



## Design Since 1860 (634)

Thu, 22nd Apr 2021, Live Online

### Viewing Times:

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## Lot 575

Estimate: £400 - £600 + Fees

### PORTHIA PRINTS, ST. IVES GROUP OF TABLE LINENS, CIRCA 1955-60

screen-printed linen, to include SIXTEEN TABLE LINENS, designed by Roger Hilton (four unhemmed and unsigned, approx 32cm x 45cm, Denis Mitchell (one hemmed and with printed signature, (29.5cm x 42cm), Michael Snow (one hemmed and unsigned, 29.5cm x 43.5cm), Barbara Hepworth (two hemmed and with printed initials, 29.5cm x 42.5cm), Stanley Dorfman (four unhemmed and with printed signatures, approx. 32cm x 47cm) and John Forrester (three hemmed and with printed signatures, 30cm x 41.5cm, and one unhemmed and with printed signature, 33cm x 45cm)

Qty: 16

**Provenance:** From the Estate of an important St. Ives artist

**Note:** In an attempt to gain publicity for the growing St. Ives art scene in the 1950s, Denis Mitchell and his brother formed the company *Porthia Prints*. They encouraged local artists to submit original designs, which would then be screen-printed onto pieces of linen and sold as table mats. Terry Frost, who sometimes helped Mitchell with the printing of the textiles, described one reason for the venture as 'just a way of making a bit of extra money' for all the artists concerned (quoted in Geoffrey Rayner et al., *Textile Design: Artists' Textiles 1940-1976*, Antique Collectors' Club Ltd., 2014, p.92).

At least 17 painters and sculptors took part in the project and put forward designs to be produced on linen fabric. 13 table mats were selected and, by 1955, they were being produced and sold exclusively through Heal & Son Limited of London. The artists featured were John Wells, Peter Lanyon, Terry Frost, Roger Hilton, Robert Adams, William Gear, Denis Mitchell, Michael Snow, Wilhelmina Barns-Graham, Patrick Heron, Barbara Hepworth, Stanley Dorfman and John Forrester. By 1957 Alexander Mackenzie, Trevor Bell and Agnes Drey had been added to the team.

The results were unveiled to the public on 1st March 1955 at the exhibition *Abstract Designs* at Heal's Mansard Gallery. In the early days there was some optimism. Orders were secured in London for £150 worth of mats, and Bonnier's of Madison Avenue proposed an exhibition. Heal's declared themselves 'satisfied' with the sales of the first few weeks. But problems were already beginning to surface. Repeat orders often caused difficulties, as their production method was calibrated for the manufacture of thirteen or fourteen prints of each design, which were intended to be sold in sets or singly. However, most clients requested sets of six different mats or varieties of individual prints and Porthia struggled to keep up with demand. Denis also wrote to Stanley Dorfman saying, 'I have found it impossible to get anyone to work, they are all damn lazy.' Mitchell, though, was convinced that together they could have 'built up a nice little business.' The production issues led Heal's to withdraw their support in 1960.

Apart from an exhibition at the Redfern Gallery in 1986, showing six of the mats, and a fuller exhibition of the mats in

2006 organised by the Belgrave Gallery, St. Ives in conjunction with Margaret Howell, London, these works have been largely unknown. This collection, from an important St. Ives artist's estate, includes a number of original designs and represents an important moment in the St. Ives artistic movement; a rare and unique collaboration of artists associated with St. Ives in the Post-War years.