

“Women loooooove textiles. Maybe it’s some weird primeval thing. They dress their bed the way they dress themselves. But they can be crazier with bedding, because you’re not wearing it – *John Robshaw*, textile designer

LIVING IN A MATERIAL WORLD

The electrifying life of internationally groomed textile designer John Robshaw

By Olivia Stren

Textile designer John Robshaw is wandering around his midtown Manhattan showroom wearing a deep sultan, Paul Smith sneakers and his bed-shoes. (He’s sporting a fine pink-and-white button-down that he fashioned from leftover bed-linens.) Mr. Robshaw, with floppy, sandy blond hair, looks much like a fair-haired Notting Hill-era Hugh Grant. Stepping into the showroom — floors adorned with turquoise-and-cream printed dhurries and lavender poufs, shelves heaped with silk-kat cushions, block-printed linen bolsters, and cotton voile quilts and shams patterned in life-valdanting colours — I feel as though I’ve tumbled into a country estate in Jaipur. In their jubilant palettes, feel-good exotica and sheer abundance, Mr. Robshaw’s textiles imagine life more vivid, a romantic, Merchant Ivory-approved India — the sort that makes you want to spend your days in linen tunics, dabbling in elephant polo and sipping Darjeeling tea in marigold gardens.

After earning a fine-arts degree from New York’s Pratt Institute, and studying etching and printmaking in Italy, Mr. Robshaw discovered an obscure grant to study Chinese block-printing. “My parents were like, ‘You’re studying what?’” Mr. Robshaw says, laughing. So, he set off to China’s Academy of Art on the banks of West Lake in Hangzhou. “I did that whole art thing in my 20s,” he says. “That art thing also found him in Ahmedabad, the largest

city in Gujarat, studying at the National Institute of Design. And in Jaipur, Rajasthan — known as the arts-and-crafts capital of India — Mr. Robshaw worked alongside local block-printers, bangle-makers, potters, Pishwai painters and marble-carvers. “It was crazy — everybody is making stuff right in front of you. People are zooming by. There’s an intensity of colour and humanity. And then some weird colonial guy in a bowtie will start talking to you in 120 degree heat,” he recalls. In this delirium of colour, Mr. Robshaw fell in love with the intimacy and immediacy of Indian fabric-making traditions, which taught him about dying, printing, stitching and weaving textiles.

Mr. Robshaw’s artistic education — not limited to stints in India and China — is about as richly varied and colourful as his creations. He worked as Julian Schnabel’s painting assistant in New York, he vegetable dyed ikats in Bangkok, spent time in Uzbekistan (“where you drive old Russian cars through mountains and cherry orchards”) and hung out with a family in Java (“I was dying batiks and watching chicken fights”). Upon returning to the United States, Mr. Robshaw began selling his prints to then-reigning fashion heavyweights Calvin Klein, Polo and DKNY. “I was using natural linens and rough cottons, doing messy overprinting which bleeds and gives depth to the print. I was messy ethnic and Polo was clean ethnic, so they were like ‘Great, some different-looking stuff.’”

Mr. Robshaw (he is no longer selling his prints to designers, focusing rather on his own collections) still travels to India twice a year for inspiration, driving, 40 to 50 new prints per season. “I’ll use traditional shapes and forms, but redraw or patch them, modernize them, organize or disorganize them,” he says, “so that what you get is not as predictable. It’s more layered and complicated.” To design the artwork for each block-print (all wood blocks are hand-carved in Jaipur), he might, for instance, find inspiration in ancient tile courtyards, architectural fretwork, the look of indigo-dipped paper or the routes of barn swallows. The idea for Mr. Robshaw’s flame-red “jaggery” quilt print was sparked by India’s Diwali Festival (which finds the country a-kindle in firecrackers). Meanwhile, when Mr. Robshaw beheld an assortment of unravelled turbans at a dust-veiled antique market in Hindustan, he came up with the idea for this fall’s new line of “Indigo Turban” quilts and shams; each quilt is hand-tied by a turban maker in Jodhpur. “No one is the same,” he says, “like a drawing.” His decorative hand-painted Pishwai pillows, washed in gentle, childlike watercolours, took their inspiration from temple paintings of gods frolicking in gardens.

