

full circle



In the heady days of the 1960s, Maurice Kain fabrics symbolised the energy and verve of the era. Now, the brand is enjoying a second heyday, writes Belinda Smart.

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ONCE SEEN AS THE EPITOME of bold prints, textures and colours, New Zealand born fabric brand Maurice Kain has long been a household name in the window furnishings market. It has gone through numerous changes since its early days, but now, with new ownership under Basford Brands leading to a complete overhaul of its supplier base and overall strategy, it is regaining its former vibrancy.

According to general manager Michelle West, that vibrancy is taking flight with this year's range releases.

There's one word that sums up everything the brand is about at the moment; 'colour'.

Cerise, aqua, green chartreuse and even hot pink are key hues for the coming season, West confirms. Meanwhile, a bold palette is complemented by radical approaches to surface finish, a trend embodied by the Society collection, launched in August.

"We are moving away from pure texture and more towards three dimensional looks. What we have done is taken a taffeta base cloth and created a crush that has hard edges to it, so it produces a 3D effect. Society epitomises what is on trend at the moment; three dimensional looks, plus colour."

"We are also releasing a new range in October, the Theatre Collection,

which is really bright and contemporary. Another release, the Avenue Collection taps into the revival of the trend for birds and insects. We have made both of them on wide width 280 cm cloth so they can work well for top of the bed and other co-ordinating elements."

Meanwhile textured fabrics such as linens are gaining a glamorous edge.

"A new sheer, Ballard, will release at the end of the year, incorporating both linen and metallics. It's a linen ground interwoven with metallic yarn."

"Recently released is Pravda & La Mesa, featuring a decorative leaf design with stripes, again incorporating a bright metallic yarn, while the Harmony sheer is an embroidered with a spider web design, a really organic unstructured look."

Many of these releases capitalise on renewed demand for decorative fabrics, emerging partly due to the current wave of interest in opulence, and partly to Maurice Kain's own carefully orchestrated return to form.

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Around 15 years ago, Maurice Kain was the number one brand in Australasia, however, changes in ownership and personnel diluted some of its original might, until Wayne Leslie bought it five years ago. By that time, says West, the company was at a low ebb.

"It had been pretty much unloved and it had lost its way in the market. Because of that, other brands jumped up and took over; so it's been a steady rebuild for us and for the brand. It's starting to hit its stride now and a lot of people can see where we are going and what we are doing."

Basford Brands' ownership of the company has paid dividends for Maurice Kain.

"When Wayne took over, Maurice Kain was a company. It has now become a brand within the Basford Brands stable, so that has allowed us to have more flexibility and develop the range. Being under the Basford Brands umbrella has allowed Maurice Kain to benefit from cross pollination with other brands, and because of the size of Basford Brands there are a lot of synergies as well as financial backing, which has allowed us to build the brand exponentially and quickly."

The rebuild of Maurice Kain was concomitant with West's arrival four years ago. Having spent years working "on the other side" selling to wholesalers for a number of fabric mills, West's remit has been to revive the Maurice Kain brand, with a key element of this being the reconfiguration of its relationship with the mills.

"It's been a question of employing the right people, working with offshore mills in Taiwan, Korea, India, Turkey, Italy, Belgium and the UK. When we bring out a product, that product is going to be in the market for three to five years, so it all comes back to quality. Maurice Kain was always known for good quality, affordable, decorative product, and that is what we have been striving to get the brand back to."

"We try and work with a lot of vertical mills, meaning that every processes along the way is controlled - from manufacturing the yarn right through to dyeing and finishing, warehousing and dispatch. So at any particular stage in the product's life, we are able to go back to the mill and establish and isolate where any problems may have occurred and have them rectified immediately."

"Maurice Kain's three full time QA staff are part of our commitment to quality. We don't ship anything from any mill unless it's thoroughly checked by our staff, to ensure colour, grain, pattern repeat and so on. We also have our own in house light fastness testing where every single design and colour is tested to industry standards".



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"Maurice Kain is a mid-market brand with a high end look to it. Within the brand we create our own product, which means that we design it, colour it, and work with materials that are exclusive designs for us. We are striving to achieve a decorative look at an affordable price."

Research and development play a critical part in the Maurice Kain brand and the Society collection illustrates this perfectly, she adds.

"In years gone by, when you had a crushed fabric, it had a tendency to drop. So with Society, we have put a bonding fabric behind it to create complete stabilisation. So when our customers are sewing it, it won't stretch. With R&D we are always value adding for our customers as well as the end user, the consumer."

"Another example is in sheers, where there is a strong trend towards using a base weight, putting a weight at the bottom of the drape, so customers don't need to hem it. It gives it a nice clean finish against tiles and floorboards which are now co common in our homes."

Releasing around 20 new ranges a year, Maurice Kain continually injects fresh interest into its ranges, but certain staple products sell well year after year.

"We have a product called Switch, which has just been re coloured and due for re launched in September. It's a poly cotton, ottoman stripe and

has been in the collection for well over 10 years; this would probably be the third time that it has been recoloured, with a fresh modernised palette."

"Another strong seller is Brooklyn, one of our textured plains that has been in our collection for years; it's been recoloured and just keeps coming back in. It is available in uncoated, one pass and block out."

Over the next three to five years, Maurice Kain's strategy is to develop a wider range and offering for its customer in every market category, including coated products, sheers and prints through to decoratives, West says.

Driving the message of a modern brand with a strong heritage will also be key. And will at least in part be achieved through the Maurice Kain sales team.

"All our sales team are employees of Basford Brands, which is very rare, but it means they can really focus on the brand and develop relationships."

"Because of that heritage branding that was so strong, our marketing efforts are also about working to get that message out."

Supporting the brand re-launch will be a new Maurice Kain website. Scheduled for completion by the end of the year, the site will enable ordering and a wide range of ancillary functions to be completed online.

"Customers will be able to place orders 24/7, as well as checking stock, checking their accounts, getting statements, and printing invoices. Our warehouse now operates with RF Smart warehousing which means every item is barcoded and we have the ability to track every metre of fabric throughout our supply chain."

Despite a challenging trading environment, excitement around the revival of the Maurice Kain brand has brought with it a sense of buoyancy, West says.

"It's still very much a work in progress. It's been four years and we are just hitting our stride now. We are excited about the future with an enormous amount of expansion on the horizon, while still obviously maintaining quality and affordability."

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2_ Theater Collection - Society

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society by maurice kain...

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