





A SCENE FROM THE MARKET IN THE ALGERIAN CITY OF GHARDAÏA IN APRIL 1967.

RIGHT: MAYA IN COLLEGE

FOLLOWING PAGES: A 1965 PASSPORT, WHICH IS FILLED WITH VISAS AS WELL AS ENTRY AND EXIT STAMPS.

sat too close to during the cold winter and burned the soles off his shoes.

Richard still toyed with the possibility of being a writer, but writing was difficult. In an early piece of prose, the main character—a young man visiting San Juan—wrote about the frustration of putting words on paper.

Discipline. Y' know, sometimes I think I've really got it, really got it. The words just come—and they're great, say everything I want to say; but they never go down; I just think about them, and they go away when I sit down. So I get up again. Then, maybe once, once every billion times, I get something down—easy, good. And it seems great when I read it, but it can't be, I say, so I worry and sweat about whether they're good. Ain't it a bitch?

Richard gave up fiction writing during these years, but continued working on poetry for much of his life.

IN 1966, RICHARD AND REBECCA SET OFF ON A TRIP that would turn their lives around. They left London "wide-eyed and openmouthed," in Richard's words, with absolutely no purpose or destination. Richard had only one goal: to sleep in the desert like Lawrence of Arabia. They first went east, to the Netherlands, and then motorcycled south though Belgium, France, and Spain, where they sold the bike and started hitchhiking. As winter's chill approached, they crossed the Strait of Gibraltar by boat into Morocco and headed overland to Marrakesh, almost four hundred miles to the south. People were welcoming of the young couple, but exposure and bad food often left them sick.

Richard and Rebecca had no artistic ambitions when they left on their grand tour. In need of money, they were able to sell a few watercolors and drawings while in Africa. But their modest success did not interest them as much as what they were experiencing. The beauty of the fabrics that lined the open-air markets struck them both. Euphoric as he examined the dyed silks—"It was like walking into the astroplane"—Richard made what he later called a "complete transformation to textiles."

In the souks of North Africa, art took on a new meaning. "I always liked drawing and painting, and I thought that was what you hung on walls," he said. "I'd never considered baskets, pottery, and textiles as art until I saw the beautiful ones





QUINJA (FROM LEFT), MAYA AND THEIR FIRST PATRON, ELITA MALLERS MURPHY.

RIGHT: MAYA AND QUINJA IN MURPHY'S ROOM CALLED "A FLOWER GARDEN THAT NEVER DIES."

MAYA AND QUINJA SOON GOT OUT OF THE CLOTHING BUSINESS. Maya told a reporter that he was bored with the "mechanics" of producing fashion. One associate said that Larsen had convinced Maya that there was not enough money in creating one-of-a-kind fashions. It was still difficult to support themselves one garment at a time. And despite the raves, Quinja was never satisfied with the quality of what they were making.

In 1971, they started making something completely new: fabric environments. Their idea was to take what they had learned from constructing clothes and combine it with modern hand-dyeing and resist-dyeing techniques to create 360-degree interior spaces of cloth. "It was a way of changing the environment through textiles," Maya said. And it also represented the early stages of the work for which Maya would become best known.

Amazingly, they soon found a patron.

Elita Mallers Murphy, the Chicago socialite and wife of the architect C. F. Murphy, was a trendsetter in a city not known for trends. She wore black crepe pajamas to a women's luncheon in 1962, long before fashion pajamas became popular. *Time* magazine pointed out that she was one of the first women to wear pantsuits. "If Chicago is years behind New York in fashion, Mrs. Murphy fills the gap," wrote Bobette Cohen in the *Chicago Daily News*.

Murphy was a fan of the Romanoffs. She bought about ten pieces from them, including a tie-dyed opera coat that she eventually donated to the Metropolitan Museum of Art. "He was a tad above the times," she said of Maya. "When everybody else was getting shag carpeting, he was hanging tie-dye on the wall. I recognized him right away as a revolutionary."

Murphy asked the two to create their first fabric environment in the bedroom of her daughter, also named Elita, for her sixteenth birthday. "I had always been on the avant-garde side," Murphy said of her apartment in the otherwise prim and proper high-rise at 1500 North Lake Shore Drive. "We raised some eyebrows in that building. But when it was finished it was a sensation."

The tropical garden, about twenty feet square, was an undulating dream of tie-dyed and painted textile surfaces. It had painted green canvas carpet for grass; a velvet garden with trees, birds, flowers, and a rainbow; and a silk ceiling painted blue with fluffy clouds. It looked like a hippie harem, complete with a tie-dyed velvet bedspread. "It's an organic thing," Maya said. "There are no hard edges in nature. Man created the hard edge. Softness is the key to what we do. We use soft





HELIUM-FILLED BALLOONS FLOAT OVER THE TIE-DYED BELVEDERE CASTLE DURING THE MEDIEVAL SPRING CELEBRATION IN CENTRAL PARK IN 1980.

