

The science of creativity

By Bethany Bradsher

Jhane Barnes mixes logarithms and lapel lines to make her own distinct mark on the design world



Under the carpet: Textured carpets can capture the finishing accents and pull the look together

Far Right, Designer Jhane Barnes on the verge of greatness and pondering her next quest

Even as a teenager, Jhane Barnes understood this about herself: She had a drive to excel at anything she tried. And at that age, she set her sights on a career path that was ambitious for a young woman in the 1970s. She wanted to be a scientist — preferably, an astrophysicist.

But two high school teachers, working independently, derailed Barnes's plan. The first was a trigonometry teacher who gave her a "D" along with this honest assessment: She was unlikely to be more than an average scientist. The second was a teacher in an experimental clothing design course who saw something extraordinary in Barnes, a gift that demanded to be encouraged.

Today Barnes, who got her start by sewing the uniforms for the high school band, is the owner and lead designer for Jhane Barnes, a company that makes more than \$100 million in sales each year. Barnes's conglomerate designs and sells menswear, eyeglasses, furniture, carpet and textiles, as well as special projects like the designing

of the Orlando Magic uniforms in 1998.

"I just want to design products that I like myself, and that I think are worth it and wonderful and creative," said Barnes, 49.

In an industry that can often be a slave to popular opinion, Barnes has tackled every aspect of her business with absolute individuality. And while those two teachers deserve some credit for pointing her in the direction of design, in a sense she has defied both of their expectations.

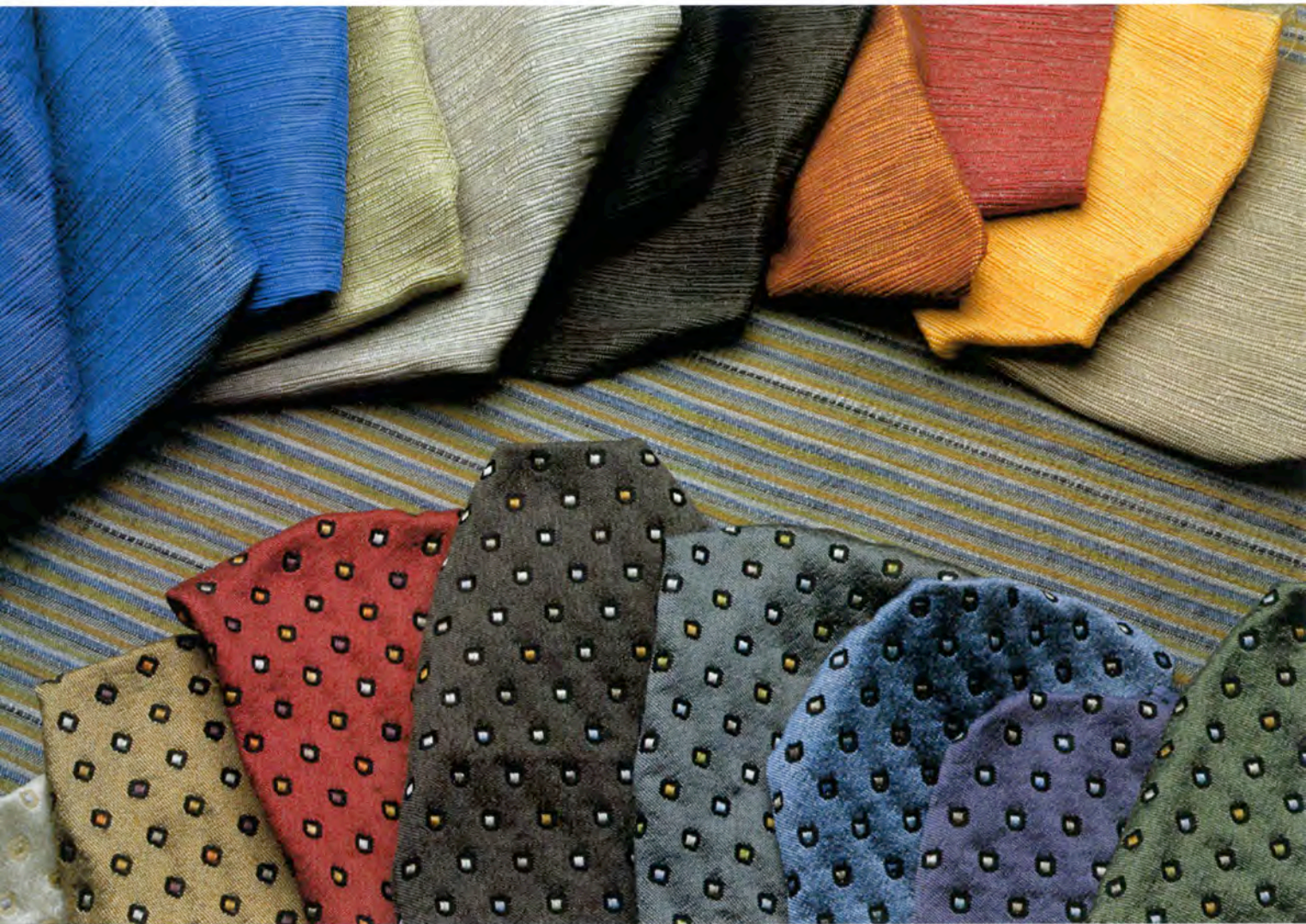
The trig teacher who dissuaded her from math and science might learn with surprise that his former pupil is cited in several math textbooks as a pioneer in computer-based design logarithms. She has also spoken to the mathematics faculty at Princeton University and employs two mathematicians on her staff.

