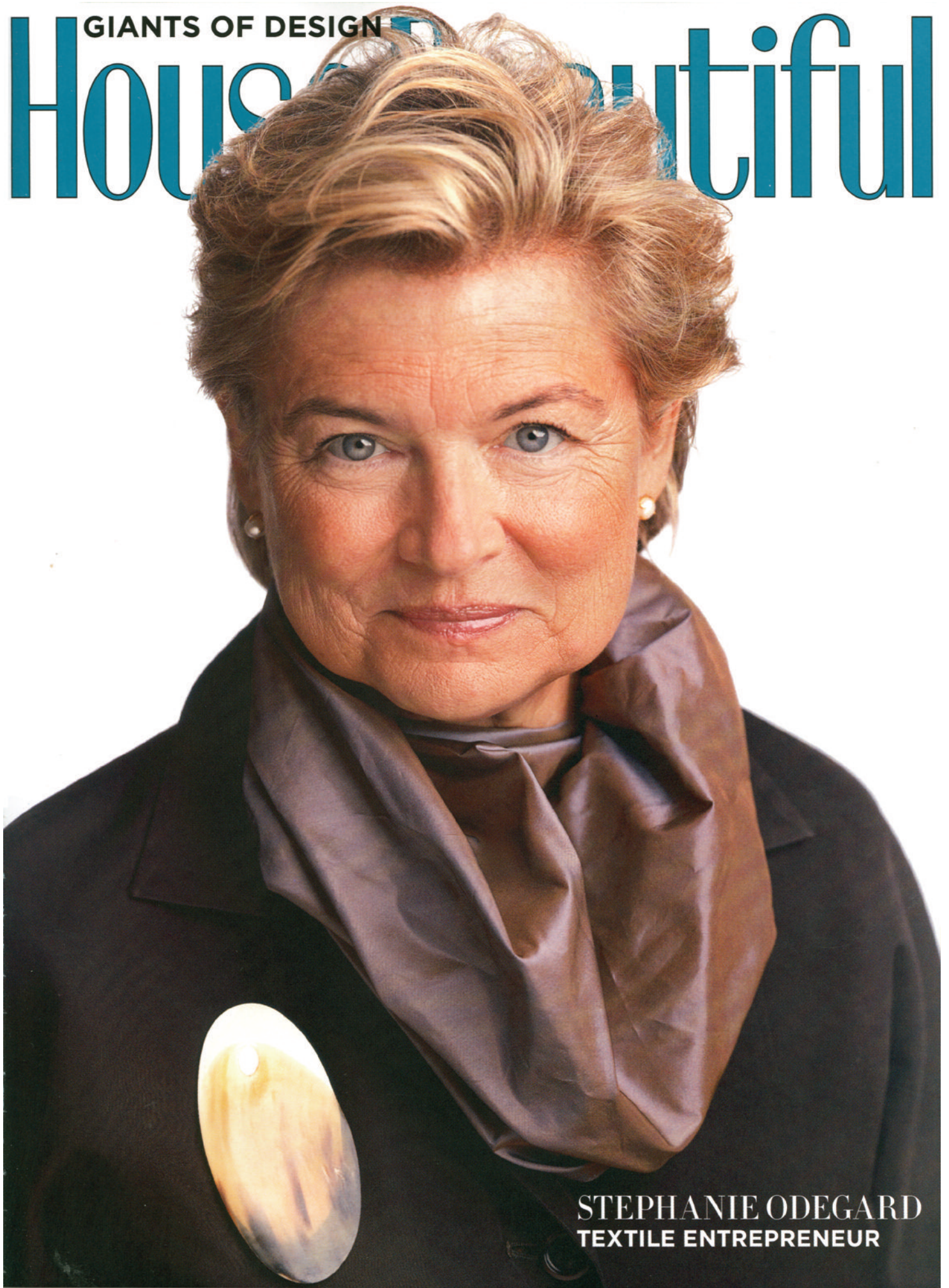


GIANTS OF DESIGN

House Beautiful



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TEXTILE ENTREPRENEUR

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DESIGN
CONSCIENCE

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AT ITS MOST POWERFUL, being a design giant means raising people's standard of living; changing the atmosphere for the better. For Stephanie Odegard that means more than bringing warmth and decorative splendor to interiors with Tibetan floor coverings. By steadfastly promoting the artisanal crafts of Nepal and promoting ethical labor practices, she has succeeded in improving the quality of life for carpet-weavers halfway across the world.

More than a design leader, Odegard is a model of social responsibility and a leader in the economic development of Nepal, the country where her company's carpets are produced. Employing thousands of people, Odegard, Inc., is also the >

“THERE’S COMPLEXITY AND DEPTH TO EVERYTHING SHE MAKES”



largest contributor to Rugmark, a carpet industry foundation that maintains the only recognized certification program to insure that carpets are made without child labor. Odegard is one of the foundation’s directors, and every one of her carpets carries the Rugmark label.

Odegard carpets adorn some of the West’s most esteemed homes, including those of actors Julianne Moore and Robert Redford, as well as the J. Paul Getty Museum in Los Angeles and the Phillips Collection in Washington, D.C. But where the rugs end up is not the whole story; where they come from is a story in itself.

The ancient craft begins as it has for centuries—with the prized wool of the Tibetan Chenluk sheep. These animals graze in the Himalayas at altitudes of up to 14,000 feet, conditions that cause their wool to become exceptionally hardy. Chenluk wool is characterized by long fibers and high lanolin content, properties that lend a world-famous resiliency to Tibetan carpets. Raw wool is carded and spun by hand, dyed in copper vats, then knotted according to a technique said to have originated in Egypt in the twelfth century.

