

Darshana Shilpi Rouget, founder of art platform Alba Amicorum, tells Sarah Maisey how her handmade scarves are helping to bring a community together

A silk scarf can mean different things to different people. For Darshana Shilpi Rouget, it meant a platform to connect with fellow artists and a new way to show the work of her late father, artist Babuji Rajendra Shilpi, to the world. Shilpi Rouget discovered all of this almost by accident, when she relocated to London with her husband after two decades in New York, and found herself without an embedded artistic community for the first time.

“My parents were artists, so we grew up with artists that would come and visit – designers, musicians, dancers. So it is in my DNA, and I realised how much I missed it when I moved to London. Art is my life, it has always been that way, I can’t separate that from me. For the first time, I was removed from the creative environment. It was like being on an island.”

Shilpi Rouget also realised that leaving behind a career as art director for the likes of Tiffany and Cartier offered an opportunity to resurrect her own artistic ambitions, which had been sidelined along the way. “I wanted to reconnect with my fine art background and find a platform where I could work with all my creative friends and artists, to learn from them and collaborate.”

That platform is Alba Amicorum, which officially launched in October. Named for a long-forgotten 16th century practice of inviting others to contribute to personal journals filled with poems and illustrations, it is a moniker built around the idea of sharing.

Alba Amicorum is open to artists of every imaginable discipline, but Shilpi Rouget needed one unifying product that everyone could contribute to. The solution, it transpires, was surprisingly simple. “I was thinking of a common ground for all the multidisciplinary artists and I thought of the scarf. It is a canvas of sorts, and the wearer continues with the creativity,” she says.

Worn next to the skin, scarves are both personal and a form of self expression. Endlessly adaptable, the versatile accessory can be worn either carelessly bunched under a jacket, artfully knotted at the neck or habitually hung over a shoulder, with each style revealing facets of the owner’s personality. For her project, by enlarging the size of the silk square to 136 centimetres, Shilpi Rouget created a blank slate to show off almost any artwork.



Above, a scarf created with the Man Ray Trust
Below, the Autumn's Rediton I silk chiffon scarf

She began by selecting 12 designs by four artists. One was her own father, Rajendra Shilpi. Translating his paintings on to silken scarves offered a new way to connect with his work. “My father passed about five years ago; his work is no longer available to buy in India and a lot of my Indian clients bought his scarves and framed them, as they always wanted to own his work,” Shilpi Rouget explains.

Case in point, the Indian Carousel silk scarf is a fabric translation of a 1943 gouache original that depicts India prior to independence, in a horizontal narrative that echoes Buddhist and Jain paintings.

Despite being such a profoundly personal experience, part of the joy of being able to bring her father’s creations to a new audience was having his blessing to use his work in a way he had never imagined. “He died from dementia, but the nice thing is that I was able to ask him if I could use his work when he was still there, and he was very happy for me to do it.”

While Alba Amicorum was initially slated to launch in early 2020, the first attempt was felled by the arrival of Covid-19. “The timing was not so great. I literally had a launch party and moved into my new studio, and then the pandemic happened so I had to cancel everything. I signed a commercial lease,

renovated [the space] and then, as I was about to open, I shut down for two years. So yes, it’s been hard,” she says.

Now finally up and running, Alba Amicorum has already released several collections, including four new designs that arose from a chance meeting at a dinner party. “The recent collaboration was with the Man Ray Trust,” Shilpi Rouget explains. “We have been working with his niece, Stephanie Browner, in New York. I met her at a dinner and a week later she called me saying: ‘I have been on your website and really love what you are doing, would you be interested in doing something with Man Ray’s work?’ I couldn’t believe it. He has been one of my favourite photographers, even as an art student. It has been absolutely amazing for me.”

From a delicate abstract pattern in shifting tones of grey to an image of painted faces in bold blues, reds and oranges, the four designs by the Dada and Surrealist photographer, painter and filmmaker Man Ray are, it turns out, beautifully suited to being featured on scarves.

With a stable of 11 artists creating designs for Alba Amicorum, the results are beautifully varied. One piece is covered in words, as if written on an old-



The wearable canvas

over, we talk. I can also arrange for studio visits with other artists if they are interested.” Taking this time is crucial because, she says, “there is a story behind everything single one of the scarves”.

And the storytelling is not just limited to the images. Produced in very small numbers, at most 60 pieces per design, but more usually only 20, each scarf is sold with a numbered certificate and is wrapped in zero waste packaging.

“The box is embossed and is made from wheat husk that is normally discarded. The scarves come in a cotton pouch, so you can even carry it in your bag without it catching, and the tag is paper you can plant to grow wild flowers. Our shopping bags are made of canvas, like a blank canvas that starts its new journey,” she explains.

For the scarves themselves, only natural materials are used, such as silk, cashmere and modal, a cellulose made from beech wood pulp, which allows the team to tailor each image to the best material. “We choose the fabric depending on the artwork, because different things reproduce better on different surfaces,” Shilpi Rouget says.

To create the images, she relies on a small, family run business in Lake Como, where each scarf is digitally printed. “They work for a lot of the big houses as well, and I am really grateful they are happy to take on a small atelier like mine. And they do such an incredible job, getting the colours 99 per cent accurate. It’s quite an amazing find for me.”

While the scarves are priced at between Dh1,970 and Dh4,340, putting them on a par with scarves from the major fashion houses, the tiny number produced means this is hardly a get-rich-quick scheme. Shilpi Rouget laughs at the irony of her own husband being a financier. “The funny things is most artists work for the passion. I was talking with my friends, and we were all so excited, discussing what we could do. I hung up and my husband asked: ‘Great, but did you discuss money?’ None of us had discussed money at all,” she tells me.

This is unsurprising, as Alba Amicorum is clearly an endeavour of the heart. “Nothing about this project is easy. So we might as well go all out. It is important to me because it’s really is about doing things consciously. Not just doing things season after season, but about collecting, about careful consideration about what you put out there.” ■