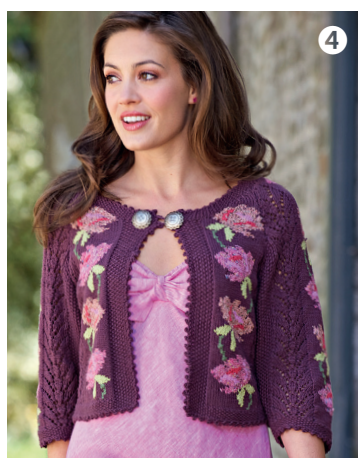


- ❶ 'Plume of Feathers' was inspired by Sasha's study of Bargello embroidery  
 ❷ The influence of William Morris shows in her 'Argyll Leaf' tank  
 ❸+❹ Geometric motifs are a recurring theme  
 ❺ 'Paeonia' is a winning blend of colourwork flowers and lace textures



# Meet Sasha Kagan

Beloved for her iconic colourwork handknits, the legendary Sasha Kagan reflects on her 40-year design career



**SASHA KAGAN** is one of the treasures of the British handknit scene. She has been bringing us her inspiring, colourful designs for more than 40 years, and we're lucky to have worked with her since the early days of *The Knitter*. We chatted to her about her inspiration and design influences, and how she creates such exquisite garments.

## When did you learn to knit?

"I was taught how to knit and crochet by my mother at the tender age of four. She came from a long line of textile enthusiasts;

her own mother 'took in dressmaking' to supplement the family income and she learnt the art of lampshade making as an apprentice at age 14. She could knit, crochet, embroider, smock, weave, tatt, patchwork and make the most exquisite confections to cast subtle light in any room. "As an only child (brought up in the days before television) I naturally absorbed these crafts at my mother's knee. I was destined to carry on the family's obsession with making beautiful textiles.

"Perhaps the 'Flower Girl' sweater I designed for Issue 62 of *The Knitter* is an echo of my childhood self, as I was always kitted out in folk-inspired knits!"

## When did you start designing for yourself, and what was the first pattern you released?

"I first started designing for myself as a teenager; making my own versions of keyhole shift dresses, bell-bottom sailor trousers and 1940s-inspired Fair Isle handknits. At art school, I studied painting and printmaking, yet I spent my colour and design classes creating block-printed fabric, screen prints and etchings featuring all-over repeating patterns, and my clay pots were covered in geometric designs.

"My first published knitting pattern was a 'Bib Topper' for Twilley's in 1971; I supplemented my student grant while at the Royal College of Art by selling



# Interview

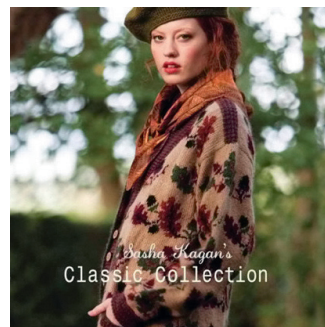
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1 'Scotty Dog', an iconic design, reappears in *The Classic Collection* 2 'Baby Rose' was based on a 1930s Liberty print 3 Sasha's most famous patterns were reprinted in her 2011 book 4+5 'Violets' and 'Autumn Leaves' show Sasha's love of nature 6 'Heligan' mixes knitting and crochet



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6

designs to this supportive yarn company. At this stage my knits used the Fair Isle technique and I played around with geometric designs using a limited colour palette. The 'Maurice' slipover from Issue 51 was inspired from this period when I was exploring three-dimensional shapes in patchwork; also the 'Plume of Feathers' from Issue 59 evolved from Bargello embroidery at this time."

## Who are your design heroes?

"William Morris is my number one design hero – his affinity with the natural world and his ability to translate flowers and leaves into a magic, balanced, harmonious fabric never cease to amaze me. The men's 'Argyll Leaf' slipover from Issue 10 pays homage to his sinuous leaf shapes and the subtle reversed stocking stitch diamond grid emphasizes the geometric motif construction. 'Paeonia' from Issue 19

features a twisting ribbon of flowers interspersed with panels of lace. The wonderful thing about knitting is that you can have a solid colour between motifs and add interesting textures. My 'Iris' kimono from Issue 48 provides another example of a flower ribbon with a three-colour slip stitch texture used as a background.