And when the sewing teacher took Barnes to Europe to experience

«Continued on page 146»







*A look to fit anyone and
to fit in anywhere*

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the fashion scene in high school and then urged her to attend the Fashion Institute of Technology in New York, she probably never imagined that her ingénue would be designing mostly men’s clothing and eschewing many of the trappings of the fashion world.

She would rather sit at her computer and design than manage the company’s finances, though she is hands-on enough to be versed in every aspect of the operation. She wants to know about spreadsheets, the machines

that produce the clothing, the payroll procedure for her 20 employees.

“Everything I do in this business I do from scratch,” she said. “My

one problem is finance. I have a feeling for when the numbers are right. My kind of mathematics is to create art, it’s not to look at a balance sheet.”

It’s that left-brained approach to design – creating patterns with her own unique software – that makes her clothing so distinctive. On her monitor, she creates formulas, or “recipes,” for an intricate print that might go on a men’s shirt or a tie. As she designs, she might put her creation through different filters, to change its look. She will craft new patterns, then ask her mathematicians to write new code to generate them. Her design process – like Barnes herself – is an enigmatic union of creative energy and ordered precision.

“Some days, I just want to dream

uup ideas, and some days I just want to study the equipment that's going to make them," she said.

The Jhane Barnes empire was born in 1976, when she was still a student and a pair of her pants caught the eye of a retail executive. He ordered 1000 pair of pants, and Barnes had to borrow money from a teacher to pay her production costs. But that initial leap of faith has lead to nearly three decades of satisfaction from customers and increasing respect from inside the fashion industry. In her early days, Barnes lost some business after retailers learned she was a woman, and the rarity of female designers in the world of men's couture prompted her to add an "h" to her surname. Her name is pronounced "Jane," but the unusual spelling boosted sales by making her logo look more masculine.

Despite those early hurdles, Barnes started receiving accolades for her designs while she was still in her '20s. In 1980, she became the youngest person and the first woman to win the prestigious COTY award for menswear. She was also the first woman to receive the Council of Fashion Designers of America's Menswear Design Award, in 1981. And her interior designs have also earned her numerous industry awards.

One snapshot of Barnes's tendency to run ahead of the crowd is her approach to carpet design. Five years ago, Barnes and her staff developed an innovative concept that would allow carpet installers to take images of her custom carpet tiles and rearrange them with special computer software to create distinctive looks. The software would then give the carpet installer special instructions for laying out the tiles in the customer's home or office.


"I thought it was going to revolutionize carpet in America," she said.

The problem was, Barnes was too far ahead of her time. The computer capabilities of the carpet retailers

were insufficient to support the system, and initially her carpet tiles were too expensive, she said. But in February she met with the executives who sell her carpets, who assured her that the computerized design system was finally ready for implementation.

Even with her natural gifts for creativity and logic, Barnes's learning curve has been steep over the years, she said, especially in the area of running her own business. Four years ago she was still able to devote 80 percent of her time to designing and delegate the other aspects of the company to others. But recent upheaval – the loss of one company executive to cancer, the firing of another partner who was mishandling finances – has forced her to become more hands-on and to acknowledge the reality of being the place where the buck stops.

"If you're going to have your own company, it's like having a big family, and you're responsible for everybody," said Barnes, who brings in a yoga master every morning to lead a workout for her and her employees. "Your employees can leave it behind when they go home, but you never leave it behind. Is that acceptable to your life? Because if it's not, don't go into your own business.

"The most important thing is your people that work for you, and developing your culture, and making where you work a fun place. I insist that my people learn something new every day, because I believe we're on this planet to learn and to love, and that's it." 



Texture and design develop into unique and stylish fashion