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THE WOMEN'S MAKING



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# **INTERVIEWS**

# Textile Design between Tradition & Innovation

## Interview to Brigitte Perkins

**Debora Giorgi**

Università degli Studi di Firenze

### Keywords

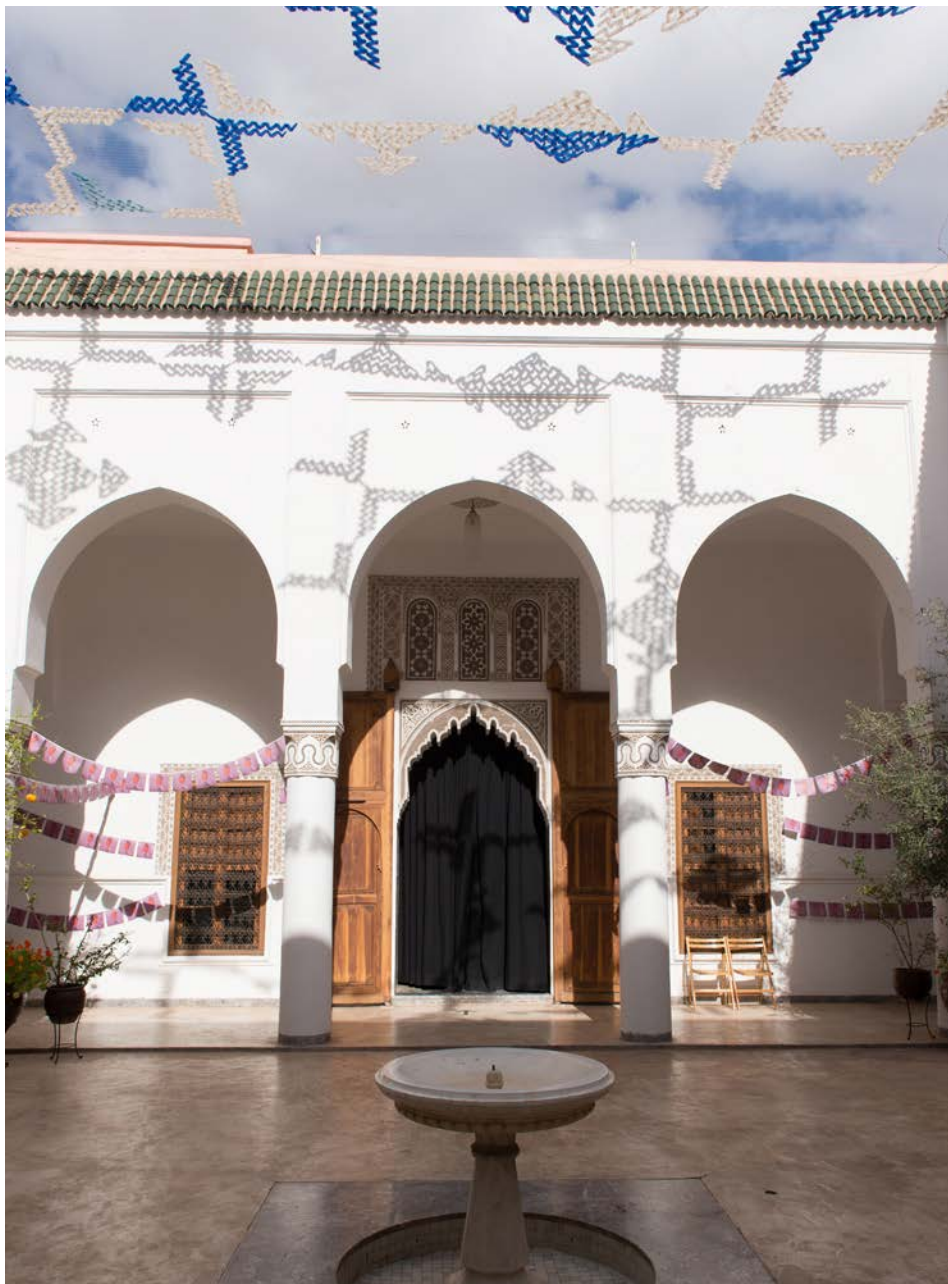
Textile Design, Traditional Arts, Innovation, Social innovation, Embroidery.