"Coco Chanel is my heroine for her smart, pared-down silhouettes and classic shapes. The 'Hanami' jacket from Issue 58 has a Chanel-inspired cropped jacket body with a striking print of Oriental blossoms framed with bi-colour ribbed borders and contrasting facings. The 'Autumn Leaves' cape from Issue 63 would sit nicely over a Chanel tweed suit, while my 'Heligan' cardigan from Issue 46 uses a blurred moss stitch stripe for a firm textured body and a crochet trim as a contrasting border.

"As far as pattern is concerned, I would champion all the unknown fabric designers

of quality from the 1930s and 1940s. The yoke and borders of my 'Baby Rose' coat from Issue 6 were taken from a vintage Liberty print fabric of that period and 'Violets' from Issue 50 is in the same vein. In the knitting world, I admire Elizabeth Zimmermann for her spirit, and my good friends Kaffe Fassett and Jean Moss.

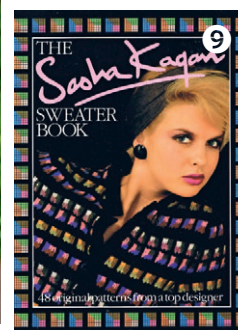
## You are famous for your incredible use of colour and pattern. Where do you turn to for inspiration for those vivid colour palettes and motifs?

"Good question. I think that the colour comes instinctively to me, helped by my training as a painter and seeing how one colour vibrates with another. My knitted designs try to capture this excitement, and with the added ingredient of texture and drape I am aiming to create pieces that the knitter will not only enjoy making but also have pleasure wearing for years to come.





⑦ 'Hanami' is Sasha's homage to Coco Chanel ⑧ 'Carinthia' fuses many folk art themes ⑨ Her first book, from 1984 ⑩ Sasha toured the UK to mark 40 years in design ⑪ 'Flower Girl' is so playful ⑫ 'Maurice' from Issue 51



"The motifs come from many sources, I have pet themes, each one clamouring for attention and there is never enough time to do them all justice! I have a love of folk art and a desire to carry on traditional patterns with a modern twist. 'Carinthia' from Issue 9 is a good illustration – a fusion of mid-European embroidery for the border, Alpine ski spots for the body, decorative coins from China and pompoms from Nepal. 'Gypsy Rose' from page 70 of this issue is a reworking of barge art.

"I live in a beautiful part of Mid-Wales, so I have only to go outside for inspiration; flowers and leaves have played a major role in my design repertoire since my first book, *The Sasha Kagan Sweater Book*, (Dorling Kindersley) in 1984.

"Geometric patterns are an intrinsic component to every design, as for me the placing of motifs must be balanced and pleasing to the eye. Actual geometric

motifs offer the opportunity to explore ethnic patterns as in my 'Lotus' cushion from Issue 21 and 'Waves' from Issue 3.

"I also love to create witty, whimsical and lighthearted designs that appeal to the inner child in all of us."

**Do you have a favourite design from your extensive portfolio?**

"I think that some of my favourite designs have a life of their own as I find myself drawn to rework them in new colour ways and yarn qualities. 'Scotty Dog' from my first book reappeared in my 2011 book *The Classic Collection* (£19.99, GMC Publications), as did 'Pansy'. My favourite leaf design is 'Hawthorn' from *Country Inspiration* (Taunton Press, 2000).

**You recently celebrated 40 years of textile design with a gallery tour and book, *The Classic Collection*. What would you say**

**were the highlights of your career so far – and what are your plans for the future?**

"It was wonderful to be on tour with my retrospective exhibition, as I met up with many appreciative knitting friends along the way, and putting the book together was great fun. However, the highlight of my career has to be my exhibition at the Victoria & Albert Museum in 2000–2001.

"My plans include a long-awaited reprint of *Country Inspiration – Knitwear for all Seasons*, and just one more beautiful book of designs. Watch this space..."

Knitting kits and signed copies of Sasha's books are available from her studio. For details, visit [www.sashakagan.co.uk](http://www.sashakagan.co.uk) or call 01686 430436. Meet Sasha in Devon on April 10–11 ([www.spinayarndevon.co.uk](http://www.spinayarndevon.co.uk), 01626 836203) and at Wonderwool on April 26–27 ([www.wonderwoolwales.co.uk](http://www.wonderwoolwales.co.uk), 01938 820 495)