



Excellence & beauty...

were the potent words that popped up continuously during my interview with Sylvie Johnson, artistic director at Merida and owner of her eponymous weaving atelier in Paris. Our conversation took place the day after the Biden-Harris inauguration.

As an avid reader of poetry, Sylvie was especially moved by Amanda Gorman's stunning and uplifting poem, "The Hill We Climb". And as a Black woman raising a young daughter, she called out the inauguration of Harris as inspiration "not just for Black little girls, but for little girls all around the world." These two figures (among others) personify her belief in the power of excellence.

Beauty is the other force that drives her. "You are never alone when you are focused on beauty," she says. Her study of beauty extends from art to fashion and seems especially driven by poetry and archeology.

I agree that we are uplifted by beautiful, meaningful

objects—being around such objects can spur us to embrace excellence. And I am inspired by the idea that to be truly beautiful an object must possess integrity as well.

For our spring report, we include profiles of three exceptional rug companies: the pioneering and visionary Jan Kath, the historic and exacting Cogolin, as well as Merida, a firm experiencing a period of rebirth under the guidance of Sylvie and Owner and CEO Catherine Connolly. From beautiful products to lofty standards of sustainability and internal culture, these firms set a high bar.

The products featured in the theme and color pages showcase a breadth of aesthetics and moods, yet a level of quality is evident in all of them. And our peek at couture lace is another testament to mastery, and to the pursuit of beauty.

To be moved by the creative output of others (whether in the form of a fragment of pottery speaking of a different time and place or a dress on the runway or today's collections) is to deepen our understanding of excellence and of beauty.

I hope this report will uplift your creative spirit in the same way the interview with Sylvie uplifted mine!

Many thanks,

Saana Baker

The Textile Eye on Rugs

NUANCED MASTERY

Sylvie Johnson coaxes elevated beauty from natural yarns, allowing her collections to shine.

Sylvie Johnson, the artistic director of Merida in Fall River, Massachusetts, and the proprietor of her eponymous textile atelier in Paris, counts herself lucky that work is a passion, not a job. She seeks to create beauty every day and believes in its innate power to touch people, as evinced in her original, handwoven textiles showcasing her signature style: gorgeously blended yarns that unite in complex architectural compositions.

“When you are creating you are so lucky – nothing bad can really happen to you if you have a pen and notebook,” she says. “I think that any kind of beauty can be something that can heal.”

In her Paris atelier, which celebrates its 18th anniversary this May, Johnson works with interior designers and architects to create custom designs for their projects. As such, she doesn't release collections



Sylvie Johnson, Artistic Director

MERIDA

Location	Fall River, Massachusetts
Founded	1978
Product	Rugs
Market Level	Artisinal
Employees	Approx. 45
Customer	Interior Designer, End Consumer
Trade Shows	Field+ Supply, Paris Deco Off



Arno & Falale, Swive Johnson Paris



Happy Wiscose, Swive Johnson Paris



per se—a design for a client might have been created yesterday or 15 years ago. Johnson develops her designs with natural fibers, such as leather, silk, Japanese mohair, and copper, in her uniquely nuanced blending technique.

For example, Malindi, a cotton yarn from Loro Piana (many of her textile sources also supply haute couture fashion houses), is combined with white horsehair from Mongolia to sublime, poetic effect. “What I’m interested in is how we capture the light, how the shadows are coming,” she explains, “and how to create something that will be vibrant and alive at some moment in your house or on your walls.”

Johnson began her collaboration with Merida several years ago after a dinner in Paris with CEO Catherine Connolly. “Merida was really love at first sight with Catherine and meant to be,” noting that she was impressed with Merida’s purpose and the values they stand for. An invitation to the Fall River mill—and meeting the master weavers and craftspeople—only strengthened her resolve. “The connection was really quick. It’s incredible because it is human on the center, as well as practice, learning, and hard work,” she explains. “It’s a really special company, and this is why I joined Merida and why I am still there.”

The fruits of that collaboration can be seen in Merida’s Atelier 2020 Collection, with Johnson’s creative process evident in its layered references. Inspired primarily by the art and architecture of the Italian Renaissance and the cultural dialogue of the Ottoman Empire, Johnson’s

internalized catalog of collected beauty is fodder for the designs. A Bauhaus lamp, a Josef Hoffman fork, an Egyptian inlay, or a celestial map are influences that might make their way into a rug. “It’s a way of thinking that takes ancient traditions and art forms as a starting point to create something entirely new,” says Johnson.

