

After a horse riding accident, Sonya Winner's career as a successful photographer was put on hold. But during this long period of recovery Sonya developed her passion for rug design. CFR talks to the designer to find out more ...

The magic of colour



Specialising in vibrant, contemporary rugs, London-based Sonya Winner is renowned for creating exceptional three-dimensional pieces combining colour with vivid, emotive shapes. Bringing a floor to life through texture and warmth became the concept for Sonya's first piece in the very early stages of her career, which was created to celebrate furniture retailer Aram's 40th year in business.

Sonya recalls: "In 2004 I was invited by the Aram family to participate in their AD40 exhibition. They invited 40 artists and designers to design a rug in celebration of their 40th year. As a designer, to see my vision initially created on an A4 page and translated into a three-dimensional wool rug was amazing."

The Kaleidoscope instantly caused a sensation amongst the press and was even short-listed for an Elle Decoration Award shortly after its launch. Sonya adds: "Through this publicity, private clients started asking me to design rugs so the possibility to continue on the rug journey began."

At the time, Sonya was working as a portrait photographer, but increasingly found herself setting time aside to feed her appetite for designing rugs, however in

2007 a tragic horseriding accident brought her to a standstill, as she explains: "Having broken my back and wrist, at first I was confined to hospital unable to move at all. Initially I was unsure if I would recover fully so it seemed as if my career as a photographer could be over."

"During the first dark weeks from my hospital bed, one thing that started to get my spirits up was sketching and experimenting with collage to create new designs for rugs. – my mind was activated and stimulated by the creative process even if my body was at a standstill. The magic of creation was exhilarating and lifted my mood. After a month, my back brace was fitted – multi-coloured, of course – and the process of rehabilitation began. That was now over four years ago and since then I have completed a 450km desert bike ride in blistering heat and feel even fitter than ever."

The energy and well-being in Sonya is reflected in the work she creates, injecting colour and confidence into all of her projects. She says: "When designing I like to be playful and spontaneous and not restricted by convention. My starting point is colour. I love the effect of juxtaposing colour and shape and am fascinated by the effect that colour has on mood."

Having trained as a graphic designer I noticed that my approach seemed very different to other designers in the rug world – most approaching their designs from a pattern base rather than graphic. I think of my rug designs as art pieces – full of emotion and meaning, that have been translated into reality by the highly skilled craftspeople of Kathmandu and Northern India who have continued and perfected the skill of weaving.”

For inspiration, Sonya regularly attends design shows enhancing her network of contemporary and emerging artists and designers. “I am inspired by many of the great and good of the visual art world, for example, Matisse, Henri Moore, Vivianna Torun Bulow-Hube, Maija Isola, Bridget Reilly, Renzo Piano, Thomas Heatherwick, Eldridge Smerin and Ron Arad,” says Sonya.

“I am a member of the Contemporary Arts Society and enjoy their tours and talks that take you to lesser-known galleries and art spaces throughout London, meeting artists/makers and curators.”

Not only does Sonya attend regular meetings and design events to source inspiration for herself, she is often invited to inspire many other in the design world: “Last year I was invited by Decorex and Cover Magazine to be the feature rug at the Decorex Focal Point – this was the first time my rugs were shown. Earlier this year, I exhibited at the Aram Gallery’s Now and Then show in Covent Garden.

“As part of the London Design in September, I will be exhibiting at Tent London and I’m in discussions to show some Limited Editions at a satellite event to the Frieze Art Fair in October.”

Positioned in the hub of London’s design community, Sonya is exposed to a wide spectrum of influences and external stimulus, aiding her design process. But more commonly, she begins with a simple sketch: “The design process for any one design starts off as a germ of an idea in a sketch book – a doodle, an inspiration from a piece of art, a cut out from a magazine or a photo that I’ve taken often from nature that I find particularly engaging. I then start working and playing with it in sketch form. It can take many weeks to perfect on paper before the process of working with wool tufts begins.

“Once I feel the design looks right in sketch form, I then look for the perfect colour combinations. Getting the right shade is vitally important so I will request new colour tufts from Chromotone to match Pantone references and add these into my existing palette and ensure my manufacturers have these to accurately dye to.

“Finally, this is translated into the computer for a detailed specification. I work with [Explorug.com](#), the latest computer technology and visualisation software to create a textured visualisation to check before production begins. This is then translated by [Galaincha](#) software to communicate to the weavers the design knot by knot. Once the specification is complete, the first prototype or sample section is sent to the weavers to produce something that is then ready to share with clients.”

Sonya’s most recent design, *After Matisse*, is pure testimony to the quantity of colours involved in the final product. She comments: “The subtle combination of the 26 colours and angular shapes and varying tuft heights have been translated perfectly by my manufacturers to give the desired effect – in fact the design somehow has taken on an extra dimension when translated into wool.”

“The idea behind *After Matisse* was to create something full of light, transparency and dynamism using the dense fibres of New Zealand wool.”

Pushing the boundaries of colour and texture is inherent to Sonya Winner and her ethos for rug design. Her portfolio includes 16 designs, all bursting with vibrancy, and is complemented by a limited editions selection in which 25 rugs are produced of each unique design. The designer even produces a few bespoke commissions each year, which as seen, has opened up valuable opportunities. She comments: “We limited the



number of bespoke commissions per year as they are very time consuming – however they are very important as the collaboration between designer and client can create new sparks of creativity that are added to the design process.

“Recently a client requested our Limited Edition Tree Trunk in pure silk – this had never been made before. When it arrived I was stunned by the beauty and intensity of colour that the pure silk lent to the design. This is now an option available to all clients. The creativity of clients should never be underestimated – they often suggest a completely new angle never considered.”

Whilst Sonya designs a few customised pieces aside from her core collection, she feels very strongly about enforcing copyright laws and believes anyone attempting to infringe on someone else’s designs should be stopped immediately.

As a member of ACID, the organisation set up to prevent copyright in design, Sonya proactively supports the campaign and urges other designers to do the same. She comments: “I am very passionate about protecting intellectual property and ACID (Anti Copying in Design) is a wonderful and increasingly powerful organization set up by Dids Macdonald (herself originally a victim of IP theft) to help designers protect and defend their intellectual property rights and lobby Government on improving and updating intellectual property law.

“Our culture is beginning to change and there is a move towards respecting the authenticity and provenance of design supporting the belief that designers should be protected from the high street and large corporations copying their work. Within the carpet and flooring world we should all sign up to ACID to acknowledge the work of our competitors and protect ourselves from imitation – which is the sincerest form of flattery!”

For more information about Sonya Winner, and her bespoke designs, log on to her website, or see the pieces first hand at London Design Week, where she will be exhibiting a range of her popular rug designs at Tent London.

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