

cover

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X ANNA MULLER

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LIFE'S WARP AND WEFT

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On the 25th anniversary of the much-respected New York brand Warp & Weft, **Lucy Upward** talks to company founder Michael Mandapati

In my discussion with Michael Mandapati of Warp & Weft he states that this is the first serious interview he has ever given. 'I never thought I had anything much to really say,' he explains. 'I just make beautiful rugs.'

Many people might consider his reticence unnecessary, including Damien Clark of rug retail brand Black Sheep Unique. On a recent COVER Conversations podcast with Damien, I asked who had been a big influence on him and his company: his first reply was 'Michael Mandapati'.

Maybe we are not always aware of the impact our passion for a subject has on other people, but what a joy to find out. I felt it was time to speak on record to the man who created the highly respected (and often copied) brand of Warp & Weft.

Here Michael talks about how the the passion started and what keeps it going after twenty-five years at the top of the industry, and he offers a poem on rugs that he wrote back in 2023. In our COVER Conversations podcast now online, we talk more about his ongoing collections and ideas of creating a legacy.

How did you come to rugs, and what kept you hooked?

In the summer of 1986, while still in college and searching for a temporary job, I came across an ad in the *Hindustan Times*. A carpet shop was looking for a sales assistant and, luckily, the showroom was located inside a five-star hotel just a short walk from my home.

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01 *Via*, Crossroads collection, Warp & Weft

02 *Veranda*, Warp & Weft, a company classic

03 Michael Mandapati in his office at the Warp & Weft New York showroom

From the moment I stepped inside, I was captivated. The intricate, hand-knotted silk carpets from Kashmir weren't just decorative, they were stories woven in silk, with each knot quietly testifying to centuries of tradition. I had never seen anything quite like them.

That initial fascination soon turned into a deeper curiosity. A few months later, I bought my first book on the subject—*The Oriental Carpet*, by P. R. J. Ford. It was through that book that I first learned the meaning of terms like warp and weft, and began to

understand the craftsmanship behind each rug. I was hooked. What started as a summer job became the beginning of a lifelong journey into the world of woven art.

When you started Warp & Weft twenty-five years ago, what was your biggest goal?

When I founded the gallery in 2001, my goal was simple: to sell the most beautiful antique carpets and, over time, create a few of my own—pieces inspired by the designs I loved most. Early on, I was deeply influenced by the Arts and Crafts rug designs of William Morris and C. F. A. Voysey, as well as by Ushak, Ziegler and Agra carpets.

But everything changed in 2004, when I discovered the extraordinary quilts of Gee's Bend, crafted by African-

American women in Alabama. That moment has guided my work ever since. It's been an incredible journey shaped by history, artistry and the enduring power of design.

What do you see as being the secret to Warp & Weft's great success?

There's no secret to what we do. It's about a steady pursuit of simplicity, integrity and craftsmanship. For us, rug making is a lifelong learning process shaped by great design, beautiful materials and a profound respect for traditional craft. We're not chasing success as a destination. Instead, we focus on enjoying the journey, evolving with every rug we create.

Is there a secret formula to successful rug designing?

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I don't follow a specific formula. My years working with exceptional antique carpets have profoundly shaped my understanding of design and colour. Every rug we create is the result of thoughtful decisions, an ongoing conversation between past and present, heritage and personal expression.

How have you seen the rug requirements of customers change over the past twenty-five years?

The industry has changed significantly and continues to evolve in ways that are often unpredictable. I'd be lying if I said I know exactly what the future holds. Client needs and design trends have shifted towards more customisation, sustainability and a broader spectrum of aesthetics. But

our approach remains the same: listen carefully, adapt thoughtfully, and remain true to our sensibility.

Has any piece of advice about rugs or running a business stuck with you?

I've heard plenty of advice over the years, but what's guided me most is my own gut instinct. I've stayed true to making carpets with soul. That inner compass has never failed me. When something feels right, whether in design, material or collaboration, I follow that feeling.

What have collaborations brought to the brand?

For us, collaboration is about true synergy—when two like-minded people come together with mutual respect and shared curiosity. It allows me

04 *Fresco, Warp & Weft*

05 One of Michael Mandapati's framed Mazandaran kilims on the wall of his home

IMAGINE IF CARPETS COULD TALK

imagine the arguments and the conversations they must have heard
imagine the gossip and the chats that they had been privy to
imagine the good news and the bad news they listened to
imagine the anguish and happiness they must have witnessed
imagine the celebrations they were looking forward to being part of
imagine if they could express how much they loved it when the room was decorated around them
imagine the seasons changing in silence and generations of families that they have lived with
imagine how their warps and wefts felt when nobody was paying attention or ignoring them
imagine if they could tell their stories

*Michael Mandapati
July 2023*

to see through someone else's lens, understand their vision, and help bring it to life with integrity. These partnerships challenge and inspire us, often resulting in work that feels richer, more layered and more meaningful than what we could achieve alone.

What kind of rugs do you have in your own home?

I have a Gerhard Richter-inspired abstract design that brings expressive energy. I also own a *Grid* piece from our Yabu Pushelberg collection, along with an antique Malayer runner. Additionally, I have a couple of Kia Sar kilims from Mazandaran province mounted as textile art. These pieces reflect my love for both contemporary expression and traditional craftsmanship.

How do you see the future of high-end, hand-knotted rugs?

I believe there will always be a demand for such carpets, especially within a discerning niche that values artistry, tradition and customisation. However, I am increasingly concerned about the future availability of skilled weavers. As younger generations move away from the craft and there are fewer incentives to sustain traditional weaving communities, this intricate skill set is at risk. Preserving and passing on this craft remains vital for its continued vitality and cultural significance.

Have you ever had a favourite rug, be it antique or contemporary?

There are many rugs I love, but *Veranda* from our Modern collection remains my favourite. It's one of my earliest designs and represents a milestone in my journey, both personally and professionally, and embodies the spirit of Warp & Weft. That rug reflects the soul of the brand and my enduring passion for creating pieces that speak deeply and last lifetimes.

www.warpandweft.com

The COVER Conversations podcast with Michael Mandapati is now online on Spotify and Soundcloud