### Abstract

Through a long interview with Brigitte Perkins, a French textile designer who has worked in Morocco for 25 years, we want to present not only the story of a female designer, but also a common story of women through the Moroccan traditional arts of weaving and embroidery, imbued with a very strong symbolic dimension, where the weaving of fabrics, carpets and embroidery are deeply inscribed in Moroccan culture, with economic, social & cultural implications.

For many women, these traditional arts allow them financial autonomy, as well as a strong social bond. Between them, they weave relationships, exchanges of knowledge ... These arts, transmitted from mother to daughter, through which regional and family traditions are perpetuated, are usually the representation of the deep cultural expression of a feminine world, too often set aside or ignored.

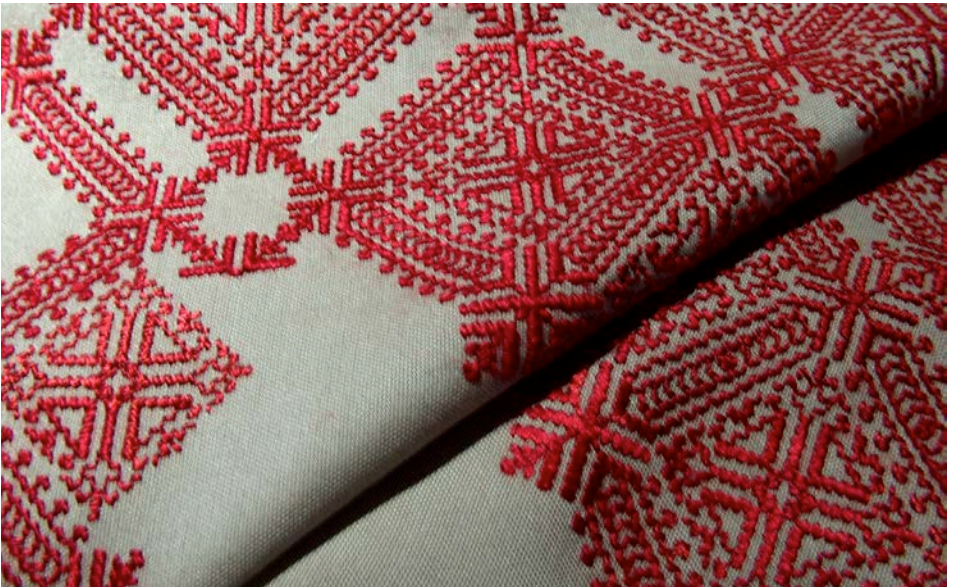
Brigitte Perkins comes from the Parisian Fashion scene. In 1995, she founded the Atelier "Tadert Titbirine" in an old caravanserai in the medina of Marrakech, offering and revisiting the old tradition of weaving, with men, and then spinning and embroidery, with women, developing a production of excellence and innovative high-end. The particular character of Brigitte's project does not only reside in the conception of fabrics and products of remarkable refinement and quality, but above all in the methodologies that she established both for weaving and embroidery, which allow this level of excellence. Convinced that the aim of tradition is not to reinvent the invention itself indefinitely, but to preserve what has been transmitted, Brigitte, by modernizing traditional techniques, has indeed succeeded in perpetuating this knowledge and in restoring the value of a living testimony to a millennial tradition that defies time by mixing the dreams of yesterday and tomorrow.



**Figure 1.** *Tapis du Ciel. Carpet of Heaven.* Work created for *Féminin Pluriel*. Photo by Terry Munson.



**Figure 2.** Brigitte Perkins/Atelier Tadert Tibtirine, embroidery of Fez in Gold Sabra on cotton voile. Photo by Brigitte Perkins.