IN 1978, ROMANOFF TOOK ANOTHER TRIP THAT CHANGED THE DIRECTION OF HIS LIFE. He traveled to Japan as a delegate of the World Fellowship of Buddhists. Spurred by Rebecca's interest in Eastern religions, Maya became a practicing Buddhist in the mid-1970s. Buddhism gave him a way to live life deeper. He meditated, did yoga, went on retreats, and stuck to a no-sugar, no-meat diet. Buddhism emphasized discipline and restraint, devotion and ethical behavior. "I think he had a lot of unattractive thoughts but worked really, really hard to be a good guy," said his niece Laura Romanoff, who has worked with Maya for two decades. "To have integrity, to be kind, to be respected by himself and others was important to him."

Maya felt wonderfully at ease in Japan. "For many years I have had great sympathy for Japanese art and crafts," he wrote. "I have many friends and contacts in the Japanese community in Chicago. When at last I came to Japan, it seemed that rather than coming to a foreign land I had come to my home."

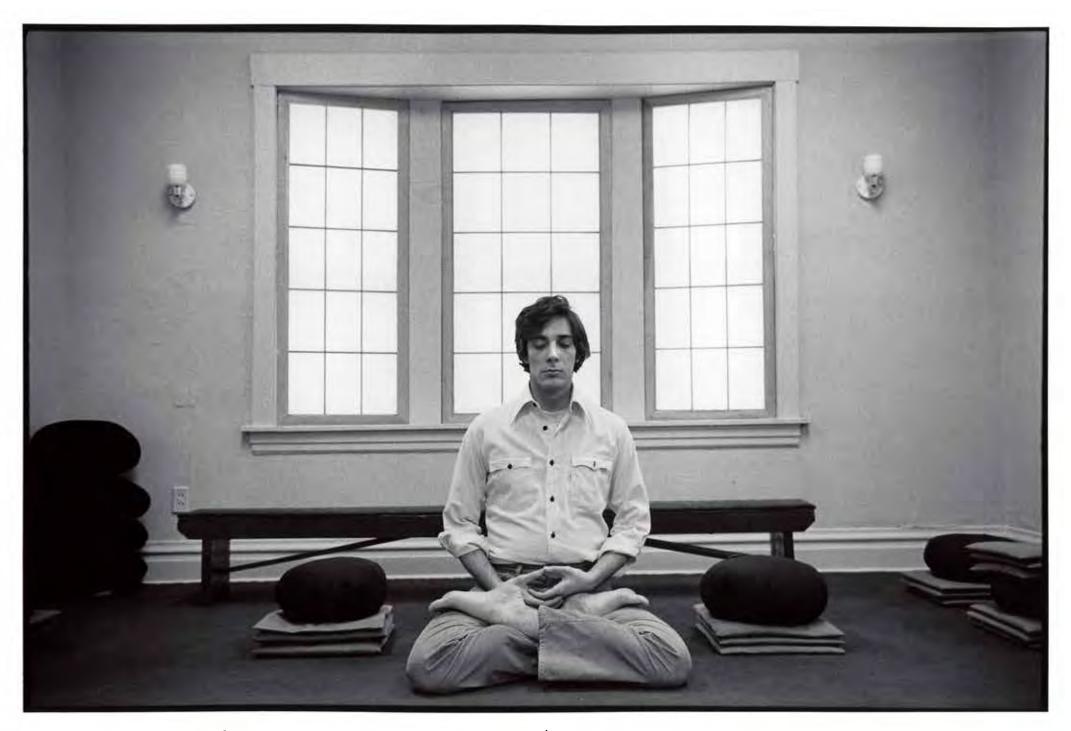
Though the trip was primarily a spiritual journey, Romanoff visited the ateliers of the master craftsman Kako Moriguchi, who painted and dyed kimonos, and the folk artist Keisuke Serizawa, who designed textiles and paper. As he had been in North Africa and India, Romanoff was inspired and empowered by the craftsmanship he saw. "I'm always involved with ancient people," he told a reporter, "and I've tried to make things that look as though they've always been there."

But the trip made him question his own skills.

