

artistic DIRECTOR

Hatta Byng meets Caroline Shamash of Saffron Interior Arts, who represents nine unique artists and designers in her London showroom – a Mecca for interior designers seeking inspiration

PHOTOGRAPHS ANDREW MONTGOMERY

Caroline Shamash is the carefully guarded secret of a band of top interior designers seeking things that are not only beautiful but, most importantly, one-off. Under the banner Saffron Interior Arts, Caroline represents nine different artists and designers, each with their own 'very unique set of skills', and it is to her South Kensington showroom that the likes of Nicholas Haslam, David Collins, Candy & Candy, Todhunter Earle and Carden Cunietti come to rummage and find inspiration for anything from a bespoke door handle to entire schemes.

Caroline's sister, Liza, set up Saffron in 2003, and Caroline took the reins in 2005. Though at the time she was doing something 'totally unrelated', it was not a completely new world for her. She had been working with Alev Saglam, who creates exquisitely detailed embroidery and beading based on Ottoman designs, since 1992, when Alev – a friend of another of Caroline's sisters – approached her with 'just five or six cushions'.

Each artist has come by word of mouth: 'It's been a chain of introductions, often with one artist introducing us to the next,' says Caroline. Geraldine Larkin, based in London, works mainly for top fashion houses on their haute couture ranges, but also, represented by Caroline, produces the most elaborate and unusual hand-embroidered panels which can be made up into curtains, cushions, or anything a designer dreams up – a recent commission involved embroidering wall panels with a firework display in gold thread and crystals.

Geraldine introduced Saffron to Susann Eschenfelder, who lives in Hamburg and had previously been head of design for Jil Sander. Working with ribbon, raffia, tumbled stone, crystals, metallic threads and semi-precious stones, Susann's striking embroidered designs – often Oriental or art deco in style – reveal her fashion background. She creates a 'snakeskin' cushion, for example, by embroidering minute,



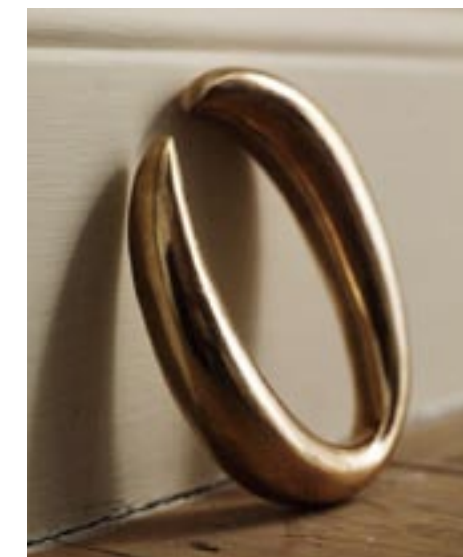
HAIR AND MAKE-UP: JAMES BUTTERFIELD AT CAROL HAYES MANAGEMENT

Caroline Shamash is surrounded by pieces created by the artists she represents: a chandelier by Scultori di Luce; a panel embroidered with pewter sequins by Geraldine Larkin; a chair upholstered in an embroidered fabric by Susann Eschenfelder; and a rug designed by Judy Ross

THIS PAGE FROM TOP Panel embroidered with copper sequins by Geraldine Larkin; clothes rail from Hilary Batstone (tel: 020-7730 5335); hand-beaded and -embroidered textiles by Alev Saglam; hanging candleholders by Pier Salvoni; settee from Hilary Batstone (as before); cushions by Susann Eschenfelder; glass and gold-leaf vase by Luigi Benzoni; glass table with bronze legs by Tillmann Koehn; verre églomisé sample by Peter Binnington. OPPOSITE FROM LEFT Candleholder by Pier Salvoni. Cushion by Susann Eschenfelder. Bronze door handle by Tillman Koehn



For Caroline, it is very important that she feels able to allow her artists to communicate directly with clients about ideas. 'Everything is bespoke, and the artists need to be able to explain the beauty of their craft and the way in which they work'



chain-like stitches in silver thread – oxidised to create variations in shade 'like a snake's skin' – on to black silk. Such is the intricacy of Susann's designs that a cushion can often cost more than £1,000 – they are works of art.

Peter Binnington, 'a truly old-fashioned craftsman working from a barn in Somerset', is a specialist in verre églomisé, an ancient technique which involves applying designs in colour and precious-metal leaf to the reverse of glass panels. He had worked alongside Liza during her time as a specialist painter and restorer.

There is also a band of Italian artists: the Venetian Luigi Benzoni, who makes sculptural glass vases and candlesticks in Murano; Milan-based Stefano Lucarini and Davide Grazian, creators of magnificent chandeliers under the name Scultori di Luce; and Pier Salvoni, whose decorative hanging lights and candleholders are imaginative and whimsical in nature.

More recently, Judy Ross, a New York textile and rug designer, was introduced to Saffron by interior designer Lucy Eadie. Judy's

textile designs, which make use of an ancient chain-stitch technique from Kashmir, are modern and bold. And now Tillmann Koehn, a furniture designer and maker based in Hamburg, has come into the fold – introduced by Susann, who had worked on the same project with him in Germany. 'It is funny how the business has evolved through the artists,' observes Caroline. Tillmann designs in an experimental, sculptural way, working with his materials – bronze alloys, rare woods, German silver, brass, copper, patinated steel and leather – to see where they take him. His work, which ranges from a wonderfully solid bronze door handle to a battered-silver-clad chimneypiece for a special commission, is beautiful and precise – David Collins bought one of his tables after merely seeing a picture of it, 'the first time this has ever happened with one of my artists', enthuses Caroline.

Caroline is never actively looking for new artists – 'they tend to fall in with us,' she says. Yet Caroline has to 'believe' in her artists, and her decision to take them on board is based on 'instinct'. For her, it is very important that she

feels able to allow her artists – who all work under their own names – to communicate directly with clients about ideas. 'Everything is bespoke and they need to be able to explain the beauty of their craft and the way they work,' she says, talking passionately about the mastery of each artist and the level of detail that they work to. She talks of Saffron as a 'family' – which includes all sorts of other artists whom she does not officially represent but will happily recommend should their skills be needed – and clearly delights in the fact that 'each artist has their own quirks'.

She is also equally enthusiastic about her clients, and the imaginative and different ways in which they use the skills of her artists. So, just as she learns from her artists, she also pushes them. 'It is important to keep artists moving. Each time clients come here, they should be able to see something new that might trigger ideas.' While Caroline is aware that not everything will be to everyone's liking, 'I like to think there is something here for everyone' □

Saffron Interior Arts
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