Merida, like Johnson, utilizes natural fibers in its rugs, such as silk wool, alpaca, and multi-felted merino wool. Additionally, Johnson and the Merida team have been innovating processes and techniques to incorporate unconventional weaving methods, from making their own yarns to rebuilding and transforming heritage looms to introduce artisanal handwork into the mechanical process.

“There is a soulfulness to everything, from how the yarns are blended to the artful construction,” explains Connolly. “So much thought went into every decision to create something unparalleled that no one else is doing.”

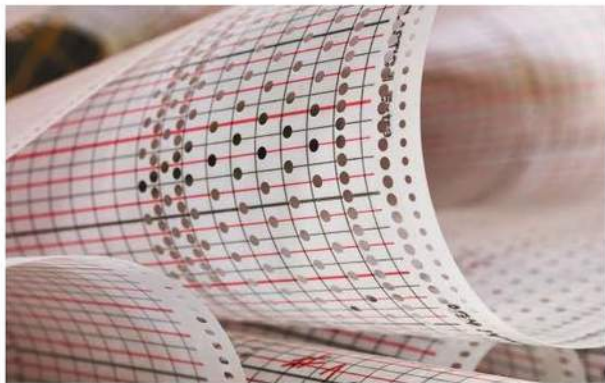
“We’re bringing the focus back to the beauty of the

materials and sophisticated technique,” adds Johnson. “You can feel the spirit of the maker in every stitch.”

Johnson used to travel to Merida’s New England workshop about every two months, but in the current COVID-19 climate, creative collaborations take place on Zoom. With that said, she has adapted to working in this new way and letting it fuel her creatively. “It’s weird to say, but it’s a special, challenging time in a good way.”

As a self-described “off-line” person, Johnson sparks her creativity by researching, reading books and poetry

“Picasso started painting when he was 12. He didn’t make one tree; he made a forest. How? Because of hard work....There is no question about how practice and research is important and it’s fundamental to be on the top of your game.”



from her impressive library, and surrounding herself with beautiful objects that inspire her. Along with not indulging in social media such as Instagram or Facebook, she does not even own a television. Before the pandemic, she drew inspiration from traveling, museums, galleries, furniture, and archaeology. "Beauty is everywhere. I love archaeology because you see the most amazing pieces," she explains. "No one signed the pieces, no one knows who made them, but it is just beautiful and touches us even if it's only a fragment."

To be a good creator, she believes, you must study and reverse what came before you, indeed you must "put it in a temple. Because you need help to grow first and then to be more humble—because this is necessary."

Johnson works through inspiration in notebooks—one set for Merida, and one set for her. Though she might start with a clear concept for a rug or textile, her process is attuned to her materials. "At the end of the day, I let the yarn decide," she says. She also takes the tactile approach of carrying small bags of yarn to "live with" in various locations, so she can touch them and see them in different lights. "Sometimes I have yarns that are 10 years old in my workshop, but nothing to pair them with," she notes. "One day, it just appears naturally. It needs to be the right moment, and the right combination for the materials to be able to work together."

She continues, "The yarn is fundamental, like the alphabet. You can't write a poem without this alphabet." Different fibers, along with the plying technique, take

the dye differently, resulting in nuances coming from the yarns themselves with each yarn taking on its own life and color.

The Dakar-born designer credits a lifelong interest with hard work, education and understanding informing her career, as well as a studied pursuit of excellence. "Picasso started painting when he was 12," she notes. "He didn't make one tree; he made a forest. How? Because of hard work. The reading and writing he was doing. He was painting every single day. There is no question about how practice and research is important and it's fundamental to be on the top of your game."

