

Designer Jhane Barnes Weaves Math and Sustainability Throughout a Successful Career

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By Valerie Dennis Craven (/authors/authorid/16)

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Although a career in fashion and design might not have been Jhane Barnes' first choice when deciding what to pursue in college, it was the obvious choice for her high school teachers. Her successful career that spans over four decades



started when three teachers encouraged her to take a different path than the one she envisioned for herself at the time.

When Barnes' teacher for her clothing class offered to take her to Europe with a college course the teacher was leading, Barnes realized that's what she wanted to do. From there, she moved from Maryland to attend the Fashion Institute of Technology (FIT) in New York.

(Photo: Jhane Barnes. Credit: Will Strawser.)

“It’s amazing having three teachers pushing me where to go,” Barnes recalls. “I’m a reluctant fashion student. It wasn’t my first choice.”

Barnes went to New York, and in her last semester at FIT, she was chosen to participate in a fashion show for industry press, retailers and manufacturers. She showed her menswear collection, and it was well received.

Following the show, she fielded phone calls from retailers wanting to buy her clothes. Because [Barnes \(https://www.interiorsandsources.com/article-details/articleid/17778/title/jhane-barnes-\)](https://www.interiorsandsources.com/article-details/articleid/17778/title/jhane-barnes-) was a student and didn’t produce the clothes, she took their contact information and went to her biology professor, asking for a \$5,000 loan to be able to create clothes to fulfill requests.

Jhane Barnes ‘Wanted to Change Menswear’

From that experience in 1976, a business and career was born.

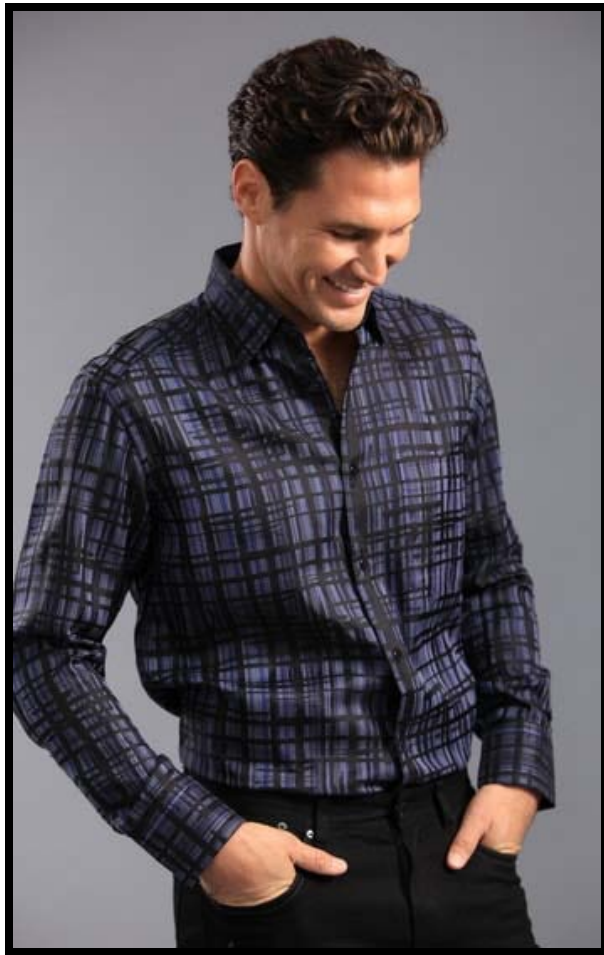
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Barnes started by buying leftover fabrics from the '50s for her menswear line because “they were creative fabrics and good quality,” she says.

She went door-to-door to small retailers with her trunk full of clothes, showing them what she could produce. Once she got her first order, she searched for a factory that would make them, paying the owners once she got paid from the retailer.

From there she got what she calls “several breaks” from the right people who noticed her clothes.

“What made my career is that I designed my fabrics from scratch. It was unusual and modern,” Barnes says. “I hated the way men dressed; suits were boring. I wanted to change



menswear.”

Some of her earliest customers include musicians John Lennon, Paul Simon, Peter Gabriel and John Oates.

In 1980 she won the Coty American Fashion Critics Award for menswear, followed in 1982 by the Council of Fashion Designers of America Menswear Design Award and Outstanding Designer of the Year for Menswear by Cutty Sark.

(Photo: Painty plaid shirt. Credit: Geraldo Somoza.)

