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interior design review

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art under- foot

Right—Janka Splashed
rug from Jan Kath

(folio) insight



In the wilds of Siberia in the late 1940s, Russian archaeologist Sergei Rudenko excavated a burial mound and unearthed the body of a tattooed chieftain, an array of elaborate gilt ornaments, select household items and one of the oldest known examples of pile carpet.

Dated somewhere between 400 and 500 BC, the rug was a remnant of the Pazyryk culture, equestrian nomads, who occupied the region bordering China, Kazakhstan and Mongolia. Typically, organic items such as textiles don't survive entombment well, but the frosty conditions in Siberia proved perfect for preservation. Today, nearly two and a half millennia after its creation, the Pazyryk rug is still largely intact, its decorative assortment of deer, horses and griffins neatly arrayed in concentric rectangles.

Since that time, the rug industry has changed quite a bit – both in design and production. Here, we survey some of the emerging trends in rug design, from the irreverent to the visionary, from rug designers within Australia and from further abroad.

text Peter Davies



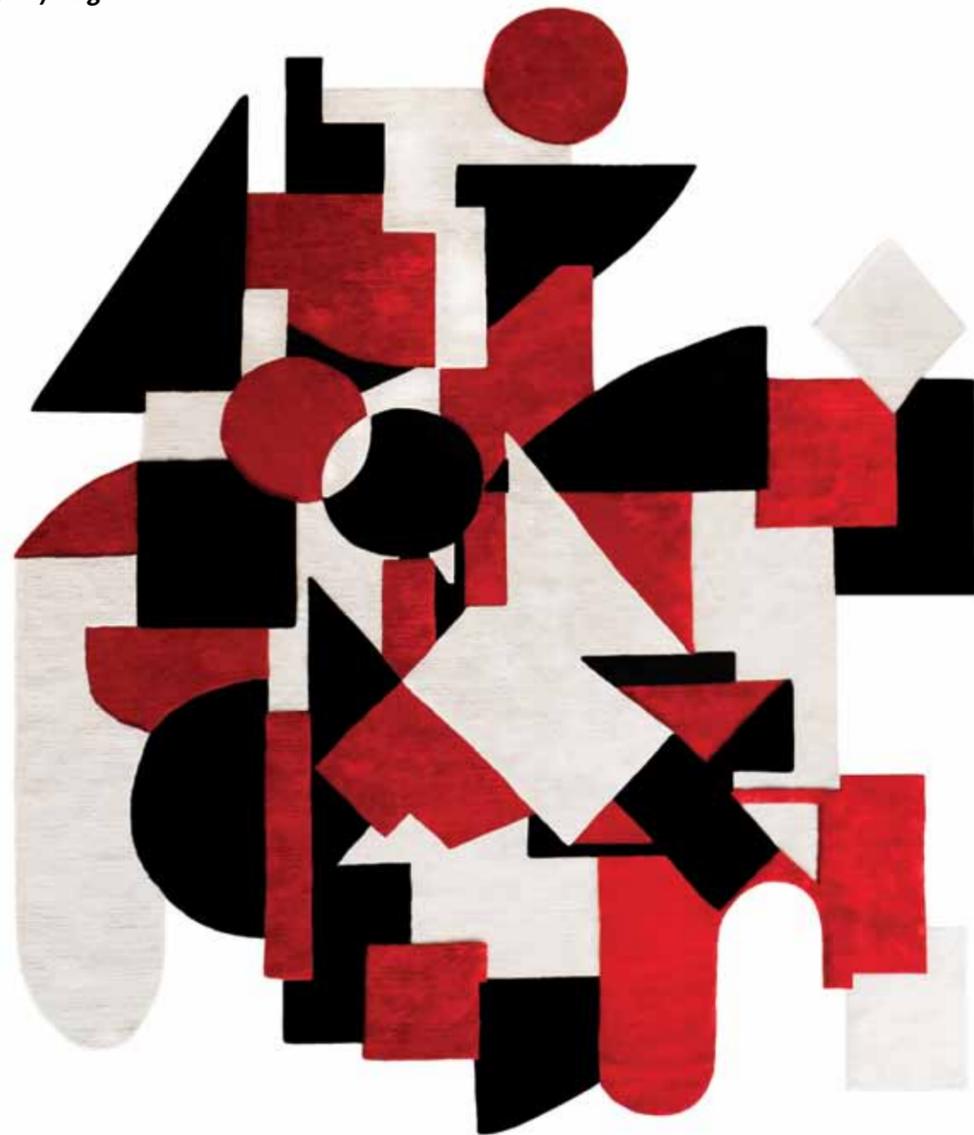
Ethnography

Over the centuries, traditional rug designs have been inextricably tied to culture and ethnography – for example, the ubiquitous Persian rug or distinctive rugs of China's Chen Dynasty. The latest crop of rug designs draws upon these traditions, reinterpreting global cultural motifs with a 20th century aesthetic.

Exoticism and otherness inform Moooi's circular L'Afrique rug by Studio Job. Beneath its playful surface and lush jungle foliage, the rug's stylised figures and iconography allude to the darker side of colonisation and the challenges of postcolonialism. It is at once playful and vaguely sinister.

Further north, the mysticism and traditions of the Baltic states have provided plenty of inspiration for German designer Jan Kath's latest collection, From Russia With Love. The range reimagines the vibrant florals and textiles of the Russian babushka. "Magnificent roses and lavish floral wreaths form the basic pattern of the carpet," Kath explains. "The petal motifs are reminiscent of the traditional shawls and headscarves still worn by old Russian women in rural areas to this day."

