first retired I continued dyeing and printing textiles but for the last few years I have taken to exploring different methods of printmaking, settling on Linocut , Reduction Linocut and occasionally Collagraphs. My natural dyeing is concentrated on dyeing fibres as I like to knit and have particularly enjoyed creating my own sock wool.

What would be your 'best case scenario' for the future of natural dyeing and the textile/fashion industries in general?

It would be excellent if the history and practice of natural dyes were taught in schools, colleges, workshops, online courses and by groups of people everywhere. I think natural dyes beautify

the fibre and fabrics and also enhance the wearer. Our eyes are accustomed to the natural world and its palette and the harsh colours of synthetic dyestuffs lead us astray by differentiating us from it I believe!

Best case scenario we all wear natural dyes and decorate our houses inside and outside with them!



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