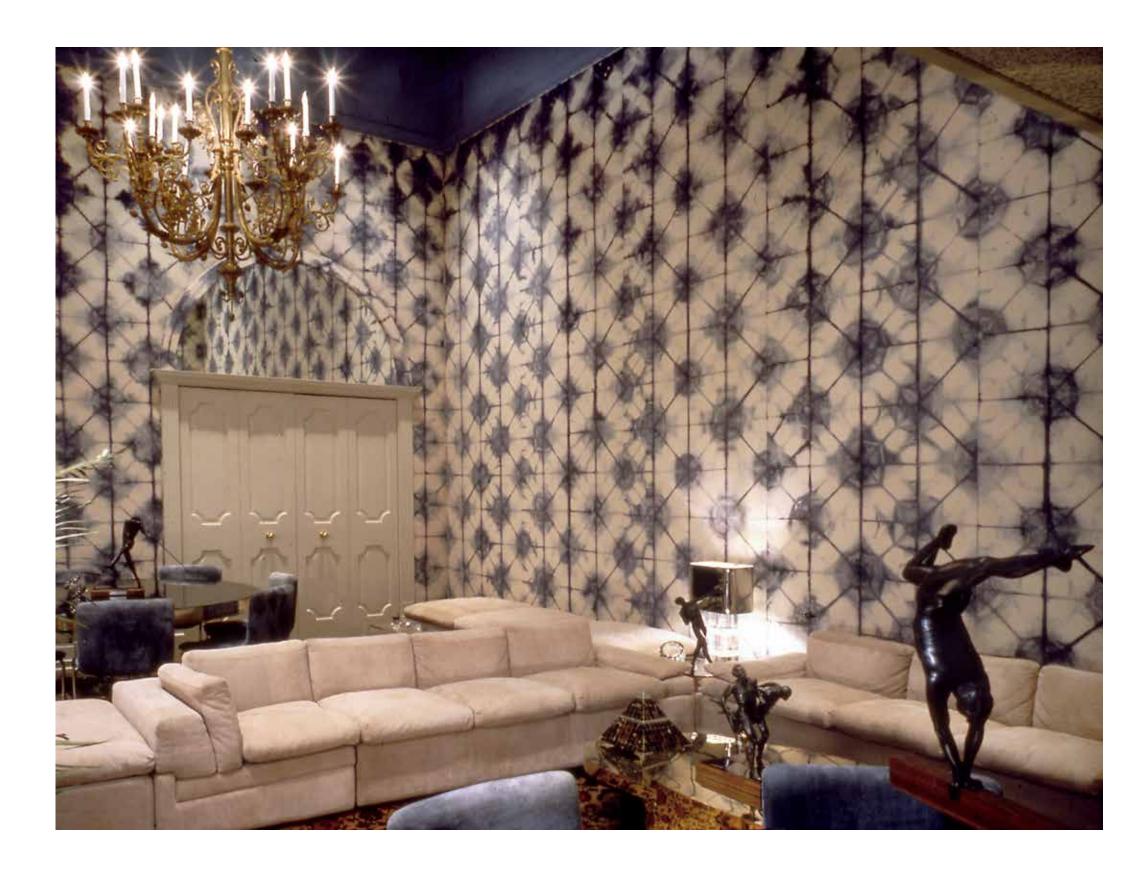
He was intrigued by the intricate *kanoko* method of tie-dyeing fabric and by how Serizawa applied resist paste through a stencil to dye fabric. Romanoff had been working on these techniques for years, but he could see he had much to learn. "The composition of the paste itself is a mystery to me," he wrote, "and also the specific method of application of the paste. Can fabric be dyed in vats or must the dye be applied by brush? Can hot dye be used? How is the paste removed? Many questions."

Romanoff was also intrigued by the ancient Japanese way of making paper and inspired by the beautifully elaborate gift wrap he found in stores. The fashion editor of the *Robb Report* would later note that "one particular paper, a copper rayon embossed material, captured the imagination of Romanoff, who envisioned the squares as wallpaper, and ultimately led him to create Weathered Walls, his line of handmade paper that is infused with dyes to present a striated, lacquered effect previously attainable only by the passage of time."

Just before returning to the United States, Romanoff met Haruko Miyoshi,



SITTING ZAZEN IN 1980. MEDITATION WAS AN IMPORTANT PART OF ROMANOFF'S LIFE. DECADES LATER, HE NAMED A WALL COVERING MEDITATIONS OHM.





like many other things he did, I have grown to accept it, and not really question it."

To capture the subtly changing colors of a sunrise, Maya made his way through the spectrum. "It goes from east to west, like the sun, rising hot and red and then giving way to cool blues and greens," he explained.

"Maya made a sunrise to show the world how colors flow," said Heng Bou, who helped paint the panels. "He wanted to show a real sunrise."

In planning the piece, Romanoff built scale models and conducted wind tests, tying fabric panels to the building and connecting them with plastic cords so he could figure out how they moved best in the wind. "It's like being an architect," he said, "only more whimsical."

Romanoff, his staff, and volunteers worked long hours for about two months to make and assemble the strips. The installation, which was not publicly announced, took people by surprise.

"What is that thing?" a cop asked.

A woman replied, "All I know, it's beautiful."

