

# MASTER CRAFTSMAN



## MASTER CRAFTSMAN ELIZABETH DOW, DESIGNER

Few things in a home penetrate our memory as powerfully as a striking wallpaper pattern. Tasteful or tacky, striped or floral, bold or subtle, an enduring motif can define a room, forever an emblem of time and place for those who inhabit it. And while certain wallcoverings recall childhood bedrooms or represent the latest hot Manhattan hotel or restaurant, we rarely consider the visionaries who create them.

Sag Harbor artist and designer Elizabeth Dow wears many hats, but her revolutionary approach to this three-centuries-old craft is the cornerstone of a growing design empire. Now based in Gingerbread Lane in East Hampton, her Elizabeth Dow Home retail store and showroom is part of that expansion, but wallpaper was the catalyst for everything, and Dow remains dedicated to it.

A graduate of University of Michigan at 19, Dow started her career as a Minimalist Color Field painter, but she always had a love for collage, which became important later. “After college I got involved in



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restoration because of my color mixing abilities,” Dow says. “I did that for five years.”

Then, while working for an interior designer, “I just thought about contemporary applications of wall surfaces,” she explains. Crinkled wallpaper was in vogue at that time, but Dow struggled with the thick substrate, which caused her paper rip easily. Thankfully, necessity is often the mother of invention, and a frustrated Dow began repairing the tears by applying rice paper to the back—then she realized it might be cool to apply the rice paper to the front.

“It was one of those middle-of-the-night moments,” she says, recalling how her signature textural style was born. Add that to her love for collage, and the rest is history.

Dow built up a thriving wallcoverings business by offering something totally new. Now, many years later, she’s still handcrafting her wares, albeit with a much larger operation, including a staff of studio artists.

Hidden beyond the front showroom of Elizabeth Dow Home in East Hampton—past lovingly arranged furniture, piles of handsome textiles and hides, monumental photographs, distressed carpets and all manner of compelling objects from nature and antiquity—Dow’s wallpaper studio is a hive of daily activity. Her 13 employees buzz about, attending to various tasks. And in the center of it all, Dow’s studio artists dutifully prep and paint wallcoverings on long, wooden tables before climbing tall ladders and hanging them to dry on what appear to be giant, empty paper towel rolls.



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Courtesy, Elizabeth Dow

Using this proprietary drying system, Dow dries many more sheets than traditional flat methods would allow in such a small space. “I think that’s where the invention comes in,” the designer says, explaining how innovation had a role in her success right alongside her aesthetic and unique approach to wallcovering.

“It’s part of my DNA,” Dow says of her designs, though this also applies to her inventiveness. Her grandfather, Harold T. Dow, was an inventor with several patents, including an automobile spring, and his father was an inventor before him. While he died before her birth, Dow grew to know her grandfather by growing up in the house he built in Elma, NY.

“It was this omnipresent personality that was part of the property,” she says, noting that the Greek Revival house ignited her passion for homes and interiors. “[It was] the first thing I fell in love with,” Dow recalls, wistfully describing a house full of English antiques, Oriental rugs and two pigs, Mike and Ike, that were permitted inside, like family dogs.

When she opened her East Hampton showroom over three years ago, Dow says it completed the story that began with that house. Headquartered in the local showroom, her Elizabeth Dow brand now sells much more than wallcoverings. She has her own line of furniture and represents a number of other designers’ work there. Her textile and upholstery collections are growing by 35 percent this year and can be found in fine homes across the world. Interior designers now acquire her products out of 13 trade-only showrooms nationwide.

In fact, Dow’s own interior design business is expanding at such a rapid pace that she’s had to renovate her space in East Hampton. The new division will include an in-house architect and several interior designers, as well as product development, technology and customer service departments.

Dow keeps a close eye on all of it, but she also continues to travel the world in search of fabulous new treasures for her Hamptons store and showroom. The designer also hosts monthly art exhibitions there in the summertime, and hangs larger group shows during the offseason.

Dow’s personality and tastes are omnipresent through everything under her reign, and it’s quite obvious when stepping through her showroom doors. Much like her grandfather’s old home in Elma.

- Oliver Peterson

