

FINANCIAL TIMES

How to spend it





ETHNIQUE, C'EST

Main picture: Roche Bobois patchwork wool Victoire rug, £3,000. Bottom right: Javier Tortosa for Gandia Blasco hand-tufted wool and cotton Mosalek rug, £1,090

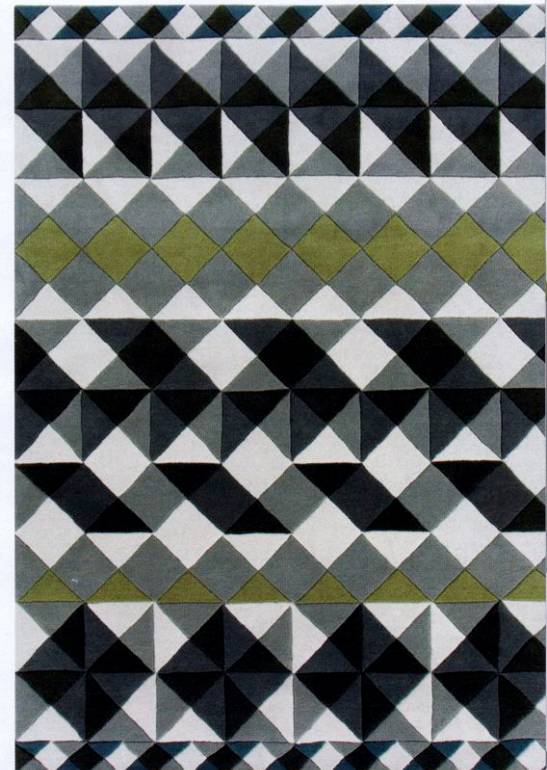


Fashion designer Jenny Packham's Hampstead home is a fabulously colourful mix of antique and modern, with streamlined kitchen, art-deco touches, elegant de Gournay wallpapers and vintage Berber rugs sourced from Larusi, the London-based Moroccan Berber-textile specialist. "Larusi is my 'must-go-to' store for beautiful rugs," she says. For Packham, the allure of these fine woollen pieces – known as Beni Ouarains, after the Atlas Mountain tribes who weave them, and popularised in the UK when owner and former Amnesty International worker Souad Larusi launched the company in 2000 – is the combination of a "desirable, contemporary design aesthetic with traditional craftsmanship... The showroom is a designer's dream den".

Packham is not the only one to have trodden the path to Larusi's door. Tom Ford came to her studio and purchased a number of rugs, then commissioned several more for his Santa Fe ranch; Margaret Howell has one in her Sussex home; and artist Peter Doig purchased the highly coloured "rag rugs", known as Boucherouite (traditionally made from fabric leftovers, recycled jumper yarns and sometimes even scraps of plastic), for his home, and loves to discuss the unrivalled and slightly bonkers colour palettes of the genre. Meanwhile, designers Tom Dixon and Ilse Crawford have both used them in interiors projects. In fact, it was Crawford who first introduced Larusi's Berber Beni Ouarains to a wider audience when she started to feature them in her Soho House schemes about 10 years ago.

At the time, says Larusi, Moroccan Berber Beni Ouarain rugs (from £750) were virtually unknown in the UK. But as she researched the marketplace, and as her architect husband began to spot them in 20th-century interiors by the likes of Frank Lloyd Wright and Alvar Aalto, Larusi began to see a precedent for a mix of modern and historic that would appeal to urban 21st-century homeowners.

She was right. Now the Beni Ouarain style of neutral-hued lush-pile rug (which the tribespeople



CHIC

Ethnic rugs are gaining a new fanbase as designers contemporise traditional motifs and rework vintage styles. Jenny Dalton is spoilt for choice



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often use to wrap themselves in) has become so popular in contemporary circles that everyone from John Lewis (from £175) to The Conran Shop (from £4,400) to Loaf (£445) has their own version. For Larusi, these new pieces underline the appeal of the patterns. However, she maintains that it’s “the authenticity of the vintage designs that appeals to my clients; they want to own something that’s unique” – such as the Beni Ouarain rug (pictured right, £2,000 for a similar piece) in the Blackheath home of one of her customers.

Nonetheless, vintage does not always suit modern homes. So says Emma Wilson, a dealer in Moroccan rugs who set up Beldi Rugs after seeing how popular they were becoming. She draws on contacts she built through her holiday-rental properties in Essouira and sells authentic Beni Ouarains (from £1,000), Boujads (from £250 to £1,200 for the pink- and red-coloured ones from the Haouz region), Boucherouite rag rugs (about £450) and the finer, geometrically patterned Azilal rugs (example pictured top right, £900). However, she has recently launched a bespoke service that creates new versions because “the vintage ones are becoming scarce and more expensive, but also because people want larger rugs for contemporary living – Moroccan houses aren’t generally big and so when clients want a rug that is 3.5m x 3m, as they increasingly do, we can make it to order [from £4,000], in any pattern, in any size”. For Wilson, it is because Moroccan tribal rugs are “just so beautiful” that the market has grown steadily over the past 10 years, since she started sourcing them for fashionable, creative Londoners.