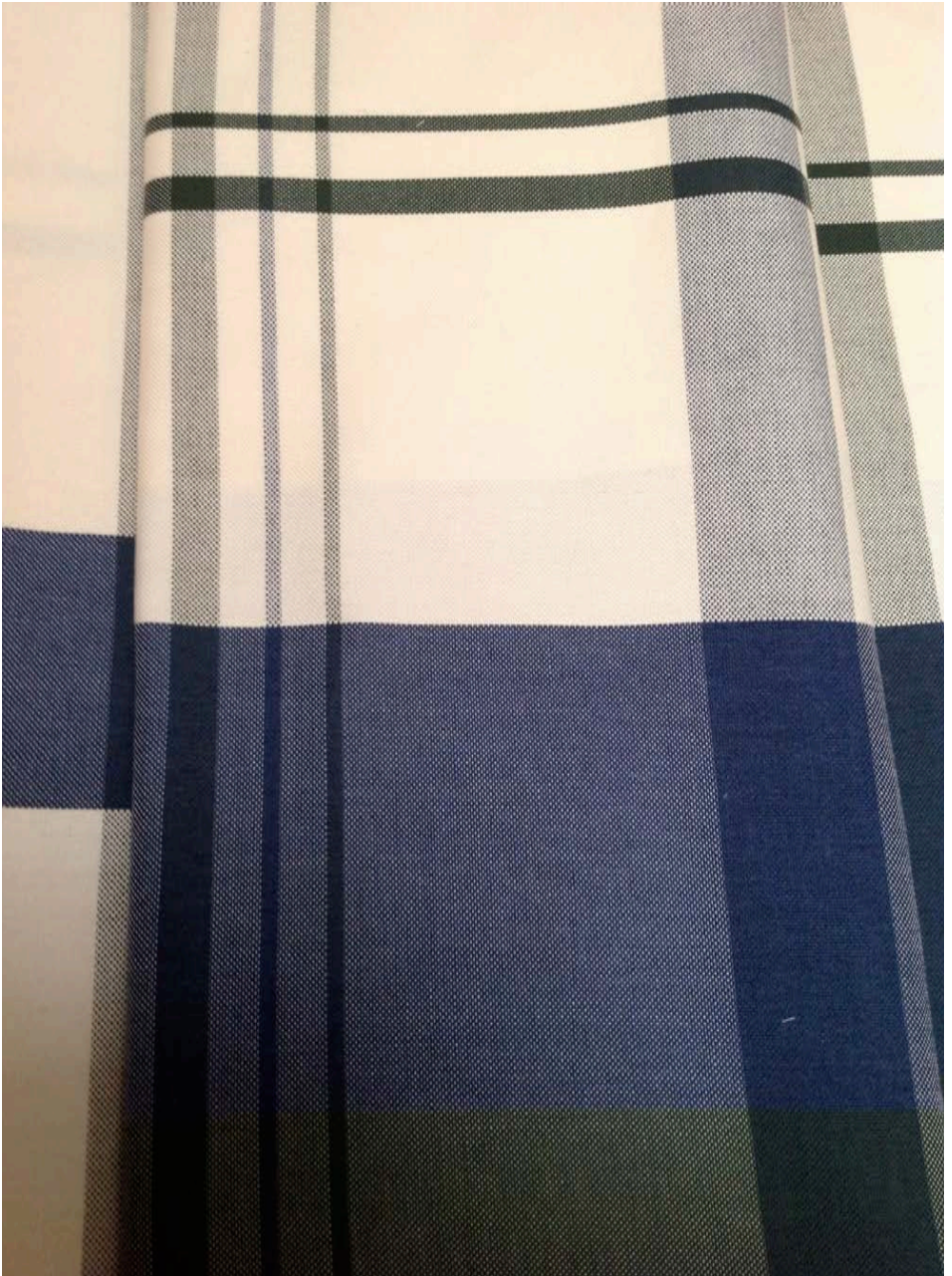


**Figure 3.** Brigitte Perkins/Atelier Tadert Tibtirine, silk embroidery of Fez on cotton. Photo by Brigitte Perkins.





**Figure 4.** Brigitte Perkins/Atelier Tadert Tibtirine, Fez embroidery on silk. Photo by Brigitte Perkins.



**Figure 5.** Brigitte Perkins/Workshop Tadert Tibtirine, cotton plaid. Photo by Brigitte Perkins.

## DG: Can you tell us about how you came to Morocco and your work on textile design?

**BP:** Nothing was premeditated... I would never have come if one of my friends hadn't invited me to spend a few days by the sea in the south. Later I spent a year and a half, between 1990 and 1992 in Marrakech, discovering this country and especially the Berber communities of the Ourika Valley and the Ouirgane region on the road to Tizintest, their often very difficult living conditions, their potential.