As the fabric was being slowly unfurled, Romanoff knew that in a matter of hours an unappreciated building would appear light and airy. And for those on the inside, it would be like looking through stained glass windows.

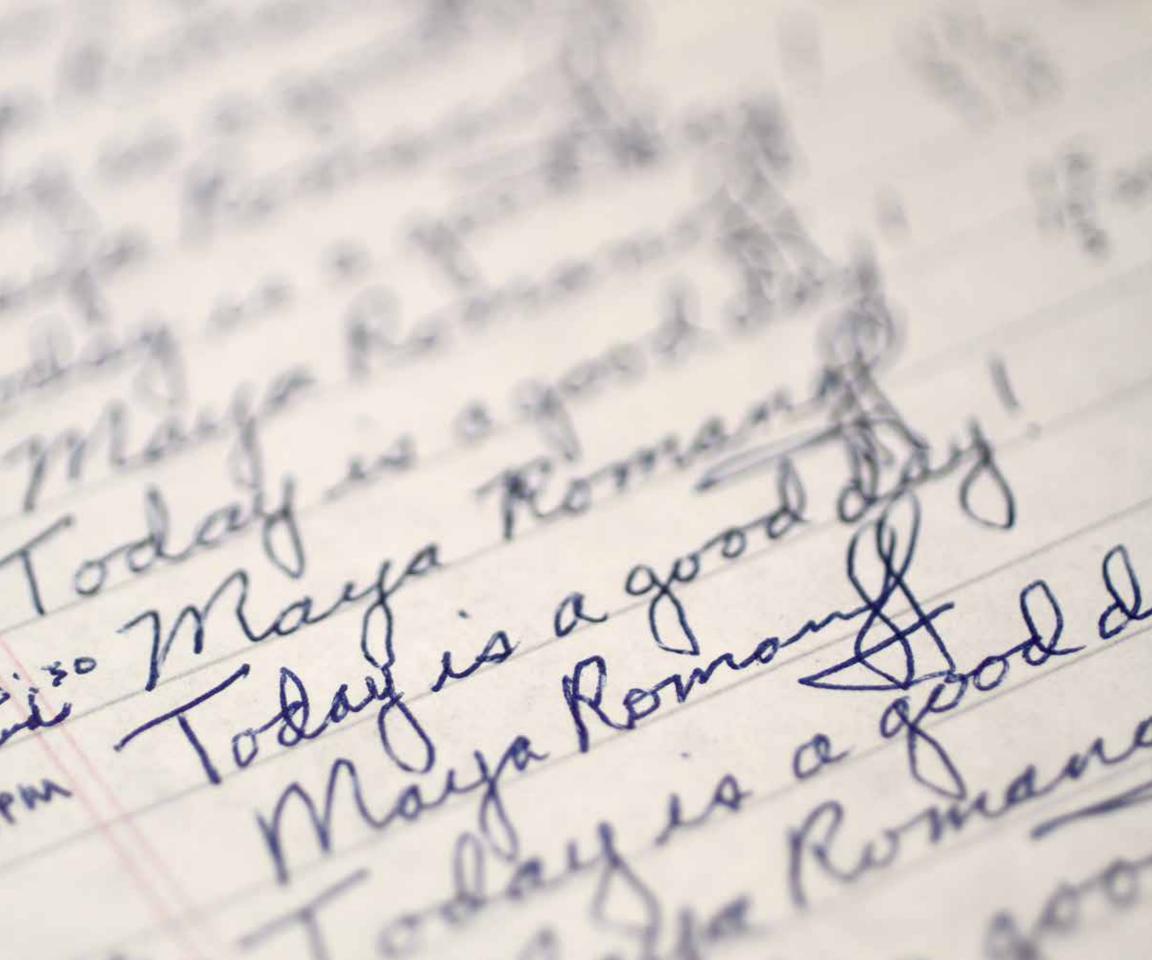
One Sun-Times employee disagreed. "I feel like I'm sitting inside Abbie Hoffman," he said.

Bess's Sunrise garnered much attention. At least a dozen local and national publications weighed in on the piece. "Maya Romanoff is about to transform one of this city's ugliest buildings into his vision of Cleopatra's barge at dawn," proclaimed the *Wall Street Journal*. Said *Time*: "In a city attuned to architectural splendors and niceties, the squat, graceless Chicago Sun-Times Building, resembling an aluminum-and-marble houseboat run aground, has long struck its beholders as an eyesore. Suddenly it has become the visual star of the Windy Cityscape."

Romanoff wrote that Bess's Sunrise was his first successful attempt to transform architecture through art. "Rather than disappearing the building into a mysterious package by completely wrapping it, this piece honors its functions as a printing factory and office building. By adding it to the everyday life, the extraordinary becomes comforting—that was above all its main purpose—to comfort myself as Bess always did for me."



