

BEHIND THE BRAND

We find out more about fabric firm de Le Cuona and its landmark range of organic, fully traceable linen

THERE'S always something unexpected in a de Le Cuona collection. This year's The Golden Age features couture silks, super-fine merino, wool bouclés and linens threaded with vintage metallics – beautiful neutrals dressed up with rich accents. A few years ago, eyebrows were raised when the company released its (now iconic) Vintage Canvas – a linen cloth that had been painted before being washed several times to render it down to the texture of an artist's canvas. Prior to that came the invention of stonewashed and embossed linens for interiors, none of which had ever been seen on the market before. And one of the first fabrics was Buffalo, a robust linen washed with large pumice stones to resemble beaten-up buffalo skin. It has, according to founder Bernie de Le Cuona, a 'raw sophistication.'

Recent events and shifting landscapes have proved both a challenge and an opportunity. 'The world has changed so much,' explains Bernie. 'What used to take between six and eight weeks to reach the warehouse now takes between six and eight months.' When the pandemic struck and a yarn shortage hit, the brand forward purchased harvests of cashmere and flax to ensure clients had access to the full collection. Patience is now key. 'In this climate, it is about re-education. Interior designers need to educate their clients that if you want the best quality fabrics, then you have to be prepared to wait.'

A brand with sustainability at its heart...

Despite all the challenges, Bernie's commitment to sustainability is non-negotiable. Having lived on a farm near Pretoria in South Africa from her early teens, the environment and its precious resources have always been close to her heart. 'Growing up in Africa, you see how nothing is ever wasted. Waste is a rich country's problem; in Africa everything is reused.' Although she has always worked directly with mills, a few years ago Bernie began to investigate the

environmental impact of her supply chain – and follow the entire production process from farmer to warehouse. The result was Pure, a collection of six 100 per cent organic linens – a first in the world of interiors fabric. It's certified by the Global Organic Textile Standard (GOTS), awarded to fabrics that are sustainably produced from field to final product. This is no mean feat: only one per cent of the world's linen is organic and it required finding the certified mills, flax farmers, dyers and weavers and also changing all the in-house packaging so that it was FSC-approved.

Today, de Le Cuona operates a circular economy wherever possible to avoid any fabrics ending up in landfill or being destroyed. 'We either re-colour lines that are discontinued or we give them to a charity that we collaborate with – Fine Cell Work – which turns them into other products,' says Bernie.

How it began...

Bernie founded the brand in 1992. Having studied architectural design in Johannesburg she came to Europe to travel and ended up living in Belgium for a year. There, she often found herself browsing the antiques shops in Brussels. 'It was the first time I'd come across hand-dye vintage linen, which struck me as a raw yet gentle fabric that had a texture and nature that took me back to Africa. The versatility and ways linen can feel and be handled sparked an idea.' Moving to England, she set about producing a linen fabric for interiors. At the time, the only one available was printed linen – plain or textured linens were unheard of. The business was self-funded from

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the start. 'I knew no one, but just called interior designers. I learned on the job,' she says.

Bernie's first port of call for production was India. Having been on a trip with a friend who imported carpets, she was mesmerised by the way that Indian weavers produce silk by hand with a tremendous attention to detail. At the final stage, the layers of silk were laid out over logs and beaten to soften the fabric – it occurred that the treatment could equally be applied to linen. However, flax wasn't grown in India and quality control was next to impossible. The only option was to move the production back to Europe – specifically Flanders – and to use the best quality Belgian and French linen fibres. The first collection piqued the interest of decorators, the quality of this European-woven fabric cemented it.

How it grew...

Unexpectedly, the film industry bought lots of early de Le Cuona – they needed natural linen for costumes. Orders from Ralph Lauren Home was another boon. Growth from that point on has been organic. 'Our timing was good,' explains Bernie. 'We were lucky that during the first 10 years our fabrics were unique on the market and they combined with a time when, thanks to trends in the world of fashion, the concept of creased linen was no longer a problem for people.' de Le Cuona now works with specialist mills around Europe using natural fibres and artisan yarns; while the mills have long histories of weaving, they are happy to experiment with the ideas that Bernie conjures. Some, such as the one that produces Coco, a new cashmere-soft wool, are those that specialise in fashion fabrics. Today, the whole collection, including the home accessories, are available from the firm's showroom on Pimlico Road in London. The US is de Le Cuona's fastest-growing market and other territories are growing, too. Collections grow organically: they might be inspired by the colours of her native South Africa or a visit to a museum in Europe. An undercurrent that runs through each collection is that the unique textures, weights and colours of the fabrics work harmoniously together – making life easy for decorators and clients alike. 🌱

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Vintage Canvas – an unusual painted linen cloth reminiscent of an artist's canvas



Curtains in Naturally Organic linen; woven and washed linen sheers in Mistral; sofa upholstered in Shore

FEATURE: ARABELLA YOUNG PHOTOGRAPHS (LIVING ROOM) JON DAY