

## MASSACHUSETTS-BASED MERIDA IS “PART INNOVATION LAB AND PART ATELIER”

At a time when more than 90% of the world’s rugs are stitched together with fragments of plastic and chemically bathed synthetics, one American textile house is consciously threading the needle in a different way.

“Our mission is to be a countercultural company reimagining textile design and manufacturing in the U.S.,” says Catherine Connolly, CEO of Merida, which crafts woven-to-order, eco-friendly rugs and stair runners made to inspire and transform the canvas of everyday living spaces.

“We took the long view and started to create an environment where we could be part innovation lab and part atelier, where we were practicing and perfecting technique on a regular basis.” Connolly says putting authentic materials that are healthy and beautiful into the hands of artisans means the possibility of something special. “I knew that the products would have to be unique and truly extraordinary if it was going to work.”

Connolly, who took over as CEO in 2007, favors a balanced approach to evolving the direct-to-trade company, while making it a continuously enriching experience for customers, industry professionals, and Merida’s own employees.

One guiding tenet is to utilize all-natural and rapidly replenishable materials that are safe for the environment and healthy for the home. Merida’s products often feature an amalgam of fibers as identifiable as they are comfortable to the touch, including wool, linen, mohair, cotton, even silk. Yet being environmentally aware isn’t just a hyped-up publicity tactic. In January 2022, Merida became the first U.S. company to earn Green Product Assurance certification, meaning all components of Merida’s rugs, including the backings, have been rigorously tested and found devoid of harmful chemicals and materials. “We feel it was important to authentically tell people not only our commitment to natural materials but also to the health of our clients and our craftsmen,” says Connolly.

Another company commitment is directed at the team of Merida makers. This collective of artisans and craftsmen makes up part of the 35-strong team at Merida headquarters, an impressive 40,000-square-foot workshop and yarn library located in Fall River, Mass., the original textile mill hub of America. Because reverence for textile fabrication and future innovation is so intrinsic to the brand, Merida’s in-house artisans and weavers are continually emboldened to learn, evolve, and thrive, explains Connolly. “We aspire to elevate the practice of craftsmanship by providing opportunities for our craftsmen to master techniques, gain the confidence and have the space to innovate, and develop viable careers.”

This handiwork flourishes in Merida’s robust collections of colorful, comfortable products envisaged by artistic director Sylvie Johnson. The 2022 Portfolio collection, guided by a curated lineup of soft watercolors, takes its cues from the Arte Povera movement, a translation of found materials into artistic expression. The 2022 Atelier collection pulls out the stops with color and texture; it plays on the theme of light and shadow through a sophisticated and textured palette of natural yarns that evoke a comforting beauty to the eye and also underfoot.

Atelier is a collective celebration of original forms, both organic and symmetrical, inspired from a menagerie of natural and manmade notions ranging from landscapes to precious baubles, cultural heritage sites, and artists and artistic movements of all genres, including sculptors, photographers, architects, and fashion designers. There’s nothing commonplace in these creations, and that’s the point.

Johnson explains that memory, tradition, and story are elemental to the designs, an accumulation of experiences in living, and especially through art, travel, and food: “We can’t create from scratch—everything we learned through reading, any exhibits we saw, any music we listened to, every meal we had.” Johnson says these lived moments are woven directly into the rugs and emanate as texture, contrast, and unexpected detail.

Pricing for this attention to detail ranges depending on the order, but retail costs for a typical 8- by-10-foot rug made in Fall River hover around \$10,500.

For Merida’s new flagship showroom, which debuted at the New York Design Center in May, it was only fitting to create a gallery atmosphere that could present the collections as they were meant to be experienced: in an illuminated and minimalistic space where the colors and textures can be celebrated. The finished gallery is the work of New York interior designer Mark Cunningham and his team, who have worked with the brand for many years.

The most gratifying part of visiting the showroom isn’t just the rainbow buffet for the eyes, but also the experience of walking on livable art. Customers are invited to take off their shoes and to feel the handicraft of what Merida does best.

The final brand commitment, says Connolly, is simple but perhaps the most meaningful of all: creating a company that thrives on quality, beauty, and respect for the process. “Merida cultivates a virtuous circle by creating products that bring as much joy to the maker as to the receiver.”



From top: William Geddes; Jared Leeds Photography

Merida’s showroom has a gallery-like feel. It’s an illuminated and minimalistic space that lets the colors and textures of the environmentally friendly pieces shine.

# REIMAGINING TEXTILE DESIGN