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## If these walls could talk



They would tell of the revolutionary design sense of Maya Romanoff

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Glass, granite, even gold.  
What Maya Romanoff puts on  
walls has long turned heads.

# Design revolutionary

**By Barbara Mahany**  
TRIBUNE NEWSPAPERS

Even though his words now come in fits and starts barely louder than a breath, Maya Romanoff still does what he has long done best: raise eyebrows.

Since long before he tie-dyed his first T-shirt, he has been a revolutionary, all right. Tie-dyed his way right into the Smithsonian's permanent collection, and onto the cover of *House & Garden*. Sold a tie-dye leather vest to Roger Daltrey of The Who, a caftan to Cheryl Tiegs. And that was back in the 1970s when tie-dye, Tiegs and Daltrey were hot as the lit-up end of whatever everyone was smoking back at Woodstock.

Romanoff's psychedelic wraps — an opera coat, a backless ribbon dress — were hung above the grand staircase at Ultimo in Chicago's Gold Coast, flew off the racks at Henri Bendel in New York, I. Magnin in Beverly Hills.

But then, unwilling to put up with the ephemeral whims of now-it's-in-oops-it's-out fashion, Romanoff turned his tie-dye attention to outdoor art, draping Belvedere Castle in New York's Central Park with 150 yards of tie-dye panels and unrolling 48,000 square feet of hand-dyed canvas strips off the side of the Sun-Times building in Chicago.

Somehow, Romanoff found his way into interior design and started slapping tie-dye on the walls. Didn't stop at twisted, knotted, dyed cloth or paper either; once he discovered the canvas that is the wall.

He has put up mother-of-pearl, crushed granite and marble, and Swarovski crystals. He has papered walls in 18-karat gold. And braided hemp. And razor-thin slices of Paulownia wood, from the Chinese fig tree. And glass beads that shimmer like a lake at twilight.

"Extraordinary surfaces. Since 1969," goes the inscription of Maya Romanoff, the corporation, known in chic design circles around the globe for the last four decades for what it has done to the vertical planes that delineate our lives. Its logo, of two entwined lotus blossoms, is a touch of Zen



Maya and Joyce Romanoff. CHRIS WALKER/TRIBUNE PHOTO

that goes back to the beginning of this free-flowing enterprise.

One recent morning in what's called the Multifarious Room of the company's Skokie headquarters, Romanoff held court beside a conference table where even the doughnuts dazzled in a shimmering sprinkle of rose-petal-pink sugar crystals.

As has been the case for the last few years, Romanoff was folded into a wheelchair as he played the whispered raconteur.

"Once tie-dyed a woman," he tells you, without a hint of shock. "Came out great," he opines before moving onto another eyebrow-raiser. That being how, with 200 borrowed dollars in his pocket, he once





Production managers Gina Panijan, left, and Na Bopha ly Orm, right, consult with Maya Romanoff, the company chairman. Romanoff began his career selling tie-dyed T-shirts out of a van and has grown his business into a state-of-the-art studio/factory that creates innovative wall coverings. CHRIS WALKER/TRIBUNE PHOTO

roamed Pakistan for six months, sniffing out the world's best hashish. Found it, he lets on, but then seals his lips.

For some 18 years, Parkinson's disease has slowly, agonizingly, been robbing Romanoff of his balance, his gait, his grasp of even a breakfast spoon. The endgame of this neuromuscular killer is when the vocal cords begin to close, making speech an exercise in slow-drawn perseverance, and a barely audible one at that.

But the disease can't put a dent in the creative spark — and storyteller's wit — that is the 69-year-old's trademark.

"It's not an easy disease," says Romanoff's wife and business partner, Joyce, in a simple declaration that spoke volumes.

When clicking on a retrospective DVD, one that unspools Romanoff's story from a trek to Woodstock to Time magazine's declaring him "the visual star of the Windy Cityscape," his wife of 12 years says of the soundtrack, in passing, "You can hear his gorgeous voice." And you can't miss the longing for what was.

Maya Romanoff remembers finger-painting as a little boy, growing up in a somewhat gilded childhood, in the Belmont Hotel on the North Side. His father was a metallurgist by training, made

plumbing fixtures for a living. His mother, "brilliant, crazy," her son calls her, was a socialite, a philanthropist, once had been a model. His bedroom walls, he recalls, were covered in toile; the floor, a checkerboard of simple squares in blue and red linoleum.

He studied anthropology at the University of California at Berkeley — fell in love with a painter and fellow student named Becky. They graduated in 1965, heady times indeed. Self-avowed searchers, the pair took off, traveled through Europe, India and North Africa.

It was in the marketplace at Gabes in Tunisia that Maya was transfixed by the ancient art of tie-dyeing, the swirl of kaleidoscopic color and unpredictable pattern that emerged from all the dipping of hand-spun cloth.

"It was like walking into the astro-plane," the young Romanoff was quoted as saying at the time. (By then he'd dropped his birth name, Richard, and taken on the name Multifarious Maya, given to him by a Punjab holy man during travels through India; Maya, taken from Sanskrit, means "doer of many things." Eventually, he ditched Multifarious.)

But it wasn't till after coming home from Woodstock, in 1969, that Maya and Becky, by then his wife, took to the basement of



Romanoff wrapped the old Sun-Times building in hand-dyed canvas strips in 1988.

her parents' home in Louisville, Ky., and tried their hand with a bottle of Rit, a slew of rubber bands and their first knotted-up T-shirt.

