

INTRO
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Stephanie
ODEGARD

By Susanna Salk





It all **STARTED** *with a Tibetan snow frog.*

Well, the frog's footprint, more precisely, which made up the motif of a busily patterned, antique Mongolian rug that Stephanie Odegard spied 26 years ago while in Nepal working for the World Bank. It would soon set her on a new career path and lead to the founding of her eponymous rug and textiles company in New York.

The New York-based Stephanie Odegard combines artisanal traditions, contemporary design and socially responsible practices to produce luxurious, hand-knotted carpets, including these flatweave dhurries and kelims. All images courtesy of Stephanie Odegard

I had been collecting vintage rugs for my Kathmandu home and suddenly imagined a rug pattern of only the frog foot repeated in just two colors as a design motif in a room-size carpet," recalls the Minnesota native. "Pared down like that, tone on tone and without the requisite border, it would look entirely unique." Not to mention groundbreaking. "Almost no one had created modern-designed oriental carpets prior to that point. Only reproductions of old designs were being done."

After commissioning her first carpet, which she called Belak, in Kathmandu in 1986 from a top local rug maker (who still works with her today), Odegard moved to New York the following year and doggedly tried to convince carpet dealers that there was a market for her modern interpretations. "I was told 'no' a lot at first," says Odegard, who began selling her imports herself out of a tiny apartment on East 22nd Street. (Her mother was her first and, at the time, only employee.) "The dealers in the United States just didn't think there was a market for non-traditionally patterned carpets, particularly with simple color palettes like mine."

Odegard's Soho apartment is decorated with antiques from around the world as well as items from the Stephanie Odegard Collection, including the cushions on the Hans Wegner chairs, the Indigo Metok carpet and the candlesticks designed by Paul Mathieu.





As it turns out, the dealers were wrong, and today Odegard sells carpets, wall hangings, tapestries, decorative objects and furniture to designers and commercial clients from Tokyo to Texas. Since 1991, her home base has been a stunning showroom at the New York Design Center, where a staff of 30 tends to as many as 400 active designs in more than a thousand colors. And the designs are as original and globally inspired as ever: An image of a diamond necklace recalling India's Mughal Empire dazzles on a dove-gray background; flowers celebrating what Odegard calls "a sense of openness" grow in horizontal rows (a signature format she introduced in the '90s) on raspberry soil; a geometric honeycomb pattern feels both abstract and literal.

At Odegard's New York Design Center showroom, where she also offers furnishings and decorative elements, the Bellegrano rug hangs behind a Carré credenza and decorative washbasins by Viya Home for the Stephanie Odegard Collection.

Odegard is as committed to social good as she is to good design. She's a founding board member of GoodWeave, a carpet-industry foundation created in 1997 that ensures its members' rugs aren't made using child labor. "When I joined the Peace Corps in the seventies, I became passionate about sustainability and social responsibility," says Odegard, who eventually went to work for the United Nations in Jamaica, Fiji and other South Pacific nations as a marketing expert focused on cottage and small-scale industries before heading to Nepal for the World Bank, in a similar capacity, in 1986. "I wanted to put people to work in jobs that enabled them to take pride in their own cultures, with the major goal being to alleviate poverty."

Scenes from Odegard's time abroad include, clockwise from top left: Weaving baskets in Fiji, 1979; in Kathmandu, Nepal, where she lived in the mid-1980s; talking with former child laborers who are now students, thanks to the efforts of GoodWeave



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Odegard's clients, ranging from the Getty Center in Los Angeles to actress Julianne Moore in New York, are drawn to the clean modernity and precise execution of her designs. "Mine were the first modern Tibetan rugs introduced to the market with a quarter-inch pile — the standard Tibetan knotted pile prior was three-quarters of an inch at one-hundred-knots-per-square-inch," explains Odegard. "The more finely-knotted low pile allows for better execution of a design."

Odegard's Tundra carpet subtly adds richness and color to a gallery at the Getty Center in Los Angeles.



Once Odegard has conceived a new pattern, whether derived from a Brazilian church or foliage in an Indian jungle, she creates a black-and-white sketch and then selects the rug's colors from the rainbow of threaded pompoms that line her studio's walls. After the colors have been transposed into a kind of paint-by-numbers map, Nepalese and Tibetan artisans directly translate the visual instructions onto graph paper that is the size of the future carpets, with every square representing one knot. This is always all done by hand.



In Udapur, India, Odegard works on a different craft, the centuries-old process of reverse-painting mirror-glass tiles. Opposite: Weavers in Kathmandu, Nepal, complete an Odegard carpet.



Next, artisans duplicate the pattern section by section, knot by hand-tied knot, until they have completed the rug — a process that can take up to ten months. From there, the carpet heads to a washing-and-finishing plant in Europe and then finally Manhattan, where Odegard inspects every inch before shipping it to its ultimate destination.

