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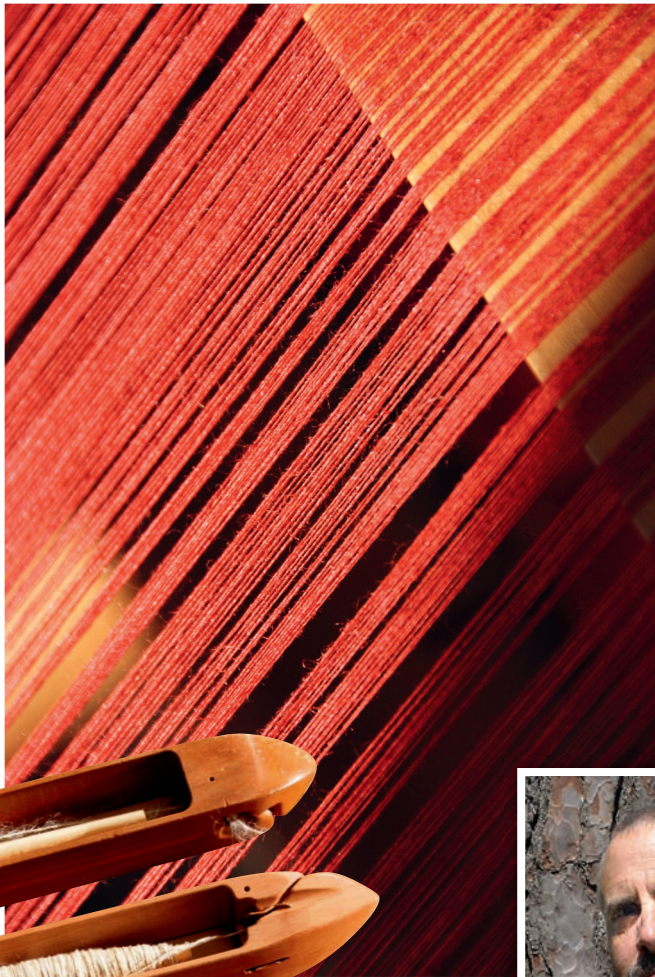
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TO TOUCH KASTEN'S fabrics is to experience the vast gulf between machine-made and hand-woven



OH, what BEAUTIFUL webs he WEAVES

With an uncanny knack for emulating colours and a catalogue of A-list clients, Sam Kasten's bespoke textiles are top of the pile, says **Natasha Fraser-Cavassoni**

IN THE INTERIOR DESIGN WORLD, Sam Kasten is a byword for sought-after excellence. His hand-woven textiles and rugs furnish the most exclusive homes the world over. Kasten has been tapped for private projects by the esteemed likes of architects and designers Thierry Despont, Jacques Grange, Christian Liaigre, John Pawson and Tino Zervudachi, while a few of his public projects include working with noted architect I M Pei on Washington's National Gallery of Art and creating wall coverings for Ronald Lauder's Neue Galerie in New York.

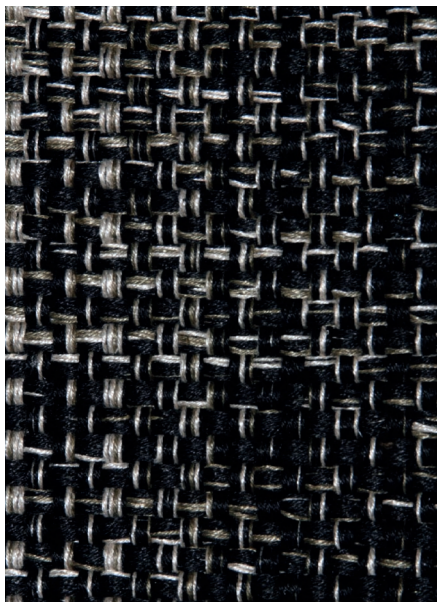
Then there's Kasten himself. Grey-haired, Gary Cooper

handsome and with a relaxed appearance – he favours open shirts, tweed jackets and jeans – Caroline Sarkozy describes the 60-year-old American weaver as “someone who contaminates you with his passion”. She ordered blood red linen to cover a pair of Maxime Old chairs, a simple request which had proved impossible to find elsewhere. Kasten delivered “a vibrant red that was just astounding and yet fitted in perfectly with the dining room”, she says.

Although Massachusetts-based, Kasten, who derives the lion's share of his commissions from Europe, often holds court ➤



ELEGANT AND humble, Kasten's designs are made to complement rather than overwhelm



here; in Paris recently and surrounded by his wares, he picked up a wad of custom-designed fabrics, revealing how "for inspiration, the architect sent shells, sand and tree bark". A FedExed mouldy orange peel resulted in quite another textile. "It was a question of nailing that green," he says. Other notable examples include an exquisite navy blue kimono-inspired fabric and Kasten's personal favourite: the linen and ramie ottoman rib. "It's the strongest natural fibre and it dyes beautifully," he says.

Kasten has been weaving for almost 40 years. His mentor was Andy Oates, an artist from the Bauhaus movement who was then running Nantucket Looms with his partner Bill Euler. The couple hired Kasten but, in hindsight, he reckons it was more because of his "blue eyes and long arms" than anything else. "I had no education in decoration or aesthetics – my family came from the middle of Iowa!" he says.

FABRIC ACQUIRES AN ETHEREAL, TAPESTRY-LIKE INTRICACY

off" of a new design within just three weeks. And his work lasts. Case in point: two silk chenille sofas that he covered 25 years ago, and despite "three children living in the apartment, still look new". Finally, there's the lived-in elegance. According to John Pawson, "When you put one of Sam's pieces into a space, your eye reads the colours and textures in the same way that it reads the surface of stone or timber, so there's no distraction." And in a style that seems to echo Gary Cooper's less-is-more approach to acting, Kasten's designs epitomise understatement. "When I collaborate, I'm there to support. I'm not trying to compete." samkasten.com

Still, within four days, the newly married Kasten was, in his own words, weaving an array of complicated fabrics. "It was as if I had done it for 100 years." After a few years, he left – "Nantucket was not appropriate to bring up children" – and set up his own mill in Stockbridge, Massachusetts. Fortunately, he had John Saladino, the prolific US-based interior decorator, as a client, one who Kasten describes as feeding his family for ten years. "I remember John warning me, 'Now I'm Italian, I can be very loyal or very Italian. Don't mess with me.'"

Kasten sources his yarn from Japan – "their dyeing is superlative" – and although he oscillates between Belgium, France and Switzerland for linen, he only gets his mohair from Stucken, the renowned South African company. Reputed for his subtle and sensitive way with white, Kasten plans to truly conquer the European market by using more colour in the future as well as creating "subtle plaids and stripes". Meanwhile, a growing market is developing in the reproduction of beloved but defunct fabrics from yesteryear. Working with his seven in-house weavers, he can easily tackle even this seemingly herculean task. "Something difficult or against the grain leads to the best work," he says confidently. "You rise to the challenge."

To touch Kasten's fabrics is to experience the vast gulf between machine-made and hand-woven, which has an intensity of weave, depth of craft and colour that are spellbinding – a deceptively straightforward fabric acquires an ethereal, tapestry-like intricacy. It's no wonder Tino Zervudachi is inspired by the "intense luxury and elegant inventiveness".

Although Kasten remains fiercely price-shy (his custom-made textiles and rugs are famously expensive) his team can complete a 23cm by 28cm "strike