

A DELICATE PROCESS

Catherine Brunel, founder of Fra Josephine, prefers natural beauty



Light and airy, the textiles produced by French designer Catherine Brunel celebrate the beauty of the natural world. The artist's way of life is a far cry from the bustle of fast-fashion: instead, she follows her inner rhythm, choosing to respect the earth through exclusive use of natural dyes combined with the finest linen, cotton, hemp, silk or wool. Designing, dyeing and screen-printing are done by hand, infusing her fabrics with a sense of calm and a tangible organic presence.

Born in Grasse, the hometown of painter Jean-Honoré Fragonard, Catherine grew up in the Dordogne region of Southwest France. She studied History of Art at the University of Toulouse, hoping to become a restoration artist. After her marriage to an antique dealer, the newlyweds settled in Paris in the early 1990s. Exploring the Decorative Arts collections at the Louvre or Toile de Jouy museums she grew intrigued by textiles, eventually straying from fine arts to focus on this new passion.

When the couple moved to Eastern France in 2000, she landed a job in Vesoul at the Textile Restoration Studio of CRRCOA: "I learned how to screen print and dye – I was striving to do something meaningful with textiles. Collecting pieces from Middle East countries was a starting point. In a Dijon Auction House, I bought a beautifully embroidered Persian cloth from the 16th

century and other printed fabrics from the 18th that were truly inspirational. This Persian piece is still dear to me, it enriches my mind."

Catherine worked as a restoration assistant for six years and found time to produce personal pieces, using the trichromy process (mixing yellow, blue and red dyes) and experimenting with screen printing: "Textile restoration was done with synthetic dyes back then, but I was instinctively drawn to natural materials. My first experience with natural dyes was a turning point and I just couldn't go back to synthetic dye. The colours were vibrant; they caught the light differently and breathed new life into my textiles. It was a whole different world. I'm still learning!"

The designer draws inspiration from vintage sample books or textile traditions whose aesthetics convey harmony with nature. Her Sarrazine and Volubilis collections are reminiscent of the early printed textiles manufactured at the Oberkampf factory in Jouy en Josas, see page 30. In fact the first Fra-Josephine scarf collections were designed for the Toile de Jouy Museum Shop. Today her timeless collections include scarves, stoles, housecoats and dresses. "I create textiles that ring true and touch people's hearts," explains Catherine. And her yearly increases in production volume show she is succeeding.