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Susan Harter Muralpapers Debuts Collection of Heritage Custom Textiles at High Point

Muralist Susan Harter, known for her softly colored landscape wallpapers, will launch her first collection of textiles “Regency Revisited” at High Point in October. Handwoven of natural fibers and based on 18th century weaving patterns, these luscious fabrics extend the beauty of the mural palettes throughout the room.

A Collaboration Rooted in Craft, Color, and History

When muralist Susan Harter learned that her church’s organist, Terry Reitz, was a weaver, she assumed it was simply a hobby. But when she visited the Colorwaves studio— set in a barn deep in the fir forest of the PNW— she was stunned to realize Terry was one of the world’s best custom weavers.

From her barn, Reitz and her staff of professional weavers produce drapery and upholstery fabrics for clients including Parisian interior designers, luxury fashion brands, and Saudi Arabian princes. Harter’s team serves a similar clientele, printing archival copies of her landscape murals from her art studio in a tiny Victorian seaport.

As the two artists became fast friends, they began dreaming of a collection of handwoven textiles inspired by Susan’s misty landscape mural wallpapers.

But first, the friends— both passionate, opinionated, and with decades of design experience— had to agree on a direction for texture, color and pattern.

“No Hand Sadness”

Texture was the easiest hurdle. Reitz filled a table with dozens of skeins of fiber all in whites so that Harter, the painter, wouldn’t be distracted by color. Then she sat back and watched what Harter was drawn to— silks, alpaca, mohair, cashmere, washed linens, rayons, and baby camel hair.

“You like everything to be soft, fuzzy, or silken,” she noted.

“It’s true,” responded Harter, “I can’t stand fabrics that are stiff, scratchy, or feel synthetic. They give me ‘hand sadness.’”

They quickly agreed the line would use natural fibers of the very highest quality.

“No hand sadness” became their first humorous motto.

A Palette Inspired by the Mural Landscapes

Color proved more of a challenge. Reitz assumed Harter would want to play it safe on a debut collection, choosing a few creams and neutrals and grays. But Harter was adamant that the fabrics should share the full range of soft colors found in her murals.

“Nobody does a fully-colored debut range,” remarked Reitz, “it’s audacious—I love it!”

Soon, Reitz’s studio was festooned with huge sheets of Harter’s landscapes.

“I thought at first this would be easy,” she teased Harter, “Muted pastels, I get it. But girl, you have HUNDREDS of colors in each mural. And they are so radiant!”

Painting the Language of Fiber

To help Terry narrow it down, Harter tried filling her painting studio with balls of colored yarn and silk. She twisted and embroidered fibers together to try to get the effects she saw in her mind’s eye. She even learned to weave on simplified versions of Reitz’s custom built production dobby looms!

But nothing she came up with worked.

Reitz chuckled kindly at Harter’s amateur fiber efforts, saying, “Stick to what you know best, try painting your ideas!”

Harter and her art assistant, Anne McGowan, used every paint can in the studio to faux-finish several hundred color cards in fabric-like textures. Reitz enthusiastically covered the floor of her loft with the cards, walking among them and recombining them as she dreamed up color and fiber combos.

“I sometimes woke my husband at 3 AM, crunching over the cards in my slippers when an idea suddenly jolted me awake!”

Her solution became warps and wefts of gently varied colors, much like Harter's brushstrokes, sparked with light, radiant peaches, and creams.

Regency Inspiration

Only pattern remained. Harter flew to the UK, where she keeps a satellite studio, for design inspiration. She studied the textile archives at the Victoria and Albert Museum and traveled to stately homes around the countryside.

Over and again, she found herself drawn to the design of the late 1700s and early 1800s, informally known as the early English Regency. The muted pastel ceilings of Robert Adams and the hand-drawn nature textiles of William Kilburn proved a particular delight.

These designs, made just before the Industrial Revolution, had a wonderful human quality. They were light, informal, and unabashedly pretty.

That became the duo's second motto:

"Make fabrics that are unabashedly pretty!"

Heritage Patterns Reimagined

Back home, Terry pulled dozens of pattern drafts from late 1700s handwovens. Pattern drafts, which look like tiny very complicated checkerboards, were a new language to Harter.

They often struck her as looking overly busy or harsh. Sometimes she'd slide one into the *no* pile, unable to visualize it in fiber, and Reitz would firmly slide it back to the *yes* pile, saying "trust me!"

Other times Harter would cheerfully sketch over Terry's drafts adding curves and flowers, and Reitz would gamely adapt them into something that could actually be woven.

Reitz never makes a pattern straight from a historic draft, her musician's mind prefers a creative challenge. She developed wonderful complex small geometrics, surface textures, and stripes, creating over two hundred and fifty distinct fabrics.

All of them are heritage textiles, in all-natural fibers that could last "until your grandchildren have grandchildren!" as Reitz likes to say.

Regency Revisited

The creative duo is thrilled with the result of their year's work, which they dubbed "Regency Revisited."

As they had hoped, the fabrics harmonized beautifully with the murals. They reward closer inspection with intricate weave structures and unexpected soft color combinations. And they feel wonderful to the touch.

"Now we just have to wait and see if interior designers love them as much as we do!" says Harter.

Debut at High Point Market

Harter's heritage handwoven collection, Regency Revisited, debuted at Highpoint this October, and is now available to the trade at her website (www.susanharter.com)

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