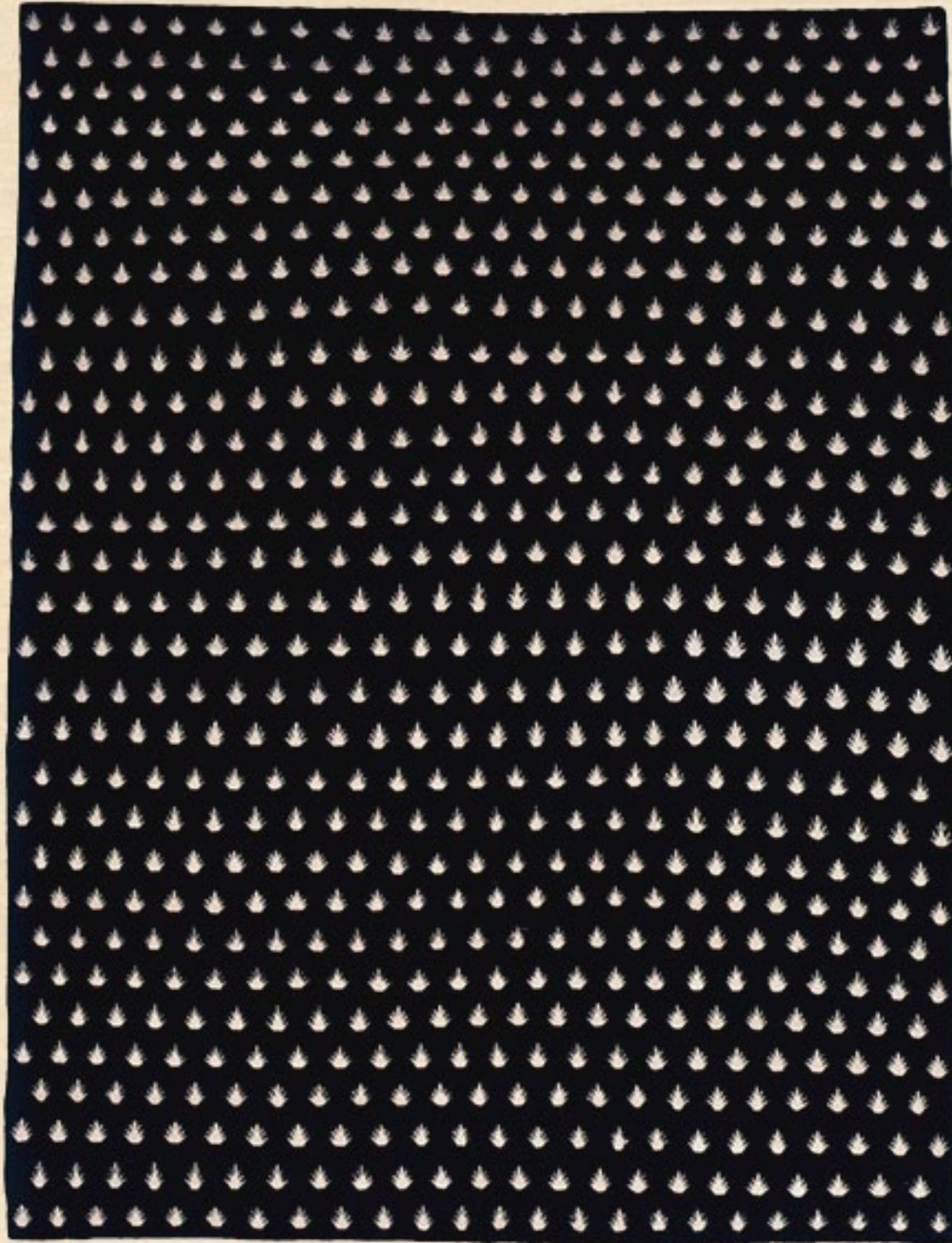
The secret of her success? “Courage, determination, idealism and naiveté,” Odegard says with a smile that’s both savvy and serene. On the following pages, we delve deeper into five of Odegard’s rugs and discover the inspiration behind each one.

In her office, Odegard uses dozens of threaded pompoms to conceive color patterns for her new designs.

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BELAK, 1987



The Belak (left) was the first design that Odegard introduced to the U.S. market in 1987. The snow frog footprint motif was taken from an antique Mongolian rug (above) she collected and had in her Katmandu home. By repeating just the footprint in two colors, with no border, her interpretation of a traditional design became completely modern.

TAKYU, 2003



Odegard often scours vintage books from all over the world in search of inspiration, saying that even a small detail can trigger an idea and be expanded and repeated to form its own carpet pattern. Here, an antique Japanese kimono decorated in underwater floral and vine motifs led to the Takyu VIII carpet, which is part of the designer's Kyoto Collection and is shown at right in the willow colorway. Above is Odegard's original line drawing of the design.



NAVARATNA, 2007



The extravagantly embellished fabrics, decorations and gold jewelry created during India's glorious Mughal Empire inspired Odegard's Mughal Collection. The Navaratna rug (shown at left along with a line drawing) is based on traditional Navaratna necklaces, pendants (above) and rings, which always consist of nine gems — ruby, pearl, red coral, emerald, yellow sapphire, diamond, blue sapphire, hessonite and cat's eye — each representing one of the planets in Indian astrology. In her piece, Odegard laid out the nine jewels much as they would have been placed in a traditional amulet or talisman, and, as in actual jewelry, the gems seem to shimmer and reflect the light.

GANTEN, 2012



The Ganten was inspired by Odegard's visits to old village churches, some dating to the 17th century, in the countryside of Minas Gerais, Brazil. The design at right was taken from an altarpiece (above), which she interpreted into a flamboyant festival of colors reminiscent of a sunrise in Belo Horizonte, Brazil.





SOMOROFF III, 2012



For a series within her Artist Collections, for which she translates works of art onto carpets, Odegard created six pieces, Somoroff I through Somoroff VI, inspired by photographer Michael Somoroff's vivid images of raw, crushed vegetables (above). Attracted to the shapes and colors as well as the linear detail of his photos, Odegard visualized a rug (left) depicting these vibrant images and knew it would be dramatic.