



FLORENTINE TEXTILE DESIGNER

## Margherita Pandolfini

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**A**S A CHILD, MARGHERITA PANDOLFINI had a natural flair for paint. We met in the late 1980s, both students at the same all-girls school on a tree-lined boulevard in central London. An art studio was nestled at the very top of the white 19th century Victorian townhouse, and it was Margherita's favourite place to be. Her whimsical sketches and jubilant use of colour were inspiring to me, even then, as was her chic wardrobe of smocked summer dresses, pretty pinafores and Italian cashmere sweaters. The home she shared with her parents—both native Italians living in London—and three siblings, was equally stylish.

"My mother has great taste, and our homes have always been eclectic, colourful and full of print," says Margherita on the phone from Florence, where she now lives and works as a textile designer. "My love of colour and pattern comes from her."

When Margherita's collection of boldly patterned, colour-rich runners, cushions and table cloths appeared in my Instagram feed last year, I realized that it had been well over 20 years since we had last seen each other. Life takes people in different directions. It did not surprise me to see that sweet Margherita, with her round specs, infectious giggle and intense creativity, had chosen an artistic one.

We had much to catch up on. She told me about her stint at the Camberwell College of Arts in London, where she studied sculpture and fine art, and about the various fashion jobs she flitted between after graduating. It was in 2007 that she decided to move back to her native Italy and start up La Serra MK.

"Florence isn't electric like London, but it has a beautiful tradition of skilled craftsmanship," says Margherita, her South London accent more melodic than most. "It's exciting to be working within a community of modern makers who are keeping that tradition alive."

Her business partner, Karl Jorns—a fellow artist with a background in textiles and architecture—is equally embracing of the city's rich artisan community. Together, they host regular events at their studio—a beautiful, disused greenhouse on her family's Florentine estate—for artists, designers and other creative types.

"The events are a great way to welcome people into our world, showcase our work and connect with other artists," says Margherita.

Margherita and Karl are also regulars at arts and craft events in and around the city. "Sometimes it's an open-air market in a botanical garden, other times it's a creative gathering at a gallery or a local bar," says Margherita. "Florence is not known for its contemporary art scene, but slowly that's changing, and these events are supporting that change."







Barring a short stint with Bergdorf in 2014/15, Margherita says they choose not to sell in shops. Every product that La Serra MK creates—from the hand-painted linen gauze scarves to the digital range of lamp shades and cushions—is one of a kind. “We just wouldn’t be able to keep up, or we’d end up compromising on what makes our work unique.”

The duo uses a combination of techniques to create their collections, from screen printing and hand painting to stencil, block printing and digital. For larger quantities they print digitally and for a smaller range they either hand paint or screen print, says Margherita. “I like both effects, and the technique we choose really depends on the project, because the results are very different,” she adds. “It’s always interesting to see how the colour reacts to the fabric. But for a more hand-made look, I prefer to screen print fabric.”

Most projects come through word of mouth, like the table runners they created for a Florentine wine bar, the costumes they designed for a local theatre group, and the placemats and cushions they custom made for a small bed and breakfast in Rome. Last year, Margherita created a Bedouin tent for a Saudi Prince’s London penthouse. “These are the kinds of projects that really excite me,” she says, her Jack Russell yapping in the background. “Vieni qui, Gilda!”

More recently, La Serra MK has teamed up with Airbnb for its Host a Local Experience initiative. “We invite visitors to the greenhouse to see our work. They get to play with paint, and do some screen printing while they’re here. Then I might take them to a local bar or a restaurant—something under the radar and artsy, something they might not find in the guidebook.”

Margherita’s Florence is far from mainstream. And while she cannot deny the beauty of the Duomo and its surrounding postcard piazzas, it is in the city’s underbelly—in its hidden cafes, galleries and bars—where you will find her. “That’s where I find inspiration,” she says. “There, and in the greenhouse.”

Set in a traditional Italian garden of flowers, fruit trees and classical sculptures, there is no shortage of natural inspiration at the greenhouse for Margherita. “All I have to do is look outside,” she says. Inside, the studio is bursting with inspiration, too. They have set a mid-century modern aesthetic with orange leather and tubular steel chairs, and subtle hits of teak and walnut. “We often move furniture around, and edit the space to reflect our current interests and ideas,” says Margherita. “It keeps things fresh.” Colour abounds, light pours in, and a vibrant mood board reflects a breadth of inspiration.

The greenhouse stands adjacent to the family home—a late Renaissance palazzo that is divided into apartments and is home to Margherita and her many relatives.

“If I’m not in the greenhouse, I’m in my apartment, and if I’m not there, maybe I’m at my parent’s apartment having dinner,” says Margherita. “We’re Italians, we love to eat! We’re very close.”

I ask if she would ever consider moving back to London. “There’s nowhere in the world like London, and I miss its energy,” she says. “But Florence is my home now. It’s where my family is, it’s where my work is. I’m part of something wonderful here.” <sup>1</sup>

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