

The Classic Collection



Ivy hooded coat. The Collection

WORLDWIDE DESIGNER AND AUTHOR SASHA KAGAN TAKES TIME OUT FROM HER BUSY SCHEDULE TO TALK TO **KNIT** ABOUT HER POPULAR DESIGNS AND HER EVER-EXPANDING BUSINESS

Sasha Kagan is mother to four children and grandmother to five. She's lucky, she says, to live in a beautiful, unspoilt valley in Mid Wales, where she looks after 13 acres of land, on which she grows organic vegetables and runs her textile design studio. We asked the renowned designer of vibrant knits with a distinctive, handmade style, when she mastered the craft itself?

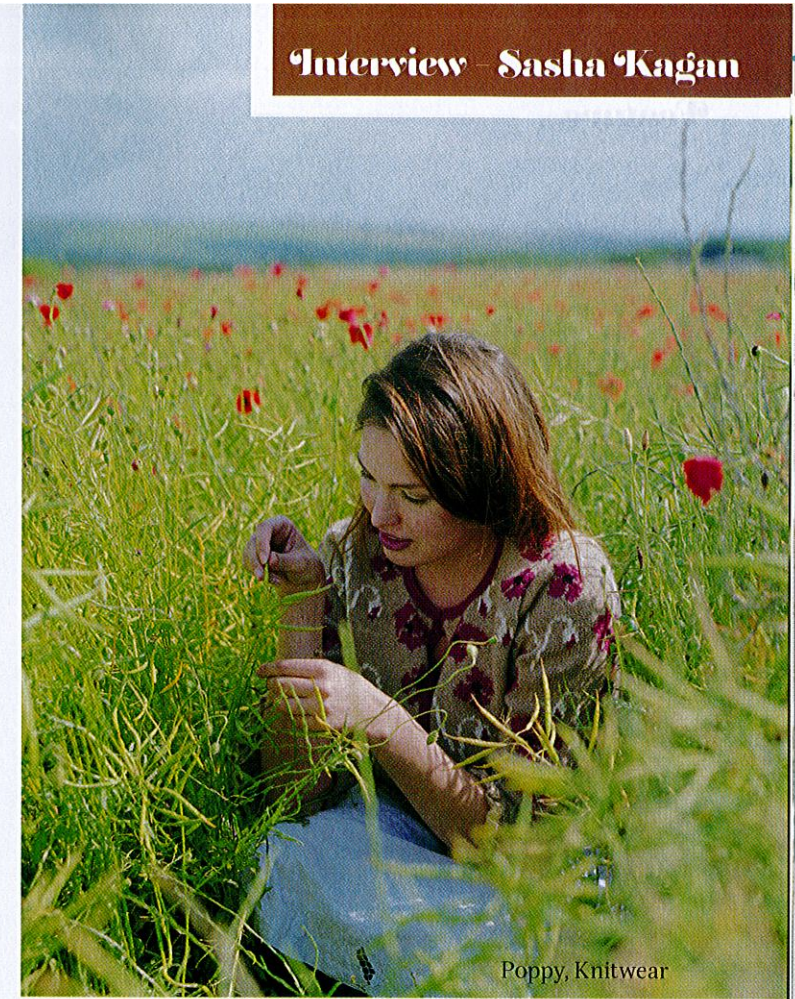
"I learnt to knit at the age of three or four, from my mother and aunt," she tells **KNIT**. "I designed my first piece in 1969. I had won a prize at Art School and spent the money on Jaeger wool from John Lewis. In my new book *The Classic Collection*, I used this cardigan as an early example of Memphis-influenced design."

We are amazed that Sasha has been designing knitwear for four decades. How did it all begin, we wonder? "A set of serendipitous circumstances set me on my path," she tells us. "A friend of mine had a shop in Carnaby Street called *Hung on You* selling Liberty print shirts and he had commissioned me to design gilets and cardigans for the store.