BESS'S SUNRISE AT THE SUN-TIMES BUILDING.
ROMANOFF'S GOAL WAS TO CHANGE PEOPLE'S
RELATIONSHIP TO THE BUILDING. "IF I SUCCEED, I'M A
GENIUS. IF I FAIL, I'M A BUM," HE SAID.
(PHOTOS BY GEORGE LANDROS)





DESIGNER AMY LAU'S RE-INTERPRETATION OF HALF PLAID TIE-DYED WALLPAPER, WHICH MADE ITS DEBUT AFTER THE FIRM'S FORTIETH ANNIVERSARY.

RIGHT: JOYCE AND MAYA ROMANOFF. "WE MET AT A CRUCIAL TIME IN BOTH OF OUR LIVES," SAID JOYCE. (PHOTO BY TOM MADAY)

beads, wood," said Laura Romanoff. "Every person, whether you are in Uzbekistan or Tallahassee, loves these materials. It's visceral. They want them around them."

ONCE A WEEK, MAYA ROMANOFF takes an art therapy class. The goal is not to make great art, but to enjoy a moment of creativity. Maya approaches it—the brushes, paints, cotton balls, and cray-pas—with a great deal of comfort.

He could still speak softly when he started the class in 2011.

"He talked about his travels, where he has been," said his therapist, Leslee Goldman. "He has seen a lot, experienced a lot. He was obviously once a free spirit."

At the outset, Romanoff told Goldman that he loved to collaborate. They worked together on small projects at first, but now he usually works alone. Romanoff has trouble talking, and Goldman has trouble hearing.

"We don't communicate with words," she said, "but we make art together."

Maya is still fascinated with color. He wets paper with a watery paintbrush, dips the brush in paint, and watches what happens when he touches the pigment onto the paper. The paint spreads. It goes

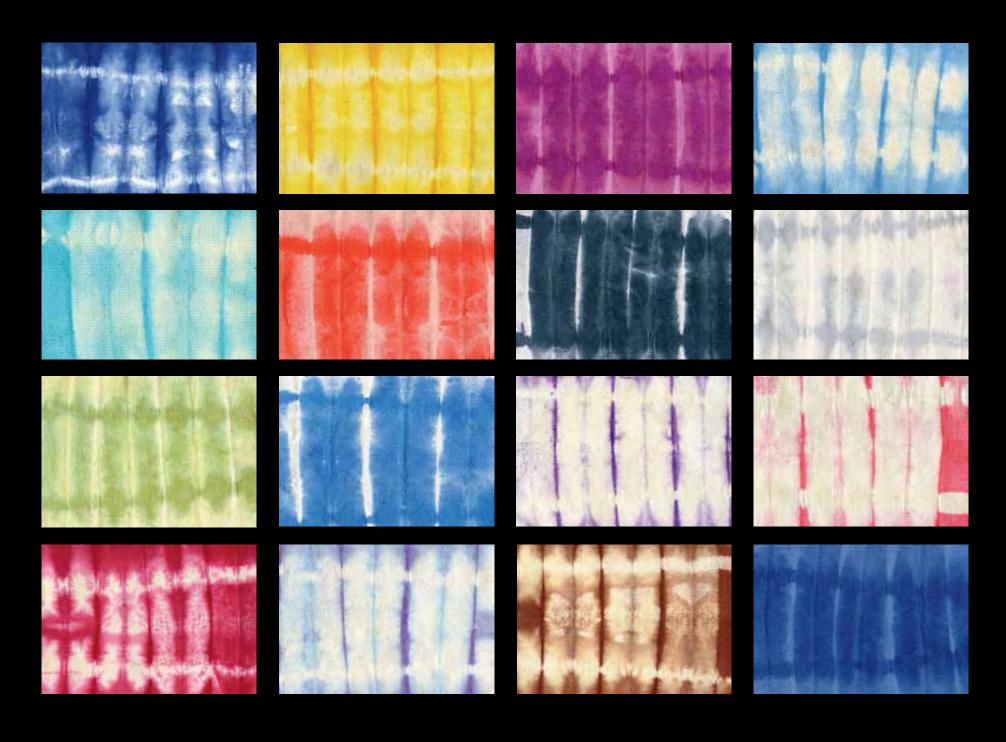
wherever it wants. "He loves the spontaneity," Goldman said.

And he still loves to finger paint, she said, because it gives him a chance to make his mark. You can't get any closer to art than by using your hands.

