

Women in conversation

In February, COVER Editor **Lucy Upward** gathered together ten successful women from the rug industry on Zoom. The lively discussion focused on how the business has changed in the past twenty-plus years and what female energy brings to the table. Here we present some extracts from the conversation



Ali McMurter and Ana Cunningham
*Managing Partners,
Creative Matters, Toronto*



Bonnie Sutton
*Managing Director,
Knots Rugs, London*



Christine Van Der Hurd
*Director, Vanderhurd,
London*



Dorothy Bourne
*Head of Collaborations and Special
Projects, Christopher Farr, London*



Maryam Ebrahimi
*Director, Edelgrund,
Zurich*



Nicole Samad
*Project Manager, Samad
Rugs, New Jersey*



Petra Both
*Creative Director, Paulig,
Schwarzach am Main*



Lucy Upward
*COVER Editor, HPL,
London*



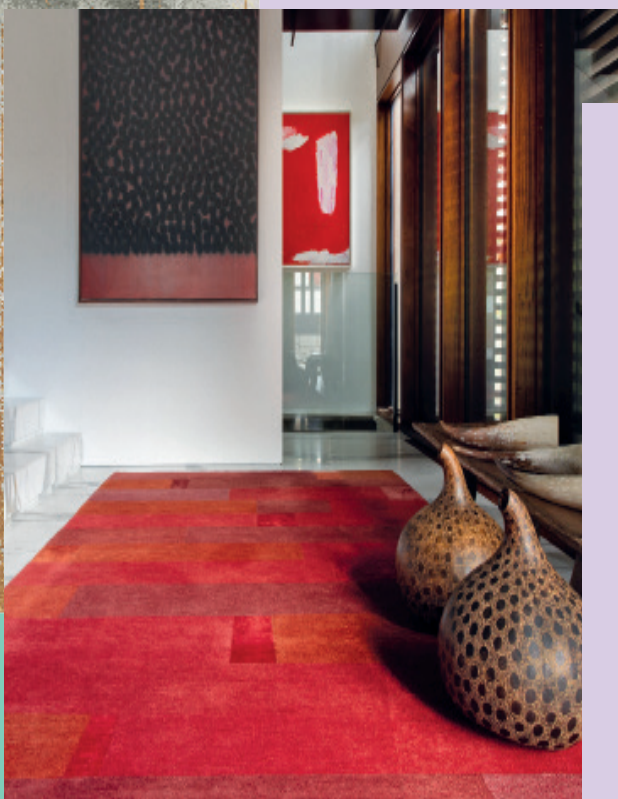
Sushma and Noya Arora
*Creative Heads, Unlimited
Style Rugs, Gurugram*



Ana Cunningham and Ali McMurter

Ana: Founders Donna, Carol and Luba each had their own experiences in the rug industry before they started Creative Matters, and that is where they built their resilience and grit. When I started in the company, ten years in, they were very inspiring in this regard. The fact we were women was non-negotiable. They went after projects to grow the business, and while they knew it was a male-dominated industry, they made the choice to move forward with confidence. From attending trade shows to expanding into new markets and sectors, we've been able to build strong relationships within the industry along the way. This has been paramount to our success. There are many women on this Zoom call who have also paved the way, and we extend our gratitude to each of you.

Ali: We feel a bit sheltered over in North America, because the design community here is very gender open. So here it is easy, but we do notice when we venture beyond here it can be different. When we travel to manufacturing locations, I think our company name is so strong that there is no longer any question about it.



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01 'Orchestra Dark has been one of my favourite rug designs since our XXV Collection was unveiled ten years ago.' Ana Cunningham

02 'I love this rug we made for a residential project in Toronto, handwoven in Nepal in wool and Chinese silk.' Ali McMurter

03 'Our 17th Century Skull No.01 rug was the first collection from Knots that sold out instantly at Domotex.' Bonnie Sutton

Bonnie Sutton

In London it is a very different world from rug trade shows. We did Domotex for many years, and it took us ten years to be taken seriously. When I made the 17th-century collection based on my grandpa's books and the archive at HALI, we did it so well that we had buyers coming up to us saying, 'Where's the man that's created this?' and I'd reply, 'This is my collection based on my grandfather's books.' It was the first time that they took us seriously. I launched it at Domotex 2015. I got a comment, 'Women only buy rugs, they don't make them.' So I said, 'OK, well, I've made these, this is my company.'

This attitude thickened our skin and made us want to do better and to create something exceptional. That has really shaped Knots and our artistic collaborations. I have one male in the office, who is now my husband, but everyone else is female and it's been a point of difference but also made us stronger. We have a female producer in Nepal and she really suffered. It is OK now, but it was very hard for years. She felt real empowerment working with a female company.

In the end we gained respect by staying in there. People often said our aesthetic looked quite different, and I think it's because we have a real subtlety with colour—I think we see things differently compared with the male eye. We put so much care into what we do, and I think that comes across in our product, which is always the best it can be. Over the years this has been accepted. Just look at the Lila Valadan exhibition at Domotex this year—it just shows what women can do. The community and connection you get now in the rug industry is really great. We are part of a big rug family.

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Christine Van Der Hurd

In the '80s and '90s I was in New York producing tufted rugs. Stephanie Odegard was my one memory of a sole women in the industry. When I went to India in the '90s, it was all men, I was the only woman, and that went on for a very long time. So it has changed hugely. We are accepted in this industry and are looked upon for what we can bring to design, constructions, and colour. Women have given the industry passion and strength.