But knit design wasn't Sasha Kagan's original vocation - in fact, she trained as a painter and printmaker. So what made her change track?

"I had been teaching printmaking two days a week at an art school 200 miles away from my home in Wales," she says, "But after the birth of my second child, the travelling became impossible. My hand knit business was beginning to take off, so I decided to give up teaching and concentrate on a career in textiles."

Good call, as it turned out! It was after moving to Wales in 1972, that Sasha developed her interest in textiles. "As my husband and I were both self employed, we could take turns looking after the children and building up the business - as well as doing up the ruinous old farmhouse and growing vegetables."



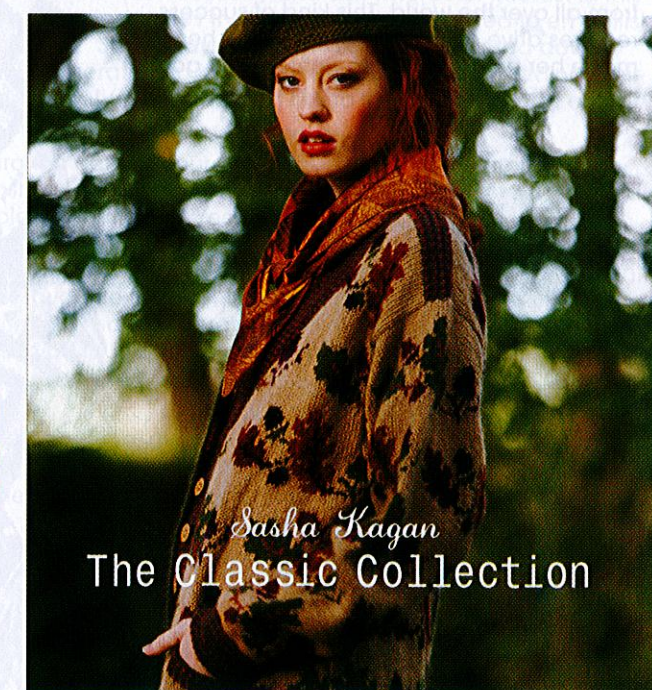
Poppy, Knitwear

Sasha designs two collections yearly. How does she find the time? "I tend to follow ideas through from one collection to another, so that often a design will develop experimentally and almost have a life of its own. Yarn availability and access to good colours is also a driving factor. Basically, I aim to design very wearable classic pieces that will stand the test of time, wardrobe staples that become like friends."

Despite a hectic schedule, she still makes time for life-enhancing pleasures, enjoying yoga, country walks, theatre, cinema, concerts, festivals, dancing, art galleries and entertaining her grandchildren. And that's not to mention writing her published works, which we ask her about now.