The carpets have been made in Nepal since 1959, when a failed attempt to oust occupying Chinese forces in Tibet forced thousands into exile, including the Dalai Lama. Many of these were skilled craftsmen who brought with them the ancient skills of carding, spinning, and knotting wool and set up production facilities in Nepalese refugee camps.



This page, clockwise from upper left: Stephanie Odegard’s carpets are hand-sheared by young men in Nepal. Her line of embroidered blankets are hand-woven in Kashmir. Odegard in Kathmandu with a Tibetan Chenluk sheep. A carved white marble side table from her new furniture line. Next page, left: A selection from her graphic LaPaz collection. Next page, far right: A Takyu carpet from her Kyoto collection.

If you’ve never had the singular pleasure of seeing a Tibetan carpet firsthand, feeling its thick pile and being dazzled by its jewel-toned striations of rich vegetable dye, hearing Stephanie Odegard describe the experience is a fair substitute.

“People who are serious about carpets will really study them,” she explains. “They’ll get down and touch a carpet and sit on it, or walk on it, while looking down at it. There’s a wonderful smell to the carpet; it smells like a sheep that’s been in a swimming pool. And it’s not dry to the touch; it’s lush and oily. After touching one, I would feel like I’d put on hand lotion. It’s a total sensory experience.”



Growing up Lutheran in Minneapolis, where she regularly attended Sunday school, Odegard said she wanted to be a missionary “to help people who were deserving and unfortunate.”

After college, she worked as a buyer at the Dayton Hudson department store in Minneapolis, learning all aspects of merchandising, business management, and inventory control. Then she volun-

teered for the Peace Corps and spent three years in Fiji passing on the skills she'd honed as a department-store buyer: she helped crafts merchants make their wares appealing to Western consumers. "That," she says, "was my mission." Happily, it combined her love of fashion and design with her sense of higher purpose. "I'd found a way to make a difference in the world," she says. After working in a similar capacity for the World Bank and the United Nations, Odegard went into business in 1987 marketing high-end Tibetan carpets made by Nepalese and Tibetan artisans.

Her impetus was, literally, writing on the wall: a quotation by Gandhi inscribed on a train station in Kajaraho which she came across while traveling through India fifteen years ago. It reads, in part, "Whenever you are in doubt or when the self becomes too much with you, apply the following test: Recall the face of the poorest and the weakest man whom you have seen and ask yourself if the step you contemplate is going to be of any use to him . . . in other words, will it lead to comfort for the hungry and spiritually starving millions? Then you will find your doubts and yourself melting away." Odegard wrote down the words, and carries them in her pocket to this day.

In spreading the gospel of Tibetan rugs, Odegard advises weavers on patterns that would appeal to Western design buffs. These include simple, Rothkoesque color fields and stripes, or subtly decorative florals inspired by the numerous antique saris and kimonos in her personal textile collection.

This uniquely modern take on the ancient craft of Tibetan carpets has made Odegard a favorite of the world's most sought-after interior designers. Patrick Naggar used Odegard carpets in his design for New York's Daniel restaurant. "The rugs were essential to the atmosphere of a 15th-century Italian villa that I was trying to evoke for Daniel," Naggar says. "They have the sheen of a worn silk carpet and an unevenness that



shows they are made by hand. They make the space cozy and comfortable."

Odegard also increased the knots per square foot to 100 from 50, making the carpets more durable than they had ever been before, able to withstand punishment even in high-traffic areas such as the galleries of the J. Paul Getty Museum in Los Angeles—which hosts some two million visitors each year—and the rooms and mezzanines of the Chambers Hotel in New York. "She's completely modern without being minimal," says David Rockwell, the hotel's architect and designer. "There's complexity and depth to everything she makes."

Most important, Odegard spurred demand for these special rugs among the people who could afford to pay no less than what they were worth. This, of course, enabled fair compensation for the artisans whose labor makes it all possible, and who had for the most part been exploited by traditional carpet manufacturers in the days before Rugmark. Since founding her company, Odegard has been tireless in targeting design aficionados and encouraging them to appreciate Tibetan carpets for their artistry.

"Stephanie created the market for Tibetan carpets as an element in contemporary design," explains Jack Lenor



Larsen, the legendary textile designer. "Now they're everywhere, entirely because of her."

By doing good, Odegard also does well. Today, the four Nepali/Tibetan-owned factories where the carpets are made and all the other parts of her operation employ more than 10,000 workers. Odegard, Inc., has \$10 million in sales annually, a significant percentage of which are earmarked for the improvement of working conditions in Nepal, the elimination of child labor, and environmental and educational programs.

The blue-eyed blonde still spends a good deal of time on the road, traveling often through India and Nepal.

She also markets jewelry and shawls, along with furniture, antiques, and lighting, as part of the Stephanie Odegard Collection. A three-building, 30,000-square-foot complex called Paraisos International Design Studios in Miami's Design District is home to the collection. Odegard acquired the property in 2001 because it reminded her of Fatehpur Sikri, the 16th-century palace near Agra in India.

Amid all her success, Odegard routinely takes time to reflect on Gandhi. His inspirational words, she insists, are the measure of every step she takes. "That's how I make my decisions," she says. "I think, Is it going to benefit my business, which benefits many people? The idea that each of us can raise the standards in this world and conduct business on a meaningful level has made a big difference in my life." ●