

NATURAL HABITAT

When a one-year sabbatical turned into a permanent move and career change, artist Kate Merritt found new inspiration in Paris where she now lives with her young family, she tells *Alison Weeks*

PHOTOS © KATE MERRITT




Kate's one-year sabbatical in Paris led to a permanent move to the French capital

After working as an art editor for a London-based children's magazine for 15 years, Kate Merritt was ready to try something new. And so when the publishers she worked for began offering sabbaticals, Kate seized the opportunity to have a break and a bit of an adventure. She hoped to try something completely different and experience life in another country. She could have gone anywhere, but she chose Paris for its beauty, architecture, galleries, nightlife and how pretty it is in the spring.

FLOWER POWER

Her original plan was to take a year out in 2011, but now some nine years later, Kate is well and truly at home in France. I meet Kate for a walk and talk at one of her favourite spots in the city - the Parc Floral de Paris. Situated in the Bois de Vincennes in the 12th *arrondissement*, these extensive botanical gardens were once part of the royal hunting domain and then later used by Napoleon as a military training ground.

The modern Parc Floral was established in the 1960s following a successful horticulture 



Colourful dahlias inspire Kate's work

show. Today the area boasts 28 hectares and some of the most stunning floral displays in the city. Kate is particularly fond of the annual dahlia competition in September and the flamboyant flower is a reoccurring theme in her work.

Kate may know Paris well now, but had only been there a few times as a tourist before making the move. And what better way to get to know a city than living in different areas. She started out in the north-east of the city in Goncourt for a short time before moving to Belleville, and then finally to the 18th *arrondissement* near Jules Joffrin where she found “a lovely little apartment” that she rented from an American lady who spent half the year in the US and half in Paris. “It had views of Sacré-Coeur - if you stuck your head right out of the window and stood on tippy toes,” Kate says laughing.

MAKING CONNECTIONS

At first Kate only knew one person in the whole of the city. “I found the key was to get out as much as possible to meet people and after a few months I started forging friendships,” she says. Straight away she looked to join various ‘Meetup’ groups, including a drawing class in Gambetta. “We used to meet once a week and I met so many people through that, most of whom I am still friends with today,” she says. It was eventually through one of those expat friends that Kate met her partner, too.

Kate also went to ‘Franglish’ classes. The concept was to meet a French speaker in a café to practise French for half an hour and then to let them practise their English in return. When I ask about her French she confesses that she’s not a natural and it has taken a good deal of time and effort on her part. She



Kate is a regular visitor to the Jardin des Plantes



Fabrics from Kate's collection with Cloud9

had studied French at school and then went on to take some classes prior to the move, and also listened to some podcasts, which she found very helpful.

Although originally from Southampton, Kate lived in London for a long time before moving to Paris and I'm curious to know how the cities compare. "Paris feels a lot smaller," she reflects. "You can walk everywhere because it doesn't take long to get across the city, and travel is also very cheap in Paris on the trains and buses. Of course, the city also has great food and I love the gorgeous cafés where you can sit out in the sunshine."

Though she does admit that she misses eating out in London as there was a wider choice of cuisine.

FREELANCE LIFE

When the one-year sabbatical had come to an end, Kate decided to stay in Paris. She considered her career options and felt that this was the perfect opportunity to go freelance. "It was a bit scary at first, but once I had taken the leap I loved it," she says. Thanks to her time in the publishing industry, Kate was able to maintain a useful network of contacts. She eventually signed with a New York-based agent and soon found work illustrating a series of baby books called *Indestructibles* as well as the *Peekaboo* series by Ladybird.


It was not all smooth sailing though as living and working as a freelancer in France comes with its own unique challenges.

In addition to learning the language and navigating a foreign housing market, Kate found the paperwork to be a bit of an obstacle. To work on a freelance basis in France you must legally be self-employed as a *micro-entrepreneur* (formally known as *auto-entrepreneur*) and it took time to understand what was involved.