Nautical, Knitwear

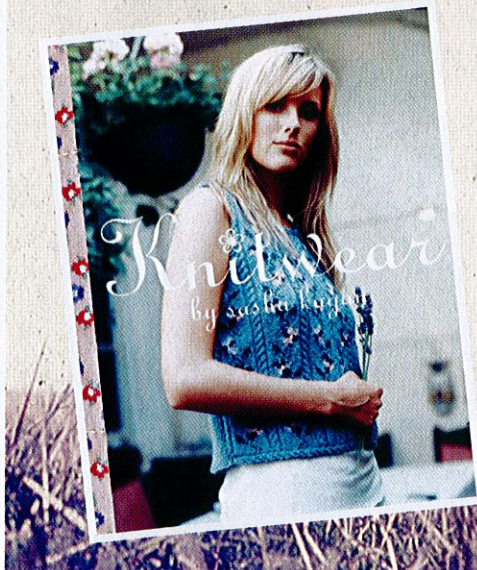
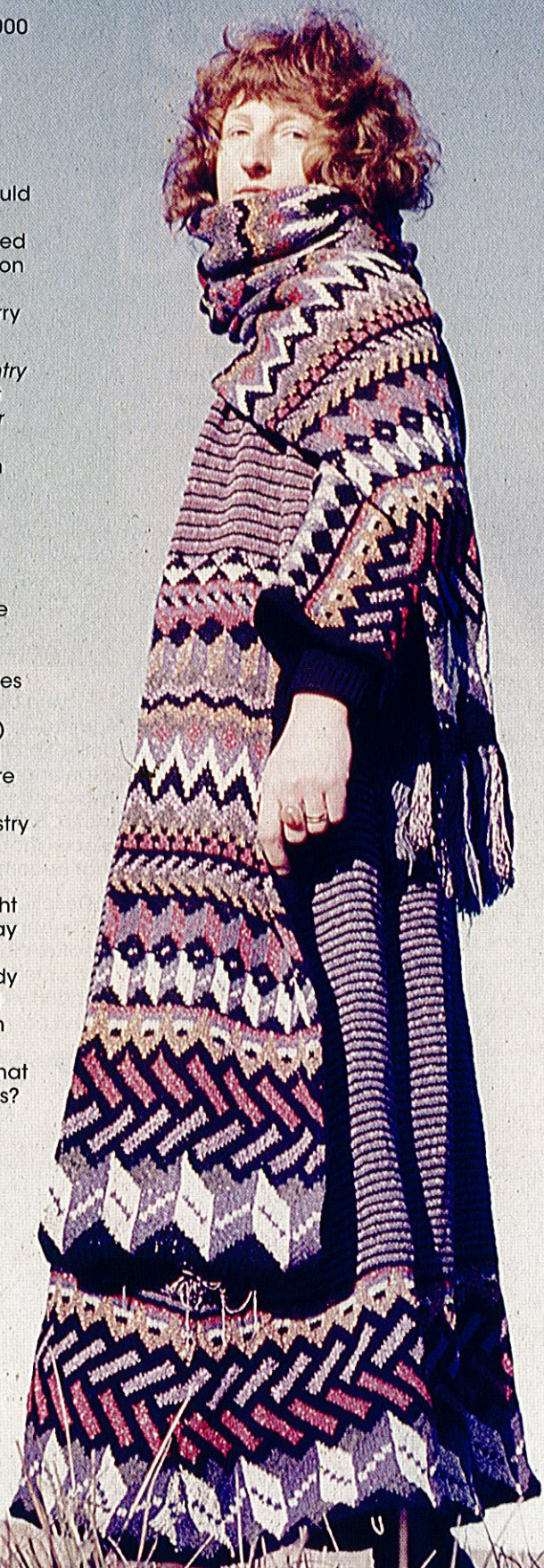