Looking at a Robshaw bed — an elaborate and soft masterpiece of coverlets, pillows, bolsters, quilts and shams — I, too, find myself struck with a powerful inspiration: to curl up and nap. “Women loooooove textiles. Maybe it’s some weird primeval thing,” he says. “They dress their bed the way they dress themselves. But they can be crazier with bedding, because you’re not wearing it.” He pauses: “I don’t claim to understand women’s minds, though.” Restraining myself from the desire to doze, I opt instead to walk around this happy-making Mr. Robshaw-divined bazaar of colour, pattern and print — both kinetic and consoling. “In India, with all that colour and action, you can get easily burned out,” he says, “but you can’t get depressed. And I’d always rather be burned out than depressed.” Indeed, in a Mr. Robshaw room, better-than-therapy anyday to winter blahs, depression will seem as improbable a proposition as playing elephant polo in India — or donning your bed sheets to work in midtown.

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Barefoot and happy designer John Robshaw, top, and his sumptuous collection.

If organizing Christmas dinner sent you over the edge, try being Shauna Levy. The president and founder of the Interior Design Show, a.k.a. IDS, Canada’s largest contemporary design fair, spends a year planning for the event, which is on Jan. 27 to 30 at the Metro Toronto Convention Centre. “Over the three and a half days, about 50,000 people pass through,” she says.

Now in its 13th year, the strength of Ms. Levy’s spectacle is its sterling content. Here’s a chance to absorb a balanced buffet of the brightest Canadian and international talent and enjoy instructive pow-wows with members of the design community.

The show’s varied offerings inspire: Sibling Revelry sees spaces buffed by creative kin. British textile queen Allegra Hicks (“The woman who made caftans sexy,” Ms. Levy notes) will be in town for a talk, as will muck-ballyhooed Washington, D.C., interior designer Darryl Carter. (Peruse the ex-lawyer’s stunningly unstuffy traditional townhouse online at *Elle Decor* or find his work at *House & Home*.)

Countering Convention sees five designers fashioning prototypes out of Corian; Studio North showcases ateliers and designer-makers from Vancouver to P.E.I.; Prototype highlights ideas not currently in production; RADO DesignGenNext spotlights the inventions of crafty students; and catch Casey House: First Seating, presented by Plan B and Vitra, in which 20 designers and architects (including Bruce Mao, Hambley & Woolley and Castor Design) reimagine the iconic Vitra Pantone chair. The chairs will be



SUCH SHOW-OFFS

Seven to survey at Canada’s largest contemporary design fair, Jan. 27-30

By Iris Benaroya

auctioned off, with proceeds going to Casey House (see the seats at nationalpost.com/homes).

If all this is too much for the person who simply wants to get acquainted with new pieces of furnishings for their pad — here’s what to look for:

- 1. Moooi Lolita Lights** Candy-coloured pendants with dainty detailing are from the creative force behind the memorable giant horse lamp.
- 2. Excel Floor Lamp** Bent plywood arms join a hub resembling a tree for NYC’s Rich Brilliant Willing’s luminous design.
- 3. Urban Tree Salvage** Oil-rubbed log rounds become tables or seats that are both stylish and sustainable.
- 4. Brothers Dressler Branches Chandelier** With its intricate arms, this piece (sure to be a wise investment from these unstoppable twin woodworkers), is a nice change from sparkly chandeliers that just won’t do in some spaces.
- 5. Modern Revision Desk** Recalling George Nelson’s classic Swag Leg desk, Modern Revision’s green desk with cute-cubies features recycled and new materials that blur the line between old and new.
- 6. Atelier 688** Silk aviator maps are backed with Egyptian cotton on these cartographic cushions in homage to the sacrifice aviators made during the second world war.
- 7. Periphere Pumpkin Chair** A powder-coated steel back (in custom colours) and wool cushion (they’ll make it in velvet, if that’s your fancy) make up this showstopping perch from a cool Montreal-based sibling firm.

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