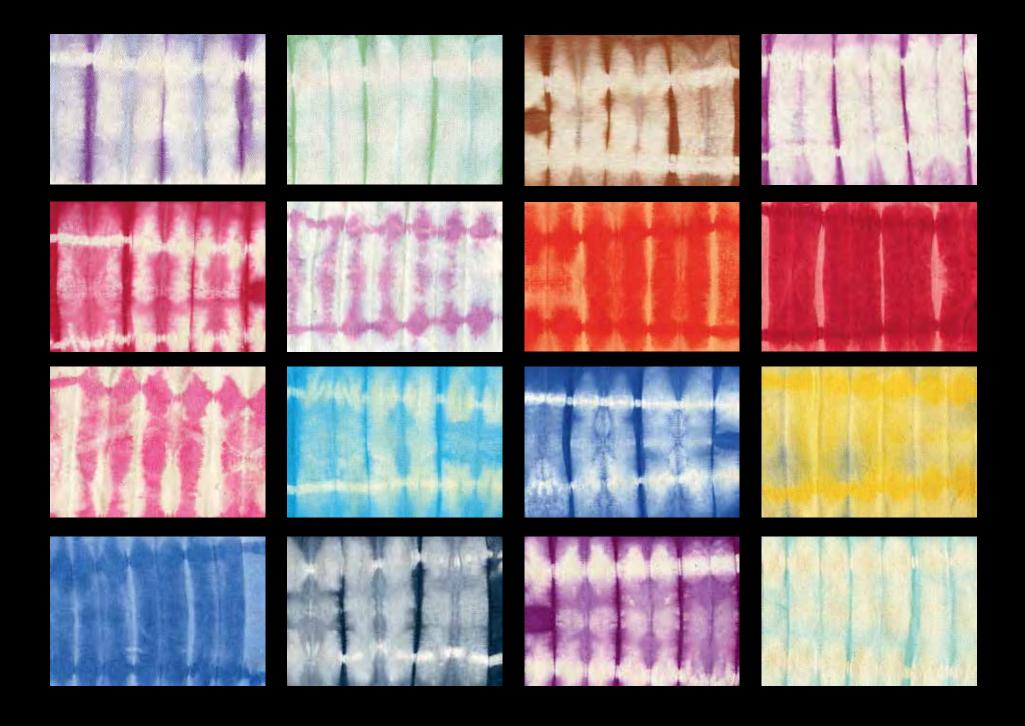
Sometimes, if he is in the right mood, Maya loses himself in time, in space, and in the studio. "This is the last thing he can master," she said.

Even now, Maya Romanoff continues to surprise, putting colors together and using textures in ways that are slightly unimaginable.

"He wants to see what happens."



EXPERIMENTS SHOW THE PALETTE OF COLORS FORMED BY COMBINING TWENTY DIFFERENT DYES IN MAYA ROMANOFF'S STUDIOS ON PLEATED CANVAS. COLOR GRADATIONS ARE CREATED WHEN TEXTILES ARE TIED BY ELASTIC BANDS AND DUNKED INTO A DYE BATH. THE BANDS FORM THE HORIZONTAL LINES.



LEATHER

"If you can imagine seeing the sun's rays reflected through a prism, you'll get a pretty good idea of Multifarious Maya's printed leathers," wrote Susan Rodgers of *The New York Post* in 1971.

RIGHT: AN EXPERIMENTAL LEATHER TIE-DYE FROM THE 1970S. MAYA ROMANOFF MAY HAVE BEEN THE FIRST TO TIE-DYE LEATHER. HE STARTED BY CRAFTING A CAPE AND A VEST, AND LATER DID CUSTOM UPHOLSTERY. NEXT PAGES: ROMANOFF LEFT LEATHER SOAKING IN DYE OVERNIGHT BECAUSE HE WANTED COLOR TO SATURATE THE MATERIAL. WRESTLING THICK COWHIDE SO THAT IT CAN BE TIED IS DIFFICULT, AND LEATHER BECOMES EXTREMELY HEAVY WHEN DUNKED INTO A DYE BATH.