Sasha Kagan
The Classic Collection

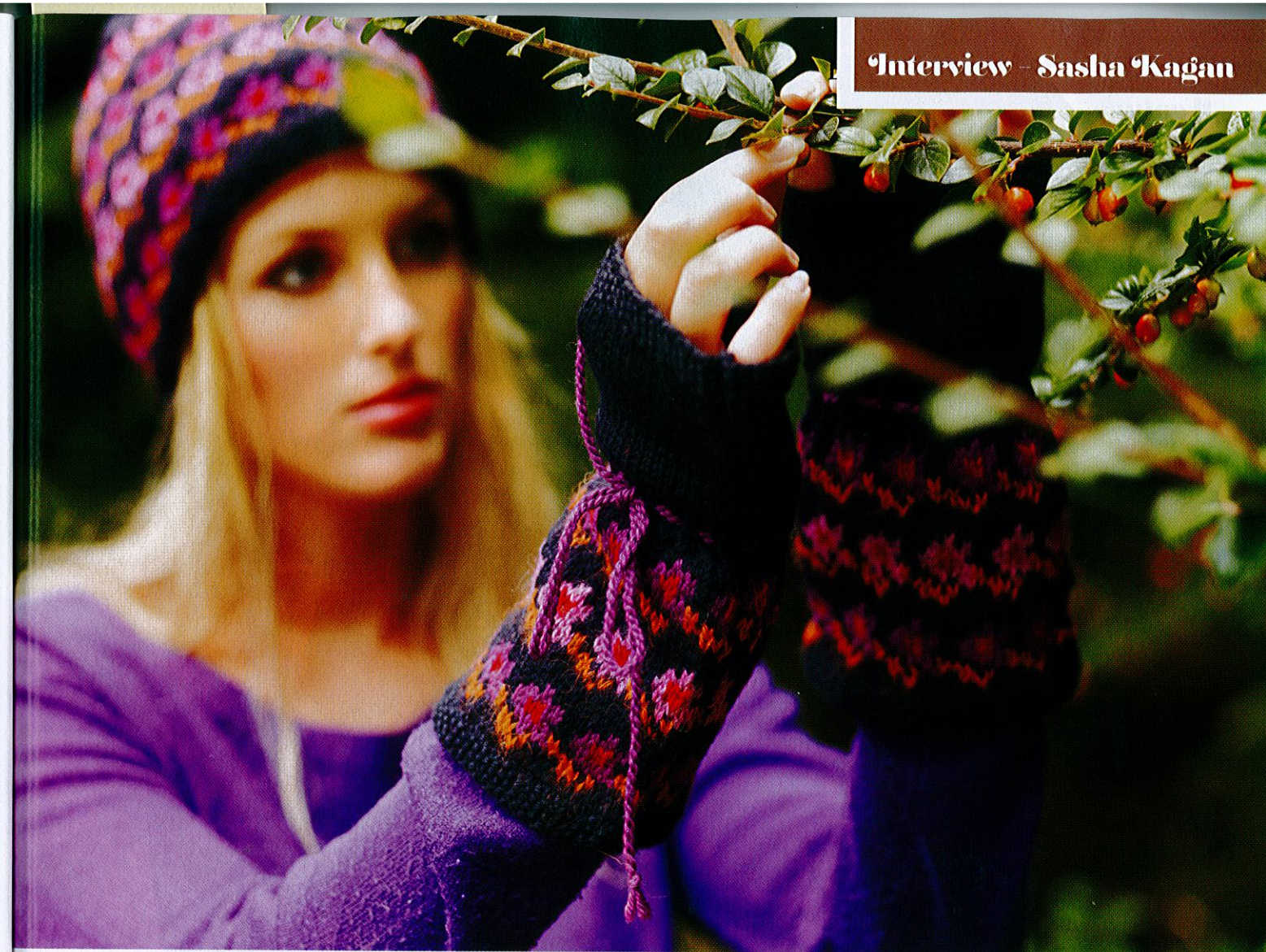
"My first book *The Sasha Kagan Sweater Book* was published in 1984, sold over 100,000 copies and was reprinted several times. Its colourful, witty designs captured the mood of the times and made a big impact on the knitting fraternity," she says. "Three years later, I brought out *Sasha Kagan's Big and Little Sweater Book* with a new collection of versatile designs for all the family, which could be knitted in sizes ranging from toddler to grandpa. *Sasha's Flower Book*, commissioned by Rowan Yarns, followed in 1989, a collection of very feminine designs using wool/silk blends, fine cotton, chenilles' and a mulberry silk.

"In 2000, I authored *Sasha Kagan's Country Inspiration* to coincide with my exhibition at the Victoria and Albert Museum. *Knitting for Beginners* was published in 1995 - I wrote this book to encourage the next generation to take up the craft of hand knitting. This, my first 'how to' book has been printed in six languages. *Crochet Inspiration* was published in 2007. It contains 200 crochet swatches and 13 projects, all with my signature colour sense. In 2010, it also came out in paperback. Next was *Knitwear* in 2008, a compilation of designs which had previously been commissioned by magazines and yarn companies. My latest book *The Classic Collection* came out last year (2011) to coincide with my retrospective exhibition *My Life in Textiles*. The book culls 20 signature pieces from the past four decades of my design career and contains essays by industry professionals which place my work in a historical and cultural context."