I returned to Paris in mid 1992, but too far from the fashion world in which I worked, after what I had experienced in Morocco. So, I decided to set up a project in Morocco with women. Between 1993 and 1995 I divided my time between Paris and Marrakech and set up a network of Artisans for this rather ambitious initial project. Worked with *Potiers for actions*, a humanitarian association, carried out with the HEART WEAR Foundation.

In November 1995 this Foundation asked me to see what could be done in textiles. Met a corporation of Weavers, most of them elderly, in an old Foundouk in the Medina of Marrakech, who were weaving blankets and fabrics from *Djellabas* "beldi"<sup>1</sup>. From the next day started with them a small series of samples with what I could find as (contraband) fibres on the spot.

The encouragements of some Parisian decorators, pushed me to continue. The evidence of a lack of structure immediately appeared to me and also that I had to commit myself really

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1. The *djellaba* is the traditional Moroccan costume, *beldi* in Morocco, simply means traditional, hand-made, local, as opposed to *roumi* which suggests something more modern and industrial. Nda.

and for a long time! Everything was empirical and repetitive: the same drawings, few or no colours. I started colouring the textiles, but finding very few cotton colours, I started mixing them with *sabra*<sup>2</sup> threads used mainly by embroiderers on traditional outfits, which nobody was doing at the time (Fig. 1). The success was immediate. The Arab House, the first charming hotel in the medina of Marrakech, asked me to create their fabrics. It was during this period that the need for a more precise methodology than the one I was using became apparent, in order to be able to reproduce identical pieces of fabric without errors. The French and international press, which was interested in my work in fashion, followed me... we were increasingly solicited by decorators, prestigious interior designers and a private international clientele.

### **DG: How you have developed your work?**

**BP:** We improved tools, looms, combs and smooths, developed textiles of different structures, work on matter and light. We had to import our raw material, as we couldn't find reliable spinners on site and yarns of the quality I wanted. The weavers easily adapted to the methodology, which I had developed with them, and were soon self-sufficient on the looms.

In 1998, I was asked to participate in a development project in Tamesloht – a city whose importance and influence was recognized until the independence of Morocco – which aimed to rehabilitate its *Zaouia* (small religious university or school) through a cultural project.

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2. Vegetable silk derived from the agave, Nda.

We set up a cooperative of women embroiderers and spinners in Tamesloht, and we moved our weaving workshops there. We also set up a studio of “Tapissières” in Marrakech, since we supplied fabrics mainly for interiors, as well as a studio for the hand finishing of products, such as plaids, stoles, *Hammam* and bath sheets.

We collaborate with international artists on some of their works, running programs in partnership with universities, such as the University of Design and Architecture in Florence. (ShareDesign Project), or Foundations. We provide training in embroidery methodology (Fondation Orient Occident, Dar Bellarj) and sewing (Fondation Jardin Majorelle).

We produced a Manual for the Modernization of Moroccan Embroidery in 2008 for the Fondation Orient Occident.

### **DG: What is Design for you?**

**BP:** An Aesthetic research applied to the creation of a form taking into account its function... in 3 words Aesthetic – Form – Function . Going to the essential and simplicity. When it comes to Textiles, transcribing images or a concept... telling stories.

### **DG: Your work is based on the traditional art of weaving and embroidery, as a designer innovation is a very important element, how can you combine these two things?**

**BP:** All we did was innovate... my art direction work, methodologies, various partnerships and other achievements. The two seem to be inseparable, if we want to bring these traditional arts to life, we have to know how to transform them

while respecting the techniques, their deep essence and their history. The evolution must be constant and continuous.

**DG: The fact of being a woman designer in a traditional society like the Moroccan one has created problems for you?**

**BP:** No! because I created our company very quickly, a guarantee of independence, and the relationship with all the people who are part of it is based on respect, trust and recognition of everyone's abilities and their value. The first thing the weavers thanked me for was showing them that they could do beautiful things... Now living in Morocco is not an easy thing, you have to know how to protect yourself and put limits around you... there can be no real integration.