“It was so much fun, the early times in my career,” Barnes says, recalling feeling both pride and shock when winning the awards.

Since her start in menswear, which she discontinued producing in 2013, she’s gone on to create a range of media, including [textiles \(https://www.interiorsandsources.com/article-details/articleid/22713/title/duvaltex-created-first-biodegradable-polyester\)](https://www.interiorsandsources.com/article-details/articleid/22713/title/duvaltex-created-first-biodegradable-polyester), furniture, eyewear and carpet.

“All my successful gigs were because someone wore my clothes,” Barnes explains. She feels that means the people she was working with really understood her and already knew what she did even before the partnership.



*(Photo: Scaler Eyewear stretch jacket embroidered shirt.
Credit: Geraldo Somoza.)*

Creating Products With Timeless Looks

Since 1996, Barnes has worked with Tarkett (then Collins & Aikman). Nat Harrison, then design director, was a fan of her clothes and familiar with her textiles, and thought they would translate well into carpeting, she says.

Always looking to do something innovative in her first collection of any line, Barnes launched in 1997 four designs in carpet tile that could be installed in different ways to create a pattern on the floor in a large repeat.

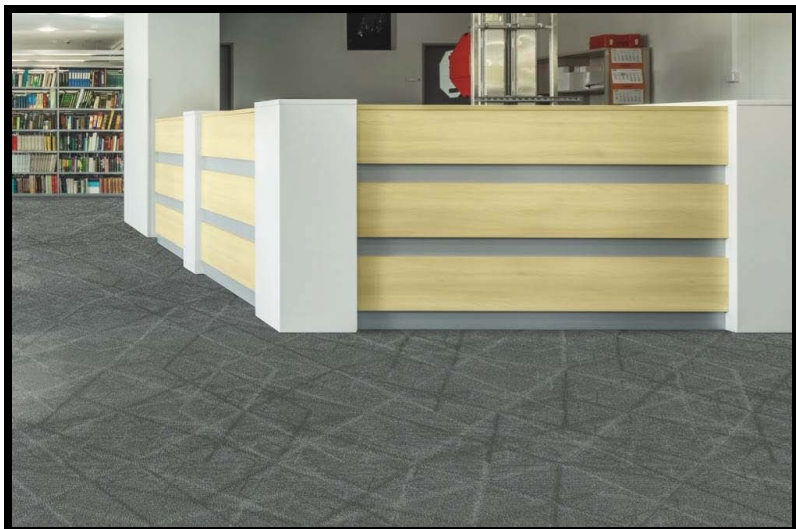


(Photo: TAR Interleave Hard Surface BoN. Credit: Tarkett North America.)

The tiles could be rotated either systematically using special software that she supplied or installed randomly, a system she has patented. This created less wasted carpet, which saved money and the landfill, and easier carpet installation.

[More highlights from Barnes: [Design Collaborative](https://www.interiorsandsources.com/article-details/articleid/9505/title/design-collaborative-a-perfect-equation) (<https://www.interiorsandsources.com/article-details/articleid/9505/title/design-collaborative-a-perfect-equation>)]

She continues with Tarkett today because she enjoys designing carpet and flooring. “Every time a new sample arrives, it’s like opening a present, and I remind myself that I used to say that about fashion,” she says.

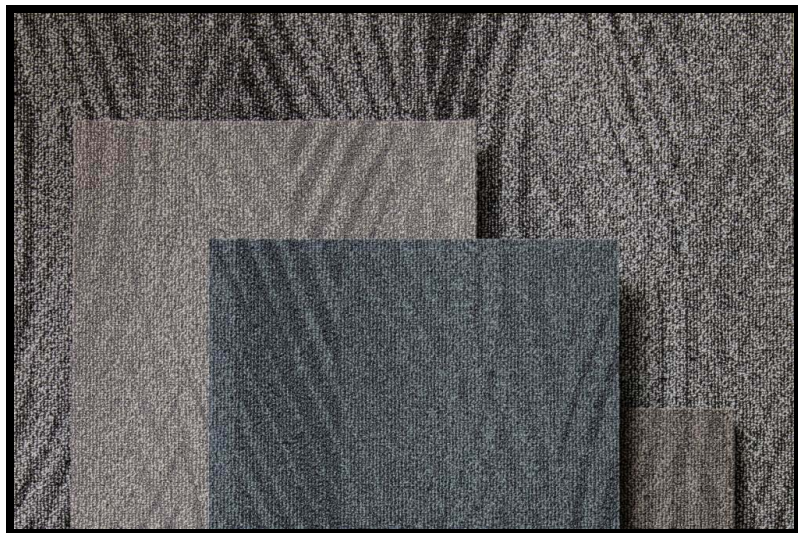


(Photo: Tarkett FlightPath StaticLift Powerbond. Credit: Tarkett North America.)