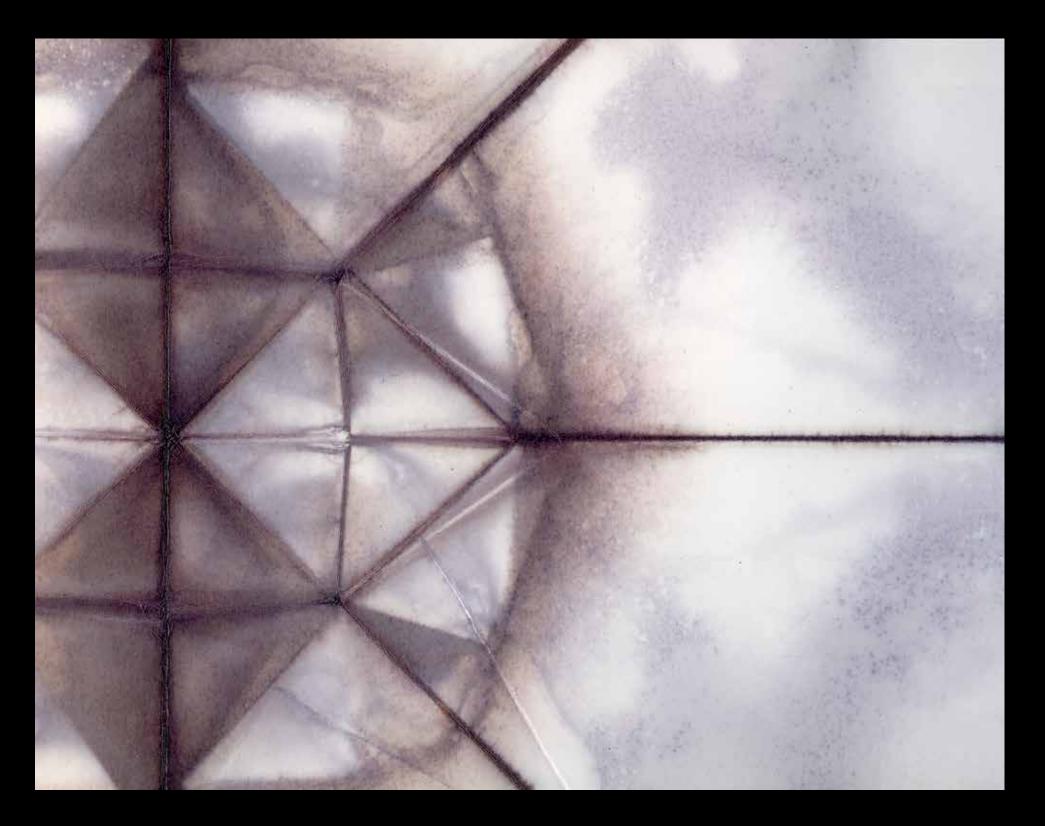


PAPER

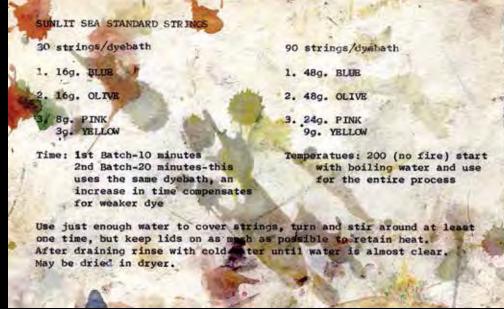
The fact that he had no experience creating paper did not concern Maya Romanoff because he was determined to figure out the process on his own. "You lose a lot of craft" when you educate yourself, he said, and you don't ever learn right from wrong. But that can be an advantage.

"If you see it first as a 'mistake' then you may be closing off an opportunity," he wrote. "In the beginning I either didn't know they were 'mistakes,' or maybe I did, but I used them anyway."

RIGHT: ORIGINAL SNOWFLAKE TIE-DYED WALLPAPER FROM THE EARLY 1980S. THE PATTERN IS PARTICULARLY TRICKY BECAUSE THE FRAGILE PAPER IS FOLDED AT THE START AND REFOLDED WHEN WET. DESIGNER AMY LAU REFASHIONED THE PATTERN WITH CONTEMPORARY COLORS ON MORE DURABLE PAPER FOR THE COMPANY AS ANNIVERSARY SNOWFLAKE IN 2010.