**DG: You have trained perhaps about 500 women in weaving and embroidery, can you tell us about this experience?**

**BP:** Not so many ! but about 250 to 300 ... In both Weaving and Embroidery, the work was very empirical, without structure or rigour, with a lot of bad practices, hence the importance of establishing methodologies and transmitting them through training. We have trained our Artisans & Craftswomen in these methods, who themselves form small groups selected among the most experienced, who in turn form others by creating the "domino effect" under our supervision, to be sure that the methodologies are well mastered and transmitted correctly. These well applied methodologies structure any work required. Preparations can sometimes take a long time, but this is a guarantee of the excellence of the desired result.

They reinforce in the Artisans the certainty of the quality of their know-how which can freely express itself thanks to them.

**DG: You also work with women's associations and for development projects, can you tell us about this experience?**

**BP:** Always through trainings whose quality is often lacking in Morocco. The social and economic impact cannot be sustainable if the training given is not good. When the technique is mastered it is already a considerable advantage that makes all the difference. Then it is necessary to apply it to the right products, to set up strategies. This is the work we do with different Foundations or Associations.

**DG: The project you're most attached to?**

**BP:** All those where there is transmission, sharing of knowledge, and aesthetic creation... those where students and Artists work with Artisans, such as *ShareDesign*<sup>3</sup> with the University of Florence, *Féminin-Pluriel – L'Espace Physique et Mental des Femmes*<sup>4</sup>, etc... Mainly those that opening up new per-

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3. *ShareDesign*, 2013, Joint project coordinated by Giuseppe Lotti and Debora Giorgi with the collaboration of Aniko Boehler between Dipartimento di Architettura Università di Firenze (DIDA-UNIFI), Marrakech (ESAV), Centre de Formation et Qualification dans les Métiers de l'Artisanat de Marrakech (CFQMAM) with the participation of several Moroccan Workshops and associations among which L'Atelier Tadert Tibtirine, Fondation Orient Occident, and others. During the project 40 students in Design from the two Universities DIDA-UNIFI and ESAV Marrakech, worked for 5 weeks with the craftsmen of CFQMAM for the realization of 50 prototypes.

4. *Féminin Pluriel* is an artistic collective created & animated by Aniko Boehler & Debora Giorgi, art curators, in 2014, in collaboration with Brigitte Perkins/Tadert Titbirine, Florence Robert-Visy/graphic design department ESAV Marrakech, Maha Elmadi/Fondation Dar Bellarj, Nathalie Locatelli/Galerie 127, Poster for Tomorrow, Voice Gallery, Dipartimento di Architettura Università di Firenze. Organizes artist residencies, workshops, conferences, in the field of visual arts with a special focus on women artists.

spectives for Artisans and make them discover other horizons where they also have their place. But above all the creation of this collection illustrating the Moroccan Embroideries, with the *Fondation Jardin Majorelle*, which will be the subject of exhibitions or illustrations during conferences, probably a book, completing the Handbook on Embroidery.

Each of our embroiderers signs one or several “Masterpiece” showing the different techniques of the repertoire, considering that each City in Morocco had its own technique, its compositions and its colours. This collection honours the mastery of their know-how, the culmination of these years with us and the recognition of their work and themselves.