Trying to earn a buck after their world travels, the Romanoffs had loaded up their iconic Volkswagen van with peaches and chocolate cake to feed the hungry hordes at Woodstock. Romanoff now claims that he never saw a tie-dyed T-shirt there, but Becky did, and they drove home itching to experiment with what they knew was an ancient textile art.

Wasn't long before a Rolling Stones concert in Miami called their name, so off they drove with a VW van full of 180 tie-dyed shirts. They'd barely opened the sides



of that old van before every last psychedelic shirt was sold. "Rained miserably," Becky Romanoff once recalled of the waterlogged rock scene. "We were the only people who didn't take a loss, except the ones who sold strobe candles."

Emboldened by their tie-dye triumph, they took on New York.

Albert Hadley, who at the time was partner to Sister Parish, the late doyenne of interior design in America who counted Jackie Kennedy among her highbrow clients, recalls how the Romanoffs, "hippies in flowing white robes," came wafting into the Upper East Side offices of Parish-Hadley on East 69th Street and Madison Avenue in June 1971.

"Together they unrolled textiles of great variety and beauty — cottons, linens, silks, some soft leathers and a variety of velvets. Some were rich and heavy, others gossamer thin," Hadley wrote in the foreword to a 1979 exhibition catalog.

"Each was more beautiful than the other, and each was a work of art. ... As one after the other of these were unfolded before us, here were glowing jewel colors, colors of fire, water, air and earth ... and yes, a rainbow! It was as though a modern Merlin had appeared before us to unfurl age-old techniques of textile design translated with utmost sensitivity and loveliness into what appeared an art form totally new, one which struck our own imaginations with delight."

As one critic of the time wrote, "They took New York by storm."

But, right off, they'd settled in Chicago, where after the Rolling Stones concert, they'd driven back to Maya's hometown to pick up a load of white T-shirts at Handelsman, a wholesale den on South Michigan Avenue that sold a particular brand of T-shirts with a ribbon through the collar.

In time, they set up shop in a Division Street walk-up where the kitchen stove was crowded with pots and pots of dye, and cloth draped everywhere, recalls Elita Murphy, an early and ardent client, and wife of noted Chicago architect Charlie Murphy. Initially taken by Romanoff's famed tie-dyed opera coat, which now hangs in the Metropolitan Museum of Art in New York, Murphy couldn't get enough of all things tie-dye, so for her daughter's Sweet 16th she asked the Romanoffs to do an entire bedroom, wall to wall, floor to ceiling, with a rainbow bed to boot.

Romanoff hung the room in tie-dyed velvet and silk, covered the floor in tie-dyed canvas. Inspired by a Zen poem, it was a tie-dye tropical garden, complete with flowing river, red lotus blooms and palm trees, billowing clouds above.

"He was a tad above the times," says Murphy, who now lives in Colorado.



Heng Bou, left, gets paper ready to be tie-dyed and turned into innovative wallcovering at Maya Romanoff's Skokie headquarters. CHRIS WALKER/TRIBUNE PHOTO

"When everybody else was getting shag carpeting, he was hanging tie-dye on the walls. I recognized him right away as a revolutionary."

It was while living on Division Street, walking through the alley on a dreary winter's day, looking up to see laundry flapping in the wind, that Romanoff got yet another big idea: dangling tie-dye swaths off buildings, bringing wind and flow and rainbow color into the hard-edged architectural equation.

So began the chapter that had him dyeing bolts of canvas by the thousands of yards, covering sides of buildings in Chicago, New York, Los Angeles and Miami.

Ultimately, though, it's inner space that has held his attention all these years.

"I consider myself a tool-maker for interior designers and interior architects," Romanoff once said. "That's where the life of society is, in private spaces."

And so, in the private and not-so-private spaces of a client list that reads like a spin through late 20th century pop icons — Donald Trump, Donna Karan, Quincy Jones, Britney Spears, Barbra Streisand, even the Sultan of Brunei — Romanoff's revolution has rolled on. And the needle never got stuck in the tie-dye groove.

The corporation has grown from a hippie couple with their sinks and stove-top pots of dye to 55 employees, many second-generation workers, sons and daughters who come to work in what has become one big family-like operation, in a state-of-the-art studio/factory where yoga classes are held just outside the workrooms.

Over the years, the Romanoffs have brought in artists who, along with Romanoff, mine the imagination and conjure secret techniques for affixing anything from precious metals to earthy bits of bark and mulberry, clay and crushed stone, to rolls and bolts and tiles that transform inner spaces to otherworldly.

Even now, Maya Romanoff, whose title is



The Anniversary Collection features tie-dye wallcoverings that hark back to the founder's early days.

chairman and chief creative officer, is "the final arbiter, the last pair of eyes on every product," says Joyce, who in her 22 years with the company has masterminded her share of genius and been termed "midwife to Maya's vision." (Maya and Becky divorced in 1973; she now lives in France.)

Kara Mann, a Chicago interior designer deemed "of the moment" by InStyle magazine, says that when she unfurls a roll of Romanoff wall covering — be it the tortoise-shell tiles, or "Beadazzled" sheaves of caviar-size beads uncannily glommed onto paper — she watches as her "clients' eyes get big, then yours get big too. You think, 'Whoa, where on earth am I going to be able to use that?'"

But then, she says, you can't stop dreaming.

And so it has always been in the psychedelic world of Maya Romanoff, where the ancient art of sweeping thread through kaleidoscopic color has unlocked untold dreams.

And raised just as many eyebrows.

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