I have never gone to trade shows, so I have been quite closeted from that side of the business. We have a women-heavy team with one male in the office, and quite a lot of our clients are women. While in Nepal our weavers have always been women, in India our weavers are all men—and men were also originally doing our embroidery. However, we then trained a group of women to do it. This is amazing as its very empowering for them. So the industry has changed in many many ways for the good.

Perhaps what we bring to the industry is something to do with creativity and new design, as opposed to business and figures.



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04 *Wakame* flatweave rug in silk, *Jadate* and *Sea Heather* colourway, Vanderhurd

05 *Tapestry 1923*, from an original design by Gunta Stözl, Christopher Farr

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Dorothy Bourne

As the Creative Matters ladies said, where they come from is very open and this is similar to where we are, based in London. There are a lot of women who run interior design practices and that makes up most of our client base. There are other women in the rug business in this conversation here who are just up the road from us, so I feel that the places where I recognise us as a minority is most prevalent in production areas and at industry trade shows.

I believe however that in some ways that gives us a superpower. I get a different experience from my father when visiting production countries. The younger women at the factory in India will bring me gifts and have thrown a tea party with street food for me. On a recent trip to Turkey the ladies held a henna party at one of their houses, with all the men in the family asked to leave the house. That evening spent with the female weavers is something a man in the industry would never get to experience. You do get a feeling of unity from the women you work with, perhaps because we are a minority.

Lots of the personality qualities we have discussed, like being creative and sensitive and good communicators, I think can be shared across both genders. For me what's most important is to have a mix of people from different backgrounds to give a balanced perspective on the world.



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Maryam Ebrahimi

Today, I am the sole owner of Edelgrund. However, when the company was owned by male carpet dealers, despite my being the face of the company and handling sales, buyers would occasionally bypass me and seek better deals directly from the men. When I brought this issue up with them, they promptly redirected clients back to me, emphasising, 'You need to talk to Maryam.' Their immediate support was not only appreciated but also served as a reminder of the importance of firmness and asking for what we want and need. As women, sometimes we accept what is given to us without asking for more.

I have never produced anywhere else or visited any weaving sites other than Iran, but where we make our carpets in Mazandaran, the women are the backbone of weaving. While the husbands are typically shepherds, the women are often the breadwinners of the household. From the outside Iranian women may look suppressed, and in many ways they are; but without a doubt they are resilient and powerful. I witnessed my mother's authority within our household, which is a trait I also observe in the households of our weavers when I visit.

06 A spring-coloured Mazandaran kilim, Edelgrund

07 'From the Ancient Wool and Silk Rug collection, this is one of my very favourite rugs because it is a traditional design and it has some pink.' Nicole Samad

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Nicole Samad

Now we are three women in our company. There have been moments where I have felt invisible, but, as Bonnie says, it thickens your skin. It makes you change the way you do business. I think some of it has to do with me being younger. When I first started, I think people didn't know me and thought, 'She is young girl and doesn't know too much.' And I probably didn't.

I feel lucky in a way that I have always had people by my side that everyone knew. So I think I didn't really experience what everyone else here did. You ladies paved the way for other women, because now men see that there are strong women in the industry and we are their equals.

I believe that being in a male-dominated industry is something we as women should embrace. We stand out more, we offer a different perspective, we bring some beauty and different ideas, and that is kind of nice. There are so many women I think of when I think of women in the rug industry, and they are all strong business people, very charming and lovely to be around. I think it is nice we are not a massive group, because, as many people here have said, you can have those connections on a deeper level. Even if we are competitors, at the end of the day, everyone is friends and family.



Petra Both

I started in the rug business in 2003. In 2004 I attended my first Domotex and I started to learn all about weaving techniques myself as I was originally a graphic designer. I was overwhelmed with all these buyers and rug enthusiasts. At that time, I was thrown into cold water. It was good in some ways, but in others it was quite a shock.

I had a very similar experience as most of you, being a female in this environment. All I could really do was focus on my work, which I loved. I just focused on my work all the time without looking to right or to the left. I just always kept believing in my work and myself to be able to go further and grow.

Now everything has completely changed. We work in a great team, one of our CEOs is a female, and and it is all much easier.

08 New rug *Makalu Century EMH 283 M182 MS*, Makalu, 'It is a design I created with a special kind of ink, which created flowing colour.' Petra Both

09 *Drape Rectangle*, Unlimited Style Rugs, 'One of our newest designs for 2024, it is handtufted in New Zealand wool and Tencel.' Noya Arora

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Sushma and Noya Arora

Sushma: When I started in the industry twenty-five years ago there were very few women heading the carpet business. Going back in time, there were not many flights connecting the cities in India, so I used to travel by train to do my research.

I was a young girl with a backpack, knocking on factory doors. I would say I was a designer, and I was then allowed inside to explore. One of the problems I faced at the time as a woman was always toilets on the go. People were usually kind, but they were almost always confused to see me travelling alone. They would say, 'Why are you here?'

But now it is different, women are bosses and are respected. There is no surprise to see a woman taking charge. Over the years, I have noticed when people come to our stand at Domotex they say, 'Ah so it is a mother-daughter duo, I really feel the feminine touch.'

Noya: Women bring a beautiful softness to the industry. How we conduct ourselves, how we think, how we design, and how we deal with people... it is not always monetary, but to build relationships. I think it's the relationships we build that keep people coming back to us. This is a massive change from the past, when they would ask for the man to talk to. It is a different world today.

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