Not all traditionally patterned rugs, however, appeal to a modern audience – at least not necessarily in their original form. Roche Bobois’s bestselling range of rugs of the past two years, for example, is its Patchwork collection – which includes the Victoire (£3,000, pictured on previous page) – handmade in small village workshops in Turkey, Iran and Afghanistan from



Clockwise from top left: MPD London kilim patchwork wool rug, £4,500. Beldi Rugs vintage Azilal wool rug, £900. Larusi vintage Beni Ouarain wool rug in a client’s Blackheath house, £2,000 for a similar piece

pieced-together, overdyed, discarded wool and cotton kilims and tapestry rugs. The new patchworks can include colour washes of orange, blue, gold or purple, among others, and more than 2,000 have been sold worldwide.

Joanna Wood, director of Joanna Trading, is also using “updated” (reworked originals) Persian and Kazakhstani rugs in her interiors projects. Recently, in a pretty penthouse dining room at The Russell development in Covent Garden Piazza, she featured a “shaved” and bleached Persian rug (price on request, pictured overleaf), which had been treated so “you end up with the faintest wash of a traditional pattern within the very short, reduced pile – it’s very subtle”. The pimping of Persians is, says Wood, “fun and funky. They can be iridescent pink or a lovely green or coral. They’re a wonderfully young way of reinstating an old skill set in countries like Kazakhstan and Azerbaijan.”

Such makers are, says Wood, reacting to demand. “It’s very new and very new and a good way of reusing carpets that are dated, or that you have inherited or don’t particularly love.” And although the rugs are not cheap, and although “you’re not adding value in the sense that they’re not about the ‘quality’ but about

aesthetics, it’s a great way of moving the genre forwards”. Wood has recently returned from Baku in Azerbaijan, where she is setting up a bespoke service so that clients can have their own rug “renovated” (from £250). The solid floors of most modern homes, she says, need softening with pattern and warmth, requiring “designs that cross over the space between the classic and the contemporary”.

That today’s tastes are increasingly accepting of historic, ethnic-inspired textiles can be seen across a number of new projects and products. Maurizio Pellizzoni, owner of MPD London interior-design practice and MPD Shop, and the ex-Polo Ralph Lauren Home Collection coordinator for Europe, recently chose a blue-and-white kilim patchwork rug for a seating area in a modern apartment in Shoreditch (£4,500, pictured top left) on the basis that “the traditional patchwork gives what is a predominantly contemporary space a touch of culture and tradition without compromising the modernity and understated simplicity of the scheme. With more traditional motifs, you don’t just get a rug, you get a history and a story, too. And it will be as spectacular in five years’ time.”

The launch visuals of the new contemporary furniture and accessories collection Wrong for Hay, by Established & Sons’ former design director Sebastian Wrong, highlight his very up-to-the-minute furniture designs alongside a densely patterned vintage rug. New York-based interior designer Athena Calderone, co-partner of Rawlins Calderone Design, meanwhile, chooses to show vintage (largely Moroccan) rugs in her beautifully stylish homes projects whenever possible, because “they continually add the vibrant pop of colour, desired texture and obscure pattern to an otherwise neutral room. They also offer history, warmth and that rustic element I yearn for in the interiors I create. The synthesis of ancient rural rugs juxtaposed against modern, clean design makes for intrigue and tension in a room.”

Brintons Carpets has found that its historic motifs based on old Persian documents, such as Manoir and Leila Rose (from £85 per sq m), are being requested again for new projects, and are just as likely to be paired with contemporary Bubble chairs as they are with



Shimmering styles in wool bring together traditional Persian influences, fresh colours and bespoke details, with a deliberate fading in parts so they don't look too new and shiny

antiques. Also, Heal's has introduced new rugs by Gandia Blasco (example pictured on opening pages, £1,090) that have simplified northern Arab motifs.

Finally, at the newly opened showroom Mayfair Design Studio – which is filled with high-end furniture, textiles and lighting by such Italian niche design houses as Ceccotti and Barovier & Toso – the rugs are provided courtesy of Milan-based Sahrai Milano. The latter produces shimmering styles in wool (from €2,928) or silk (from €6,588), which have at their heart a coming together of traditional Persian influences, fresh colours and bespoke detailing (any kind of pattern or edging can be incorporated), plus a deliberate fading in parts so that the rugs don't look too new and shiny. According to showroom manager Philip Howe, the studio has purposely chosen styles that are “designed to be heirlooms that sit perfectly between being very modern and truly classic in the sense that they will not date – when you are spending a lot of money on a rug, you want it to last a good number of years, even to increase in value as it ages”.