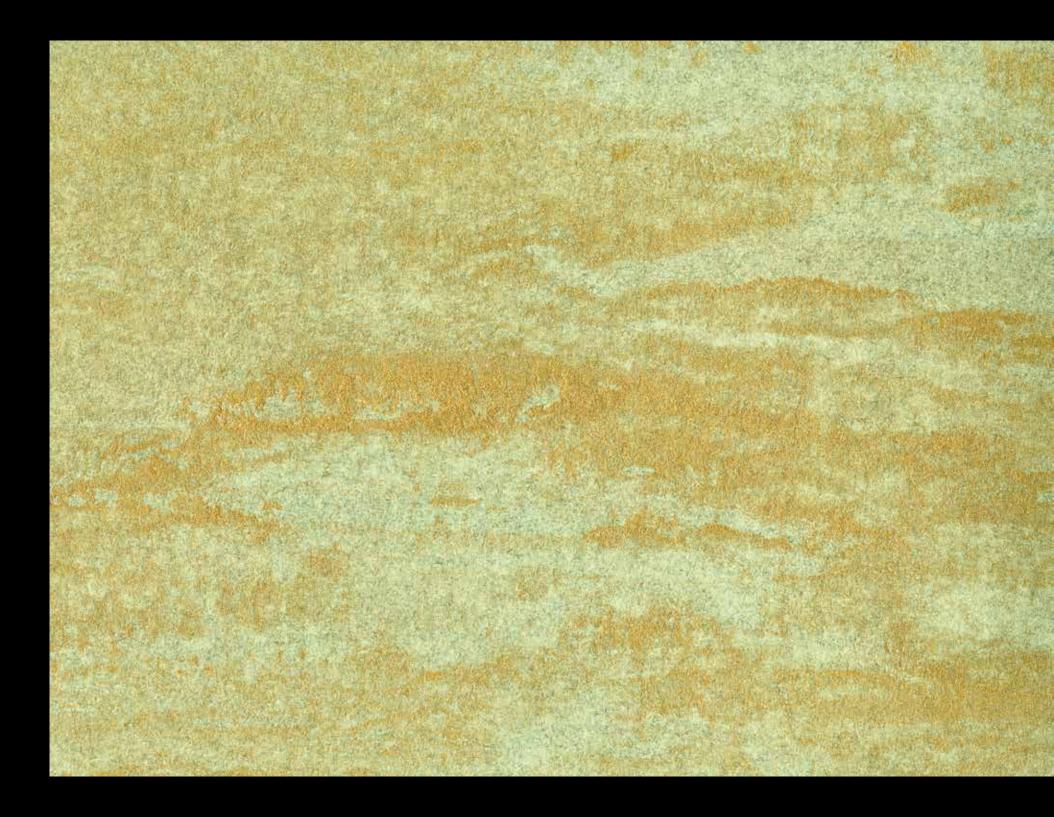








"RECIPE CARDS" FILLED OUT BY ROMANOFF SO THAT THE DESIGNS CAN BE REPEATED. THESE CARDS, WHICH CONTAIN DETAILED INFORMATION ABOUT ALL PRODUCTS MADE IN THE STUDIOS, ARE KEPT IN RECIPE BOXES AND HAVE BEEN USED FOR DECADES. "IF YOU WANT TO REDO A DESIGN, YOU HAVE TO RECORD EVERYTHING," SAYS PRODUCTION MANAGER NA BOPHA LY OM.



QUINTESSENTIAL MAYA: WEATHERED METALS, PRODUCED IN THE SKOKIE FACTORY, USES LIQUID METALLICS IN A RANDOM DESIGN. EACH ROLL IS UNIQUE; THEY DO NOT NEED TO MATCH WHEN INSTALLED.

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"Anywhere a piece of fabric can go—whether or not it has ever been there before—is where I put my textiles," Maya Romanoff wrote. "There is no creative distinction in my mind between what can be used and what cannot."

RIGHT: BEADAZZLED, INTRODUCED IN 2002, HAS HAD MANY VERSIONS. BECAUSE THE TRANSPARENT BEADAZZLED GLASS BEADS CAN OVERLAY ART, SUCH AS THIS REPRODUCTION OF A MURAL KNOWN AS POURED LINES BY BRITISH ARTIST IAN DAVENPORT, THE BEADS CAN BE CUSTOMIZED. THIS PIECE WAS COMMISSIONED FOR A 2010 EXHIBITION IN MILAN, ITALY.





MEDITATIONS OHM CONNECTS BACK TO ROMANOFF'S BUDDHIST YEARS. BASED ON LOKTA PAPER, USED IN SACRED BUDDHIST PRAYER TEXTS, FIBERS ARE MADE FROM THE LOKTA PLANT, FOUND HIGH IN THE MOUNTAINS OF NEPAL. LOCAL ARTISTS USE CHOPSTICKS TO CREATE THE HONEYCOMB PATTERN WHEN THE PAPER IS STILL WET. FIRST SHOWN IN 2007, IS PAPER COLORED AND COATED IN THE ROMANOFF STUDIOS. "EVEN IN HIS PRESENT STATE, HE HAS NOT LOST HIS EYE," SAID DOCEY LEWIS, AN INDEPENDENT DESIGNER WHO HELPS CREATE PRODUCTS IN NEPAL AND INDONESIA. RIGHT: AN EXPERIMENT THAT DID NOT REACH MARKET, A WALL SURFACE BASED ON CHEESECLOTH.



MOTHER OF PEARL, MADE FROM GENUINE CAPIZ SEASHELLS FOUND IN THE INDIAN OCEAN. JOYCE ROMANOFF, WHO WAS INSPIRED BY MAYA'S INTEREST IN USING NATURAL PRODUCTS, DEVELOPED THE LINE. SHE FIRST SAW THE SHELLS ON PLACEMATS. THE WALLCOVERING, ONE OF THE COMPANY'S MOST POPULAR, IS ASSEMBLED IN INDONESIA AND THE PHILIPPINES.

NIRVANA

There is a soulfulness that comes from using our own hands to coax out the beauty of the material from its core essence, and that feeling comes through in the crafted products.