Whew! That's a lifetime's achievement right there. Sasha's business has come a long way from its beginnings back in 1974, when she had just four outworkers. Progress was steady and by 1980, the number of outworkers had increased to 130 and orders were coming in from all over the world. This kind of success requires drive and lots of it. We asked her what made her push so hard to achieve her goals?



Sasha Kagan wearing a design by Silver Design, 1973



ABOVE: Bavarian flower beanie & fingerless gloves, *The Classic Collection*

BELOW: Valentine, *Knitwear*

"I was lucky in that I began my business at the right time," she says. "The public was tired of plain mass-produced, single-colour sweaters and the zeitgeist was for hand-knitted pieces, full of colour and character. My American agent, Ann Stirling, put me on the fashion map by getting orders from high-end department stores such as Henri Bedel, Bergdorf Goodman, and Betsi Bunki Nini in New York. My cottage industry expanded to accommodate this volume of production and I was lucky to be able to find such a team of dedicated hand knitters." In Sasha's opinion, creating a successful business requires "determination, survival, belief in the product." You should never take no for an answer, she adds.

We've noticed that one of her chosen themes is folkloric and ask where her interest in this originates? "I feel that in craft-based folk design lies the essence of man's need to embellish and beautify," Sasha says. "Folk traditions are passed down from one generation to the next, with each artisan adding their own interpretation of a theme. I like to feel that I am part of that tradition."

Inspiration can, of course, come from all manner of sources. Has Sasha's experience on painting and print-making provided valuable inspiration? "Yes, my prints and paintings were all about making rhythms, repeating patterns, colour combinations and positive and negative shapes into a harmonious statement." She has favourite themes, too. "Leaves and flowers are my favourite," she says. "There's an infinite variety of colours and shapes to be found in the countryside."

Even so, coming up with fresh and vital designs year after year surely can't be easy - and yet this is what Sasha Kagan has been doing since the 1960's. "Design and creativity are in my blood" she explains, "and I think that over the years, my brain has become programmed into seeing design potential everywhere I look."

Sasha continues to mount exhibitions which are received well by press and visitors alike. We ask about her recent exhibition, *'My Life in Textiles'*.

"In 2009, I received a grant from European-funded project called 'Chance to Create' which gave me the headspace to

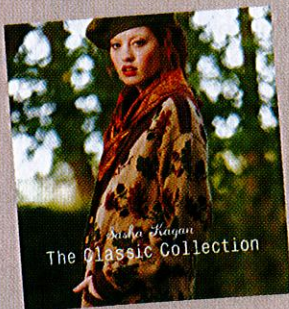


look back over the past four decades of design work and re-assess my career. I worked closely with Jill Oiercy, the exhibition curator and she helped me to separate my work into six themes: Geometric, Folkloric, Florals, Whitty and Whimsical, Leaves and Abstract. This was an epic task and we spent days going through boxes of swatches trying to find designs that spoke most clearly in each section. The exhibition showcases both garments and framed swatches and aims to elevate the craft of hand knitting to fine art status."

As for the future, Sasha is planning a long-overdue trip to India, "where I hope to immerse myself in the culture and textiles of the country. Other plans for the future include the design and build of an eco studio in the garden with solar panels and underfloor heating, trips with the grandchildren, adventures overseas and designing many more patterns for knit and crochet.

So what advice would someone who has achieved long-term success in the field of textile art give someone starting down a similar path? "Think very carefully," Sasha warns. "I am what is known as a 'lifestyle creative' By this, I mean that what I lack in financial terms, I gain in quality of life. This sometimes precarious way of living doesn't suit everyone!"

For more details, visit Sasha's website at www.sashakagan.co.uk



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Carinthia tunic,
The Classic Collection