

top left / Lampas fabric developed from a log cabin type design.
centre left / *Clare rug* woven with two warp beams and a pile that is cut.
top right / Margo Selby weaving on a computer operated 24-shaft loom.
An enlarged section of a smaller check design is being woven on the loom.
below / Fabrics from the *Tribal collection*.

TEXT TINA IGNELL PHOTO BENGT ARNE IGNELL

Passion for patterns

I saw Margo Selby in a BBC TV series, in which a master crafts-person turns three novices into weavers. I was fascinated by her energy, incredible skill and love of weaving. We made a trip over and met up with a dedicated weaver who believes in the future.

OUR TRAIN DREW UP at the platform in the little southern English seaside town of Whitstable. We picked our way through the streets, lined with typical English houses and their small gardens. The air and the light told us the sea was just round the corner. Margo Selby used to run her business in central London, but a few years ago she opted for this little town, well endowed with culture in the form of music, art and good food. Her studio is a hive of activity: in addition, she has people doing work placements and runs courses from time to time. There are sample weaves in a range of qualities on the looms: up on the walls are panels taken from her latest collection. Cushions and blankets on the shelves set up rich harmonies. The thinking behind a collection is paramount.

MARGO SELBY trained at the Chelsea College of Arts and went on to The Royal College of Art in London. Her sketchwork, according to her tutors, suggested that knit and weave might be her specialisms. True, she liked machine knitting, except for when it all fell on her lap. But when she began weaving, she knew right away that was what she loved doing.

– That is the only thing that can control me, she said, laughing. The restrictions set by warp and weft condition my creativity. It is amazingly satisfying to be able create a textile from scratch through to the finished product, it never ceases to fascinate me.

At The Royal Collage of Art, she was able to try out Jacquard weaving and make connections with industry.

She brought out samples made while she was a student: some of those designs are still part of her collections. Weave structure and material have been combined in stunning forms: pleated and bubbly surfaces variously produced by materials according to the finishing treatments applied. Lycra draws the fabric in, silk produces lustre, wool a softness, cotton and polyester separately and together create a range of interesting textures. Reverse, face. Which is which?

– I've always got an eye on the reverse when I weave, and quite often the reverse has a more interesting feel than what was supposed to be the face.

SWATCHES ARE HANDWOVEN in the studio. One of the looms is computer operated, its 24 shafts rising or sinking as set by a lifting plan, which gives her huge flexibility. The same warp can be used to create different weaves. On the loom at that point was a weave developed from earlier work, similar to patchwork patterning. Margo picked out a detail from a log cabin type design, then enlarged it to see how it would work. Collaboration with industry pending, it could go into production.

This partnership between industrial production and craft practice has been going ever since she brought out her first collection in 2003. Fascinated by the potential in machine weaving, she has employed her weaving skills and knowledge to press out as much potential as possible, as she puts it, in industry. Production through industry makes her work accessible to many more people.

Her work is made both in England and Scotland, at places such as David Walters Fabrics, Sudbury, Suffolk, where they handle silk beautifully. There are many exceptional weaving mills working with cashmere and wool in the north of England and Scotland. She also weaves the silk in Bangalore, India.

Rugs are tufted and woven chiefly in India, while handknotted rugs are made in Nepal.

What goes through your mind when you design?

– I really want to make fine designs and patterns, so usage is not uppermost in my mind. When it comes to colour schemes, I believe in intuition. I have always thought in colour, ever since I was a child. Over the years I've got more experience as to what works. I have an idea that a design needs to contain several components, something light, something dark, something bright and something neutral. You build up harmony through contrasts. I then like developing the designs in various scales. Repetition and organization are probably what best characterize my compositions. Much of the transformation offered by the various yarn combinations takes place in the finishing, and therein lies a huge challenge.

Where do you find inspiration?

– Everything around me. I take a lot of photos and often

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have a sketch pad with me, drawing from all kinds of sources: ads, architecture, nature and everyday things. Trips are another source of inspiration, sensitive ikat dyeing from Japan or gorgeous cloths from Varanasi in India. Pinterest is a favourite too.

How do you go about selecting your materials and qualities?

– The same pattern will often get used for several textiles, I love thinking in terms of collections, but it is all about choosing the right materials for the right product. For me, the type of material used is not the decisive factor, I am after effects and so a synthetic yarn can work just as well as silk. The economic aspect also comes

in here. Over the years, I have learnt what prices can be charged for different products. When I began, ten years ago, a cushion cost twice as much as it does today. Today, at ninety pounds, it is still on the borderline of what people will pay. Scarves are another matter, they can be pricey and can contain more expensive materials, like silk. Rugs are similar: they are often an investment and so can cost more.

What is your recipe for success?

– My strength is being able to do both the business side and the design, which is not so common, but it is absolutely the most important factor in my success. I put ca 70% into marketing and 30% into design. I do have a little more time now for weaving and designing, as we have employed more people, but contact with the market is incredibly important even as the business grows.

