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extraordinary coverings

organic and dramatic works of art

By Alisa Kirby

Maya Romanoff has established himself as a formidable presence in the design industry. However, his gravitation to the creative arts was a gradual process. He recalled being caught reading a history book in his fourth-grade art class and explained, “At that point I didn’t really have a purpose, though I had ambition as a boy to have a metallurgy business as my father did. My father was a successful and innovative metallurgist and as a child I wanted to model myself after him.”

The student advanced in his studies at the University of California in Berkeley in the ‘60s, with a major in anthropology and a minor in classics and political science. After graduating, he traveled abroad to places such as South Africa and Paris where his passion for textiles was fueled by divergent art and local flair.

Upon returning to the United States and compliments of Woodstock, Romanoff was exposed to the ancient art of tie-dye and was instantly intrigued. He spent weeks on end experimenting and refining his resist-dyes technique,

testing the results over and over to perfect the effect. His labor resulted in a wide array of controlled, earthy and elegant patterns that would wind up taking the couture world by storm. With an artist’s touch and matching business savvy Romanoff unveiled an apparel line in 1969, suitably dubbed Wearable Art. The clothing line was a hit and was carried throughout the country in top retail establishments.

Fashion design marked the beginning of his illustrious career. That same year he launched the Maya Romanoff Corporation, and to this day the Chicago-based manufacturer remains true to Romanoff’s founding vision: to transform modern design by combining ancient artistic techniques with the latest production technology, all with a keen regard for nature and environmental concerns. “We use natural and sustainable materials, such as bamboo and wood from the fast-renewing paulownia tree, and work only with factories that are clean and treat their workers fairly. Whenever possible, we purchase materials from local sources to reduce our environmental footprint and use the minimal amount of material for maximum effect,” Romanoff said.

The burgeoning artist took the design industry by storm with his remarkable ability to transform common materials such as sand, wood, grass, beads and metals into works of extraordinary art. It wasn’t long before the young artist/inventor received international acclaim for his creations. “I remember the first awards I received and those really validated what I was doing. Back when I was working in the basement of my two-flat apartment building in uptown, I felt like I was pretending all the time. In 1976 and 1977, I was awarded the *Roscoe* for Best Technical Innovation first for my dyed floor coverings and then next for my tie-dyed leather. That put me on the map.”



in this particular instance a picture of a demure Geisha holding an umbrella, these custom works of art take between six to eight weeks to create and have been commissioned for notable companies such as Nieman Marcus, Guess and Tiffany. Romanoff's bewitching Beadazzled material can be found on permanent display at the Smithsonian Cooper-Hewitt, National Design Museum.

One of his latest breakthroughs was a collaborative effort with architect David Rockwell. Romanoff reveals, "Our mutual appreciation for natural materials brought us together and resulted in the creation of a beautifully designed, contemporary collection." The David Rockwell for Maya Romanoff Collection is comprised of three highly tactile coverings: Blanket, Double Take and Stitched. Blanket, a cozy wool wall covering, was inspired by the warmth and comfort of a favorite wool blanket and its soft 54-inch panels are offered in a variety of grey and brown heathers.

Looking back, Romanoff reflects, "being a part of the Chicago landscape for 40 years has not only been a privilege for me and the entire Romanoff team, but has made us fortunate enough to often have more than one generation of a family work at Maya Romanoff — generations of families not just from Chicago, but from around the world." Future developments include the creation of a line of textiles to coordinate with his wall coverings. "We currently have a line called Abacadazzle, which is made with abaca fiber and Lurex that makes a stunning textile for walls," Romanoff reveals. "We are always looking for the next new surface or ways to reinvent what we are doing ... I still have some big ideas I would like to pursue."

Page 25: Maya Romanoff wall coverings were presented in a three-dimensional artistic display in the spiral staircase at the Kips Bay Decorator Show House. The team that installed this feature included Amy Lau and Jo Lynn Alcorn; Page 26: Abacadazzle is hand-woven with glittering metallic threads and is available in 18 colorways; Page 27: Top: Mural commissioned by the Geisha Restaurant in New York; Bottom: Blanket is offered in eight sewn and three screen-printed, tone-on-tone colorways. Layers of fine wool are stitched with contrasting thread, creating a striped effect that enhances tactile appeal of the coverings.