Two designs by Barcelona's Nanimarquina draw upon the history of rug design and its cultural links. The studio partnered with Erwan and Ronan Bouroullec for Losanges III, a striking rhombus-shaped design that reinterprets traditional Persian rugs made using ancient kilim methods. The resulting rug is a beautiful composition of orange and red. For the Rabari collection, Nanimarquina collaborated with London design duo Doshi Levien. The pieces in the collection draw upon the embroidery traditions of India's Kutch region, where glistening mirrors, silk and cotton thread and metallic sequins were incorporated into textile designs.



Tactility

Subtle variations in texture, materiality and pile height infuse many contemporary rug designs with their own unique topography and tactile allure.

For its latest collection, Gothenburg's Henzel Studio collaborated with Joakim Andreasson and 12 contemporary designers from an array of disciplines. The irregularly shaped red, white and black design by Assume Vivid Astro Focus (AVAF) uses varied pile heights – three-, five- and eight-millimetre – to create an extraordinary texture. “We have always stuck to our main objective, which is to design and manufacture rugs of great originality and authenticity, transcending borders of art and interior design, essentially pushing the boundaries of the medium,” says Calle Henzel.

In a similar way, Candy Crush by Brooklyn-based Mickalene Thomas is simultaneously a portrait, floral and graphic design, utilising the same varied pile heights.

Materiality is integral to each design's execution. Paolo Zani's Pacific rug makes obvious the simple woven felt of its construction. The visible 'over and under' of its felt strips reveals the warp and weft, the very structure and irregularity of its materials. The end result is a real sense of its crafted-ness and dimensionality.

Opposite—Ancient
Visions Always Freeze,
2013 by Henzel Studio
Collaborations with
AVAF

Below—Memphis
Milano's Riviera by
Nathalie Du Pasquier



Graphic

Graphics, media, popular culture and typography are proving to be a rich source of ideas for rug designers. The progenitor for much of this work is the distinctive postmodernism exemplified by Italy's Memphis movement. The studio has just re-released a 1983 design by Nathalie Du Pasquier. The Riviera design has been out of production for the last 20 years but, testament to the dynamism of that period, its stylised design and pared-back palette look as fresh today as it did in 1983.

A background in graphic design has shaped Sydney designer Linus Dean's rug collection. Themes of geometry, typography and travel intertwine in his colourful works, encouraging his clients to choose something that expresses an individual personality. “Our customers are buying an artwork, not just a rug,” he says. His 2014 range is alive with prisms, tangrams and other geometric designs, resolved in an energetic palette of bright primary colours.

Bold graphics shaped the latest collection from New York rug designer Gary Cruz too – the range eschews a strictly controlled theme in favour of lively graphic compositions. “The 2014 range is inspired by my experiences and interests at the moment – electronic dance music, an old African textile found at a flea market, Japanese alphabet characters etc,” Cruz says. He is, of course, underselling the complexity of the designs – see, for example, the almost kinetic Beat City Blue rug design, where a field of dots and blips, representing high-BPM music, coalesces as an abstract city grid.

Italian rug studio, Stile BK, drew upon the distinctive illustrative style of comic books for its limited-edition Fumetti collection. Each design is alive with sounds and movement – *Booom! Sbrang! Splaaaash! Crash!* – finished in crisply detailed black and white. Typography underpins the studio's new Emoticon design too, but rather than the hand-drawn traditions of comics, Emoticon references the ones and zeroes of computer programming. It will be startlingly familiar to anyone who ever used a dot matrix printer.



Art

Parisian designer Sabine de Gunzburg has carved a niche in creating rugs that double as artworks. In creating her beautiful art rug collection for S2G, she drew upon a rich family heritage in the creative industries – her grandfather was a renowned antiquarian and her mother managed the Saint-Germain-des-Prés gallery of Lucie Weill. Unable to find the rugs she wanted for her interiors projects, de Gunzburg worked closely with the estates of well-known mid-century artists to transform their iconic artworks into elegant rug designs. Three years on, her collection includes works by icons Francis Picabia and Serge Poliakoff, alongside contemporary figures such as artist Matthias Bitzer and architect Frank Gehry. To ensure the quality of the rugs, she spends several months each year in India working with her manufacturers to ensure each rug is faithfully reproduced. “A connection with the manufacturer is so important in the design of our rugs,” says de Gunzburg. “You must know how the rug is made, where and by whom. That is the difference between a beautiful rug and something mass produced.”

The practice of making art – the strokes, techniques and materials – influenced two new local collections. Tsar’s nuanced Aquarelle collection captures the delicacy of the watercolour painting. “The collection was inspired by the soft gradations and sudden edge lines of loose contemporary watercolour paintings,” says Julia Gentil, creative director at Tsar. Sydney rug designer Tappeti also took inspiration from traditional art practice, playing with the soft finishes and delicate colouration of a painted artwork. The designs are fluid but distinctive, designed to be customised for individual projects.

Authenticity was key to Tai Ping’s new Chroma collection – the design was created with no computer alteration, as if the paint had been splashed upon the surface of the rug. “We wanted the watercolours to happen almost accidentally and be kept as is. It is about a chromatic story, where the colours become the language and the carpet the canvas,” says Yasmina Benazzou, global design director at Tai Ping.

Fashion illustrator Megan Hess was enlisted for Designer Rugs’ new collaboration, the Vintage Jewels collection. The lightness of her work, its unmistakable femininity and softness, is applied to three new designs that reflect her body of work. Each features an art deco flavour and intricately drawn finish. Designed for commercial and hospitality projects, each design can be scaled up as a dramatic centrepiece.

Together, this small survey hints at the creative directions being taken in contemporary rug production. Design sensibilities and manufacturing skills may have advanced since the Pazyryk rug, but it is clear that cultural connections and rich traditions of rug creation continue to influence contemporary rug designs.