A NEW DIRECTION

When Kate decided to expand her work she looked to online classes to gain experience and knowledge, and she highly recommends these to other artists who are keen to branch out. Her favourites included: Make Art That Sells, Folio Focus, Make it in Design and Victoria Johnson's Create/Explore courses.

It was through one of these courses that Kate first discovered surface pattern design. "Make Art That Sells is run by a US art agent and offered an 'assignment bootcamp', a structured five-month programme of monthly assignments to help you build a strong body of work," Kate explains. "One of the projects focussed on surface pattern design. Since then I have been hooked and it's the most exciting time for me professionally and personally. Rarely a day goes by when I'm not taking photos and designing patterns."

As Kate built her website and added to her portfolio, she started making a list of potential clients that she wanted to work with. When she approached US-based Cloud9 Fabrics, she had a reply the same day to express their interest in her work. Kate's collection with 

Kate's top tips for FREELANCING IN FRANCE

Try and make different connections wherever you live. Join groups! I recommend [meetup.com](https://www.meetup.com)

Take some French classes (I used Iboux). You can book hourly one-on-one Skype classes at very reasonable prices! [iboux.fr](https://www.iboux.fr)

Sign up as a micro-entrepreneur at [net-entreprises.fr](https://www.net-entreprises.fr). This registration will provide you with a SIRET number, which is essential for invoicing French businesses. Under this status, freelancers are then responsible for declaring their earnings and paying tax on that income.

Get out into nature at least once a day! It's so important when you work from home to leave the house and get out and about.

Depending on the type of work you do, I would definitely recommend creating a **website to advertise your work.**



"I am never stuck for things to draw as I can just take a walk along the river"

Cloud9 was released in late 2019 and she is now on their books as a regular designer.

Kate's whimsical patterns show her love for nature and all things floral. While some of her more traditional designs wouldn't be out of place among the iconic prints of William Morris, her fresh colour palette of blue-greens and coral pinks lends her work a joyful and modern feel.

FAMILY FIRST

Freelancing has also proved useful for Kate's family life, as she is now mum to two young boys. "I love working from home as it allows me to be around for my children. It's great that nowadays there are more options to work remotely." Being a mum also turned out to be another way to meet people thanks to a large network of English-speaking parents in Paris called Message.

Through Message, Kate joined an English-speaking Bumps-to-Babies group and was able to meet other British, American and Australian mums and mums-to-be, including me. It's how we became friends as I was also

living in Paris with my own young family at the time.

As Kate's family grew, they decided to move out to St-Maur-des-Fossés, a south-eastern suburb on the River Marne. Their flat overlooks the river and offers Kate an endless source of inspiration for her work. "Even though we live in a small apartment, it's worth it for the view!" she says.

INSPIRED IDEAS

Although Kate loved living in the city, her new-found access to nature proved to be an asset to her designs. "I am never stuck for things to draw as I can just take a walk along the river and come back with so many photos to work with," she says.

Whenever Kate needs extra inspiration, she ventures out to Parisian parks. In addition to her beloved Parc Floral, she regularly visits the Jardin des Plantes, Paris' premier botanical garden situated in the city's 5th *arrondissement*. She's also a big fan of Maison et Objet, the home décor trade fair held every January and September in the north of Paris, and says that it's a great way to get an idea of new trends coming up and also to make some new contacts.

When I ask Kate how she decides what she wants to draw she says that she finds her muses everywhere. "I'm constantly taking pictures of flowers and nature," she tells me. As we stroll through the Parc Floral, Kate points out the various plants and flowers she has drawn, some so small and obscure I hadn't noticed them.

The way she incorporates these tiny details in her eye-catching patterns reflects the way she is constantly drawing from the world around her. **LF**

katemerritt.com

**See more of Kate's work on Instagram
[@katemerrittillustrator](https://www.instagram.com/katemerrittillustrator)**

Kate's patterns show her love for nature and flowers