She sees commonalities between men's fashion and flooring.

"I've always believed in designing clothes for men that were not trendy but at the same time, quite unique. That makes them last longer since they don't go out of trend," Barnes notes. "Flooring should also last a long time since it's invasive to install and best for the environment the longer it's being used and appreciated. I want the customer to not tire of my designs and feel good looking at them for many years."

Because of carpet's longevity, Barnes relies on her own innovations and timeless colors and patterns versus trends. She strives to make clothing and carpet designs that draw people in to discover something they may not have initially seen.



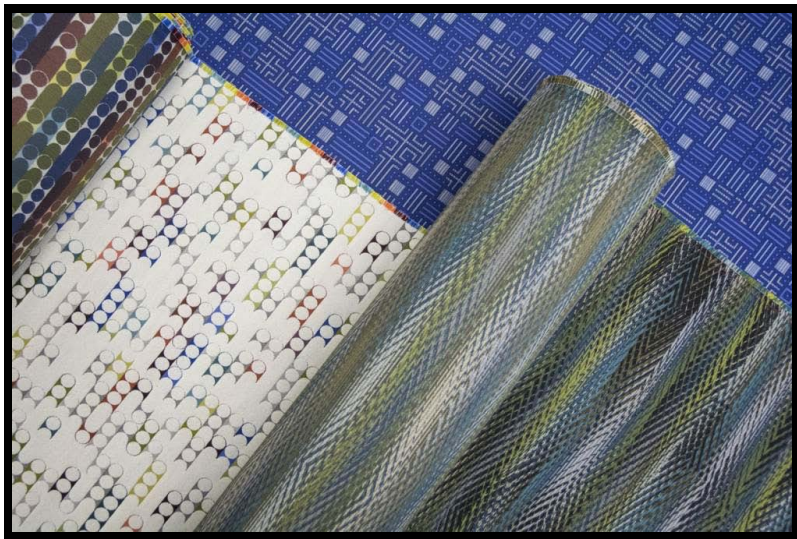
(Photo: Tarkett Interleave. Credit: Tarkett North America.)

In addition to creating carpet and flooring for Tarkett, Barnes has collaborated with Knoll on textiles, Bernhardt for furniture and Kenmark for eyewear, along with numerous clothing fashion partners.

Creating Patterns From Her Computer

One thing that sets Barnes apart from her contemporaries is her design process. She's always been interested in science, technology and designing fabric. Because of that, she began using computers and technology to create unique designs, starting with an Atari computer that operated a loom in the late '80s.

"It was really exciting. It made me feel like my possibilities [to design] were endless," she recalls. "I could make textiles that were more complex because the computer was holding all the information."



(Photo: Haywire Bacci Cornered for Anzea. Credit: Jhane Barnes.)

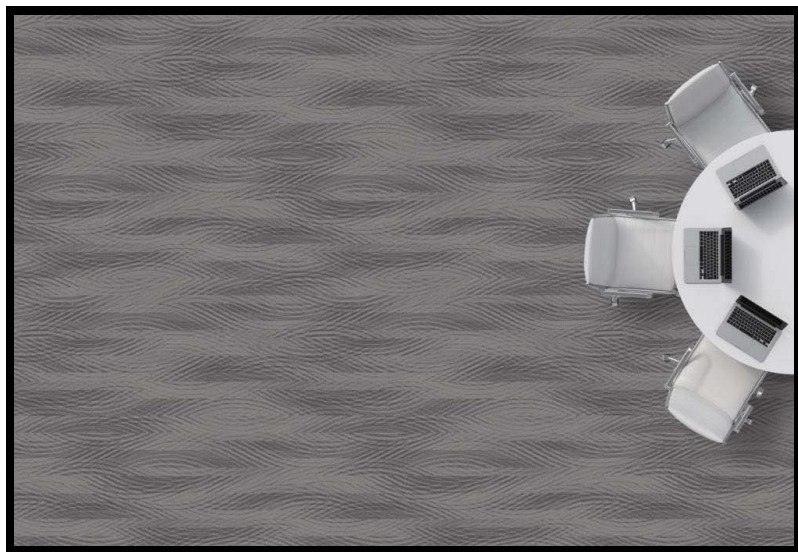
Barnes moved on from her Atari to a Mac in the early '90s, and met mathematician Bill Jones, who was generating patterns from algorithms via computer. They partnered along with software developer Dana Cartwright to form her “brain trust,” as she calls it. Cartwright wrote software tools that helped Barnes work with Jones’ algorithms.