Images and cuttings up on one wall served as inspiration for the *Tribal collection*. The patterns were transformed through the process of handweaving into exclusive fabrics in striking colour schemes and intriguing textures for industrial production. Orders come from hotels, through public commissions as well as from private individuals. Collections sell through various retail outlets and online, including through johnlewis.com.

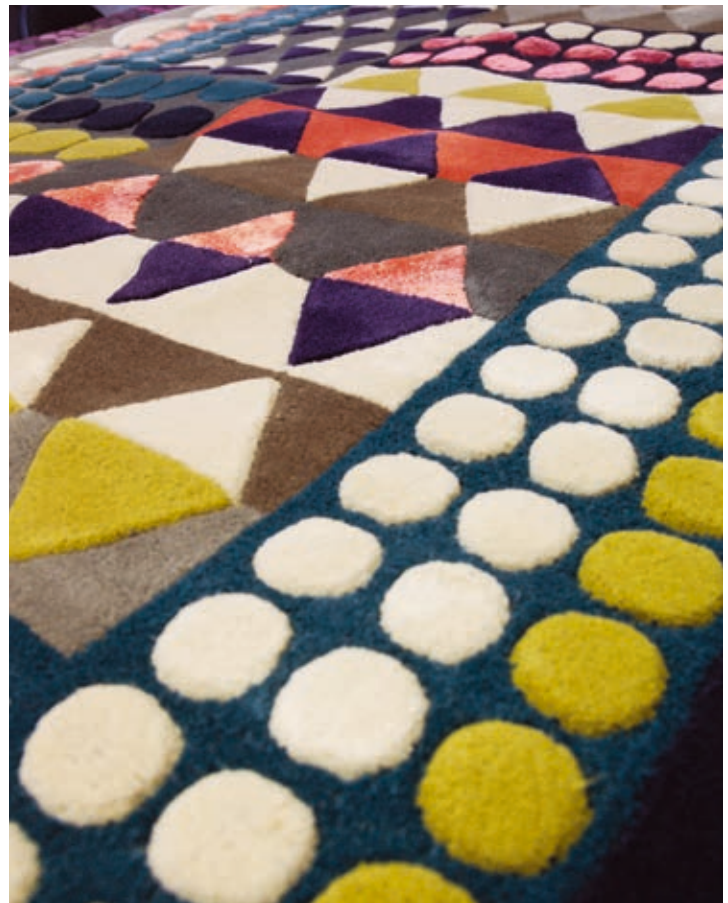
A few years ago, the BBC put on a TV series about slow craft. Three people were set the task of learning a craft over the course of six weeks. A jury chose the winner. Weaving was one of the crafts; Margo the master. She told us that after the series had aired, the interest in weaving grew along with a demand for looms. It was a hit. That series can still be viewed on YouTube.

Margo has also published a book about her approach to weaving, how material, structure and technique create interest in cloth (*Contemporary Weaving Patterns*). She runs courses in her studio as well as other places, such as Handweavers Studio in London.

HOW TO CREATE A WOVEN CLOTH

from Margo Selby's book, *Contemporary Weaving Patterns*.

Look at all the yarns you have. Create a colour palette. Decide on a weave structure. Get inspired by surfaces and objects with interesting appearances, which could spark off ideas for creating effects with different yarns. Save all your samples, record what you have done and build up an ideas bank. Finishing a cloth after cutting off is crucial for the end result: wash, steam or cut up floats etc. The book contains a great many suggestions about ways to alter a weave.



DOWNSTAIRS WE HAD A PEEK at her store. 50 metres of each design, as well as cushions and garments made up by seamstresses in Whitstable. It's all go, with new collections on the way. The best sellers right now are rugs. Margo has several ideas she wants to test here. The latest is a technique she has developed using two warp beams. It is a lampas designs which are currently woven artworks. Margo is planning on developing these into rugs which she handweaves herself in the studio.

SHE SHOWS US TWO OTHER RUGS with circles in various configurations – a recurring pattern form. One is hand knotted in Nepal, costing around £4000. The other, *The Clare rug*, is woven on 2 beams with a pile, when the pile is cut in a certain way it forms circles, see detail page 20.

Circles as a design element also appear on her woven silk shawls and woollen blankets, as well as printed on fine handwoven woollen scarves, handprinted and handwoven in Varanasi, India. That's the way she works. Constant interplay between craft and industrial potential. Always bearing in mind the overall collection concept.

– I like the idea that people can collect my designs and they will all work together. Λ

page 22 above left / Cushion in *Bindi fabric* from the *Tribal collection*.
 below left / Cushion in *Chester fabric* from the *Tribal collection*.
 right / Inspirational images for the *Tribal collection*.
 page 23 top left / Blankets in various designs, the two at the very top are in satin /satinee (woven with jacquard) and three below in deflected double weave, (woven with dobby) produced in Scotland.
 right / Handknotted rug, wool and silk, made in Nepal.
 below right / Scarves in doublecloth, woven with silk and lycra, creating a three-dimensional textural effect.

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