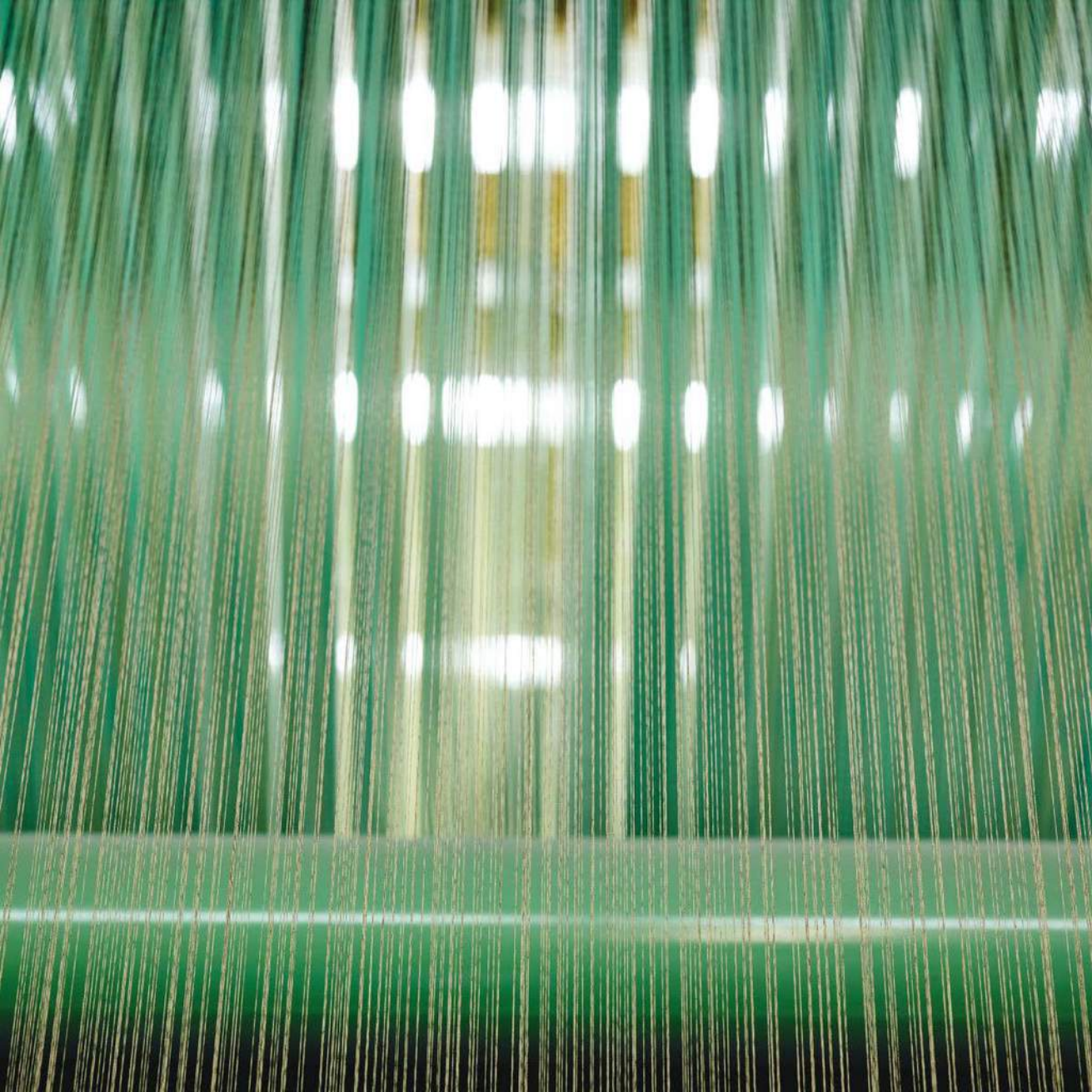
When asked about racial issues in the design industry, she shares, "This is something I was taught when I was young: you are a Black person, from Africa, and you are a woman. It might be an issue, but it's not *your* issue. It's those people's issue." So she focuses keenly on deepening her craft and her understanding of art and culture. Striving

for excellence also means no naps, as she tries to grow and do better each and every day. "I'm not sure that I'm doing that, but at least I'm trying."

In the end, continuing to learn and understand the world and the people around you is of paramount importance. "That's why focusing on beauty is important. Beauty is the key against darkness," she concludes. "We have to be defending more heartily, beauty; more heartily, effort for beauty; more heartily, practice for beauty; more heartily, the purpose of beauty. This is hope; the only hope is beauty."

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Terrano, Atelier 2020, Merida