With the software, the sky’s the limit as far as your imagination, Barnes says. “I would come up with an idea that I would dream or half draw, and they would figure out a way to facilitate it with mathematics,” she recalls. “It would help me do things a lot faster, and the better I got, the more I understood what the math could do.”

[Related: [Next-Generation Designers Offer Insight into Future of Design \(https://www.interiorsandsources.com/article-details/articleid/22711/title/next-generation-designers-offer-insight-future-design\)](https://www.interiorsandsources.com/article-details/articleid/22711/title/next-generation-designers-offer-insight-future-design)]

With the software and computer, Barnes is able to shift and manipulate the design easier, and the design is in repeat as she goes. “Nothing like this exists in the world,” she notes.

Barnes still uses the same software today and gets weekly updates. She saves all her design files to a library from which she can draw inspiration. In fact, she’s introducing something inspired from a shirt she made in 2008 that she re-discovered in her software library. And her favorite design for her 2020 carpet collection came from a vest she designed in 2013 for her final menswear collection.



(Photo: Interleave - twisted branch as Powerbond. Credit: Tarkett North America.)

Importance of Sustainability in Design

Barnes has been interested in sustainability (<https://www.interiorsandsources.com/article-details/articleid/22626/title/ofs-50-years-sustainability-neocon-2019>) in design her entire career. Over the years she has:

- Had multiple sustainable collections
- Re-used shipping boxes and packing material
- Used natural fibers in design
- Repurposed leftover yarn or fabric

Her charity of choice to support for a long time has been The Nature Conservancy (<https://www.nature.org/en-us/>). Sustainability was difficult to catch on in the early days, perhaps because it was before its time or wasn't a concern for her client base.



(Photo: TAR Interleave Savant lobby herring. Credit: Tarkett North America.)

Today, everyone expects sustainability in design, but we've only come so far, Barnes notes. "Everybody knows their work has to be sustainable, but we have to think about it in every way. People are talking about it in their work, but they aren't taking it home with them," she says. "It's been my passion my whole career. I want to do something for the environment first."

The
company
she
currently



collaborates with, Tarkett, has a longstanding dedication to sustainability. Tarkett has been following the principles of circular economy for over a decade, explains Roxane Spears, vice president of Sustainability for Tarkett North America.

"Through a focus on circular economy, our products are designed to consider every stage of the building lifecycle, from manufacturing to installation to maintenance to replacement. We were the first in the flooring industry to create a recycling program that reuses materials sourced both inside and outside the flooring industry," Spears says.

(Photo: SineEffect Modular Tree of Life. Credit: Tarkett North America.)

Designing for Pleasure

For someone who started her career as a “reluctant fashion student,” Barnes has had a varied career that includes fashion, design, sustainability, technology and collaboration, often overlapping. “When I worked in fashion, it was inevitable the carpet that year would be similar,” she says. “You might not recognize the design, but it would be created together.”

She’s stayed ahead of trends while remaining timeless in part because of all her different interests. Fashion moves faster than interiors, she says, so it helped her see what was to come for interiors.

Although she enjoyed her time creating menswear, she is happy working with Tarkett and flooring. “I only do things that bring me pleasure, and I’ve been fortunate that making a good living coincided with that.”

Read next: [Radical Innovation 2019 Finalists for Futuristic Hotel Concepts](https://www.interiorsandsources.com/article-details/articleid/22717/title/radical-innovation-2019-finalists-futuristic-hotel) (<https://www.interiorsandsources.com/article-details/articleid/22717/title/radical-innovation-2019-finalists-futuristic-hotel>).

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Valerie is an experienced journalist with an emphasis in the B2B market. As the director of editorial services and editor-in-chief of interiors+sources, she leads the editorial staff in producing the monthly print magazine, coordinates topics for the newsletter and online, and contributes relevant content.

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