Howe believes we are undergoing a significant shift in interiors, away from the disposable to a new understanding of historic design. It is a view matched by Souad Larusi, who admits, “It's encouraging that people are going back to the crafts and extracting the good things from them to suit today's tastes. For me, this mirrors the slow-food movement. It is slow design.”

The ever-fascinating rug designer Luke Irwin – whose new Tarantella collection of rugs (example pictured above right, from £1,020 per sq m) is based on 18th- and 19th-century Italian peasant documents but recoloured and resized with large repeating motifs – goes further in calling this new movement “transitional”. “It's the golden word of the moment,” he says. “These pieces transcend contemporary and traditional because, funnily enough, I think both contemporary and traditional are out of fashion. Transitional is not about design for design's sake. It's about understanding how clients live and what they want, and that is something that has longevity – and integrity of construction and aesthetic. Because our homes aren't like fashion, which changes every six months. Your home is not your

Clockwise from above:
Joanna Trading early 20th-century washed Persian town carpet from Tabriz, price on request. **Madeline Weinrib** wool Westley Tibetan carpet, \$17,500 for 10ft x 4ft. **Luke Irwin** linen and silk Agatha rug, from £1,020 per sq m



wardrobe, it's a growing, living, evolving organism that is a development of your aesthetic.”

Irwin deliberately eschews industry influences and insists on “having a certain arrogance that is about saying, ‘Well, I love it and so I hope other people will too.’ I purposely now don't look at any magazines. I just do what I feel is ahead of the curve because I'm interested in it.”

This deliberate non-following of fashion is perversely producing some of the strongest and most authentic directions in interiors today. Aside from Irwin, there is also textile and rug designer Madeline Weinrib, who has been creating a simplified, more graphic take on ethnic motifs for the past decade and a half via rugs, Ikat fabrics and cushion collections. When she began designing in 1997, “there was absolutely nothing out there like this –

nothing at all”. Weinrib recently opened an online shop, which offers easy shipping to the UK and beyond, and her collection of rugs is like an encyclopedia of up-to-date takes on historic ethnic patterns (example pictured above right, \$17,500 for 10ft x 4ft).

It may have taken 15 years for such looks to take hold, but if Weinrib et al have their way, this new classic/contemporary reworking of historical textiles isn't going away any time soon.

“Of course, everything is derivative,” says Irwin. “There is almost nothing that is 100 per cent unique and original. Art deco, for example, was mostly drawn from old African textiles. What we are doing now is a constant interpretation of what went before, which will differ from what we would do if we were in the 1800s. But that is how trends move forwards.” ♦

TEXTILE MESSAGE

Beldi Rugs, 07980-557 318; www.beldirugs.com. **Brintons Carpets**, No 6 Factory, Stourport Road, Kidderminster, Worcestershire DY11 7PZ (0800-505 055; www.brintons.co.uk). **The Conran Shop**, 81 Fulham Road, London SW3 (0844-848 4000; www.conranshop.co.uk) and branch. **Heal's**, 196 Tottenham Court Road, London W1 (020-7896 7555; www.heals.co.uk) and branches. **Joanna Trading**, 48 Pimlico Road, London SW1 (020-7730 5064; www.joannawood.co.uk). **John Lewis**, 300 Oxford Street, London W1 (020-7629 7711; www.johnlewis.com). **Larusi**, Unit 14, The Dove Centre, London NW5 (020-7428 0256; www.larusi.com). **Loaf**, 2 Exmoor Street, London W10 (0845-459 9937; www.loaf.com). **Luke Irwin**, 20-22 Pimlico Road, London SW1 (020-7730 6070; www.lukeirwin.com). **Madeline Weinrib**, 126 Fifth Avenue, New York, NY 10011 (+1212-414 5978; www.madelineweinrib.com) and branch/stockists. **Mayfair Design Studio**, 16 Hay Hill, London W1 (020-7499 7133; www.mayfairdesignstudio.com). **MPD London**, by appointment, Fairbanks Studio, 75-81 Burnaby Street, London SW10 (020-3657 9743; www.mpdlondon.co.uk). **Rawlins Calderone Design**, +1917-697 3903; www.rawlinscalderone.com. **Roche Bobois**, 286 Fulham Road, London SW10 (020-7352 5421; www.roche-bobois.com) and branches. **Sahrai Milano**, 40 Via Manzoni, 20121 Milan (+3902-0869 0570; www.sahrai.com). **Wrong for Hay**, www.wrongforhay.com and see The Conran Shop.