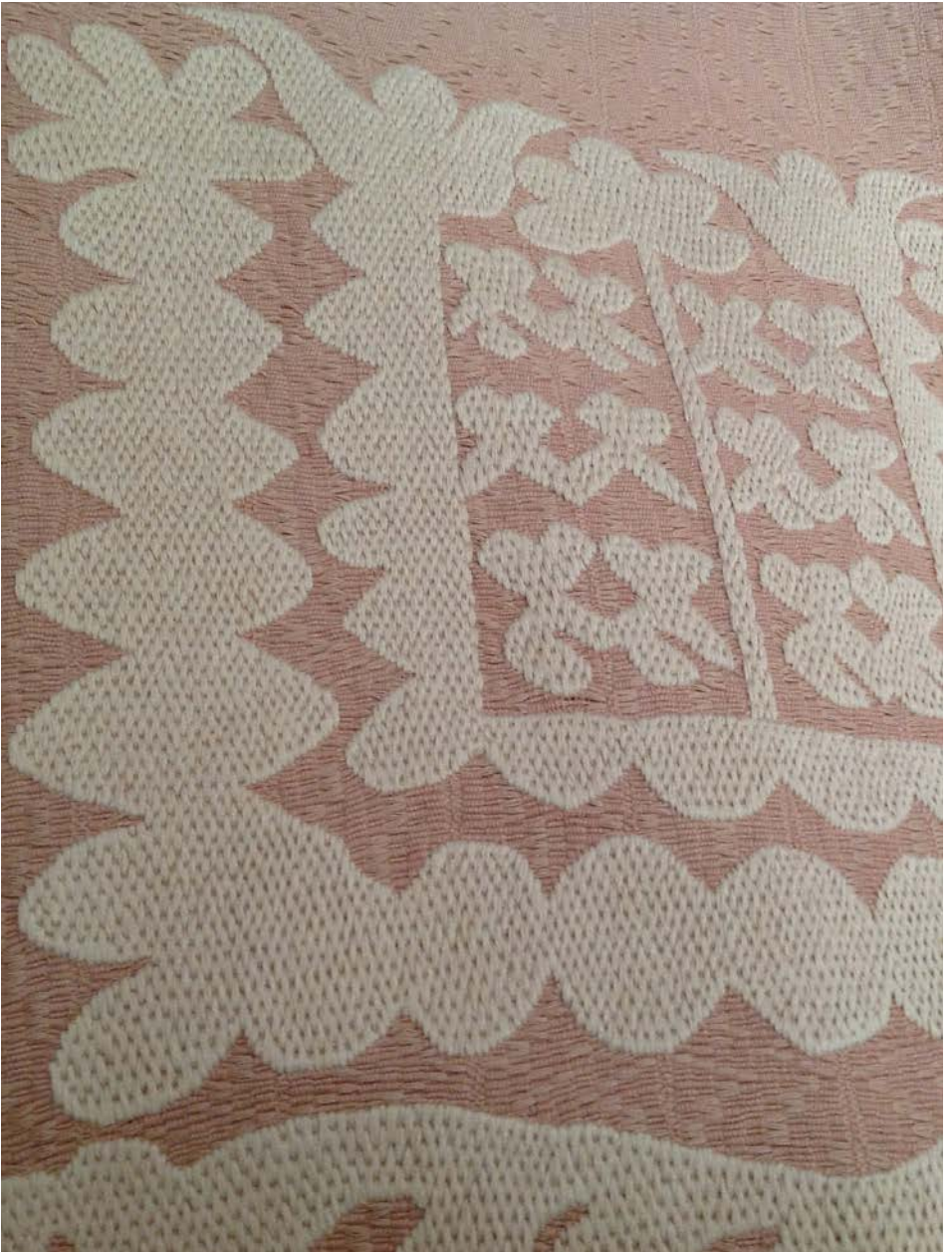
This collection will bear witness not only to a technical repertoire, but also to the innovation brought to the compositions, to the way of appropriating traditional designs, to a space of freedom linked to creation.

Each project is always a new adventure that allows you to evolve, discover and learn.

### **DG: What are your next projects?**

**BP:** An exhibition on Moroccan embroidery with the Museum of Angoulême (France) which owns the Prosper Ricard collection and will be invited to the Yves Saint Laurent Museum in Marrakech, for which we will have to provide some embroidered pieces. And this embroidery collection, on which we are still working, which will be a repertoire of the different urban embroideries that we master but also the demonstration of other interpretations of this Art. Collaborations with Artists and exclusive requests.





**Figure 6.** Brigitte Perkins/Atelier Tadert Tibtirine, Tetouan embroidery enlarged. Photo by Brigitte Perkins.



**Figure 7.** Collaboration with the ShareDesign project. Photo by Brigitte Perkins.



**Figure 8.** Collaboration with the ShareDesign project. Photo by Brigitte Perkins.