



Indigenous

The work of Indigenous artists is being translated into exciting, original rug designs by influential companies, such as Designer Rugs in Australia and Creative Matters in Canada. **Rachel Meek** considers these impactful and thought-provoking collections

Rug weaving could be viewed as a form of Indigenous art—traditionally practised by nomadic cultures with lives, shaped by and closely attuned to the surrounding landscape, seasons and available natural materials. But not all cultures practiced the kind of shepherding lifestyles that produced the wool and hair from livestock that rug weaving typically requires. However, the work of Indigenous artists from Australia and Canada, from cultures without a rug weaving heritage, is being translated into striking rugs by two companies based in these countries.

The Storytelling Collection by Toronto-based Creative Matters features four rugs based on the work of the Métis artist Christi Belcourt and two Inuit artists; Ooloosie Saila and Ningiukulu Teevee. 'There are inspiring artworks from all over the world that could work beautifully as rug designs,' company founder Carol Sebert says, 'but for our first collection of artist collaborations we wanted to focus on artworks close to home.' Having first worked with Christi Belcourt's art for a wallcovering project at the Toronto Birthing Centre, Sebert and her team were 'eager to bring her beautiful and powerful art to life in rug format'. *Four Cedar Waxwings* is based on a work

01 *Camp Fire* rug, Minnie Pwerle, Designer Rugs

02 *Complex Ecologies* rug, Tamika Grant-Iramu, Designer Rugs



03 *Four Cedar Waxwings rug*, Christi Belcourt, Creative Matters

by Belcourt, inspired by Elder Mary Wemigwans' quote, 'The health of the animals depends on the health of the earth, and we depend on the health of everything.' *Remembering Batoche* references a battle during the 1885 Resistance, when the Métis fought Canada over promised land rights that have never been fulfilled. Belcourt says 'I wanted to commemorate all the Métis soldiers who fought and died for the protection of their land and their families.'

She continues, 'I love working in collaboration with companies who approach design in ethical ways and prove that businesses can operate by paying fair wages to artisans, be environmentally responsible and give back to community. A portion of the proceeds from this collaboration with Creative Matters has gone to support an Indigenous land-based language and arts camp that I, along with others, have been working on.'

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Her online statement says: 'All I know is that all life, even the rocks, needs to be treated with respect. The sacred laws of this world are of respect and reciprocity. When we stop following them, we as a species are out of balance with the rest of the world.'

In the wake of historic atrocities, over the past decade or more, as a mark of respect to Indigenous communities, many institutions and venues in Canada and Australia are now offering official acknowledgment of the land they occupy and its traditional custodians. The Perth-based artist and rug designer Dena Lawrence says, 'This practice has become very widespread all over Australia. It reminds us that every day we live, work, and dream on Aboriginal lands.'

Designer Rugs has showrooms in Sydney, Melbourne and Brisbane. Having worked with both established and emerging artists, it offers three Indigenous collections; two more are in production.

The first launched in 2008, based on the work of Minnie Pwerle, an Alyawarre artist born in the Utopia region in the early 1920s. Another is by the Meanjin/Brisbane-based creative Tamika Grant-Iramu, whose work explores her Papua New Guinean, European and Torres Strait Islander heritage. She says, 'It's great to see my artworks



04 *Raven rug*, Ningiukulu Teevee, Creative Matters

05 *Celebration rug*, Minnie Pwerle, Designer Rugs



turned into large-scale rugs as it brings forward intricate patterns of flora that might not always catch a viewer's attention.'

The company has also delivered bespoke rugs designed in collaboration with the Gamilaroi Ularoi artist Lakkari Pitt (see Interiors, COVER 68) and other Indigenous artists. Managing director Yosi Tal says 'We believe it is important to keep Indigenous art alive through a younger generation. Commercial collaborations like this should not only support young artists financially, but also show them that being an artist is a viable career. Nurturing that motivation to create is critical in keeping this unique art form alive.'

The company's designers are mindful of iconography and meaning in Indigenous works, facilitating communication between specifier and artist and employing specialist weaving techniques to capture the original intention of the artist. Each rug sold from the Indigenous collections generates royalties for the artists and their families.

Creative Matters' *Raven rug* by Ningiukulu Teevee was first produced by Inunoo, a company set up by one of Carol Sebert's art college tutors, Doug Mantegna, who pioneered the use of Inuit artwork in commercial textile design. His interest in Indigenous cultures was sparked via scouting in North America in his youth. Then, while teaching at Sheridan College, Toronto, in the 1970s, he worked in Lesotho on a printing project with the organisation Crossroads Africa at the University of Botswana, Lesotho and Swaziland (UBLS). When he saw the positive response among the African chiefs and artists, the idea that Inuit art could also translate well into printed textiles formed.

He started working with Dorset Fine Arts, a co-operative in the Canadian Arctic, to produce

printed fashion fabrics and scarves and, in 1982, used an artwork by the Inuit artist Aoudia Pudlat for a fabric designed for the Canadian airline Nordair. Later, he recalled seeing Angora rugs being woven in Lesotho and decided to create rugs based on Inuit art which he had woven in Thailand and Kathmandu, the first being based on a work by the acclaimed graphic artist Kenojuak Ashevak. More recently, he chose to connect Creative Matters directly to the Cape Dorset artists collective to produce rugs based on their work, recognising that the company's expertise, global connections and commercial capabilities will widen the scope of the art.

While the work of Indigenous artists of course varies greatly in aesthetic sensibilities, much of it shares a common language telling of stolen lands and respect for the earth. The *Digital Quipu* that is part of the Chilean artist Cecilia Vicuña's current installation at London's Tate Modern (see Last Page) relays Indigenous voices from diverse communities in Myanmar, India, Colombia, the Philippines, Papua New Guinea and Brazil.

Olimpio Guajajara, the coordinator of the Guardians of Arariboia indigenous territory in the Amazon, says: 'Our land is crying out for help from people from around the world. We need the land to be protected for good, in our country and in all countries. I want the international public to defend life and the lungs of the Earth.'

As the voices of Indigenous peoples the world over become more urgent and united in urging humanity to live more harmoniously with the earth, these beautiful rugs, loaded with a sense of vitality and intrinsic wisdom, play a part in amplifying such important global messages.

www.designerrugs.com.au
www.creativemattersinc.com