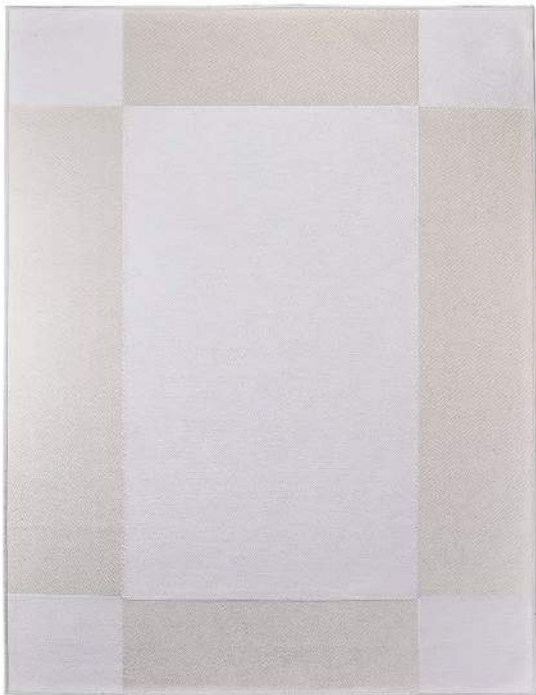
Detail Terrano, Atelier 2020, Merida



Detail Bellini, Atelier 2020, Merida



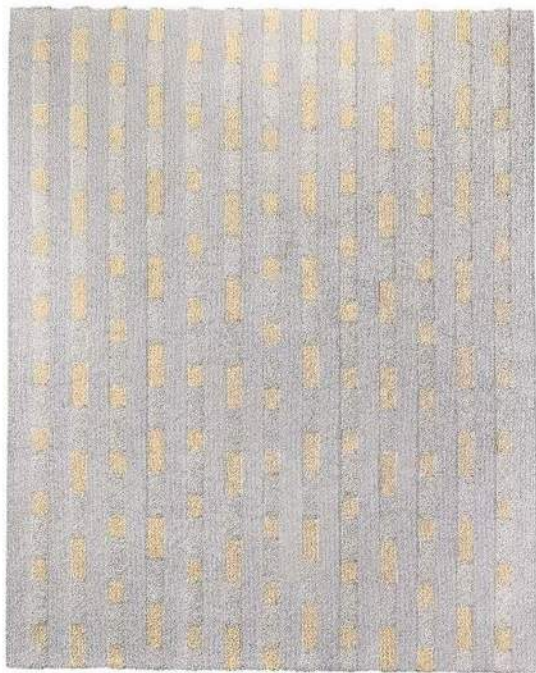
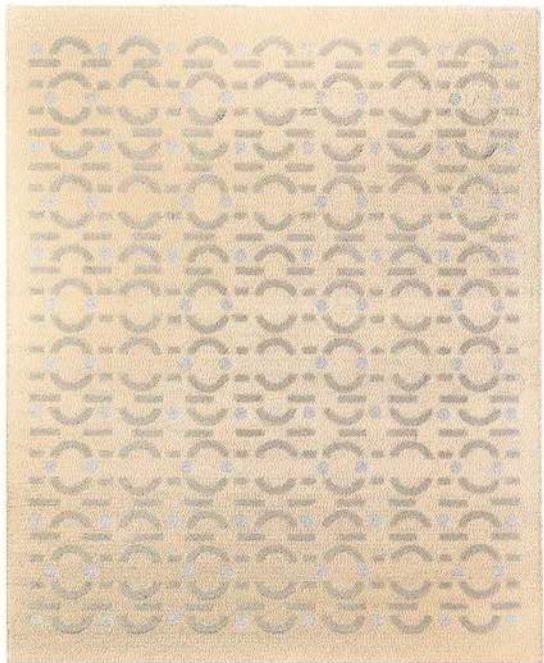
Bellini, Atelier 2020, Merida





Detail, Arcata, Atelier 2020, Merida

Arcata, Atelier 2020, Merida



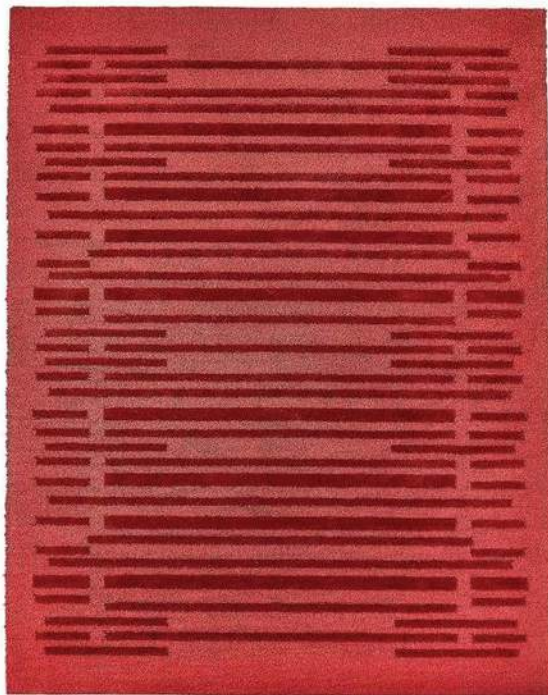
Piazza, Atelier 2020, Merida



Detail, Piazza, Atelier 2020, Merida



Detail Carmine, Atelier 2020, Merida



Carmine, Atelier 2020, Merida

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Catherine Connolly

