



HAPPY SCRAPS

This page: the colours in *zindekhs* are often dictated by the rags to hand. But the patterns are always intuitive, evolving everything from a dream house (top left) to an abstract painting (top right). In anticipation of Larusi's buying mission, one family washed and dried its mats (bottom)

From blue plastic sacking to bits of old twine, anything and everything can be turned into a *zindekh* to zhooosh up a dimly lit mud house in Morocco's Middle Atlas mountains. But for the dwindling band of Berbers who still make them, these joyous mats are not only an exercise in frugality and recycling – they're often a lifeline too. Now, thanks to Souad Larusi, the woman who triggered the trend for Beni Ourain rugs, change could be underfoot for the indigent weavers. Their tufted wares put a smile on Ros Byam Shaw's face

TWENTY YEARS AGO Souad Larusi single-handedly sparked a fashion for a particular style of Moroccan rug. Though a native of the country herself, born and brought up in Fez, she first spotted them in books belonging to her husband, a Dutch architect, in old photographs of the interiors of seminal Modernist houses. 'I had never seen them for sale in Morocco,' she says. 'And I have no idea how architects like Alvar Aalto or Le Corbusier got hold of them.' Thickly tufted, monochrome and with simple, irregular patterns of dark often zigzag lines on pale creamy backgrounds, the rugs were made as dowries, and most stayed in the remote mountain villages where they were handwoven by the women of the Beni Ourain tribe (Vol March 2003).

Souad decided they were what she wanted to insulate the wooden floors of the Victorian house in north London she and her husband had just bought. She set about finding them, visiting village markets in the Middle Atlas mountains, until she stumbled across someone who could source them. She bought enough rugs for her own house, and more, and decided to see if she could sell them back in London. Her business, Larusi, has since become well known for authentic vintage and bespoke Berber rugs, and more recently for other textiles with a handmade feel.

Souad has always sourced stock herself, travelling, making contacts, forming friendships and paying fair prices. She can tell you the life stories of the Berber families she buys from. 'This man built his own house, not with traditional mud but with breezeblocks. These people had to move because their house was about to collapse. That beautiful 15-year-old girl left school, and now works as a maid. Sadly, most of the young people are leaving the mountain villages,' she says. 'Old skills and crafts are dying out.'

One of those dwindling skills is carpet weaving, another is the crafting of small mats, known as *zindekhs*. 'These are also made by women, nowadays usually the older women,' says Souad. 'They use them as door mats, or folded up to sit on. Unlike traditional rugs made from valuable wool, these use rubbish – scraps of worn-out clothing, including underwear, unravelled jumpers, bits of string and plastic twine, packing materials – all hooked through a foundation of used plastic grain and flour sacks. You don't need a loom, just a special needle. Perhaps because they cost nothing to make except time, the patterns are inventive and spontaneous, and because the materials are modern, often synthetic, the colours are really bright, sometimes even neon or glittery.'

A traditional Beni Ourain rug is made from the finest, most lustrous wool, lovingly collected over months and years from sheep that graze high in the mountains. No dyes are used, and designs are handed down from one generation to the next. *Zindekhs* could not be more different. Free from the constraints of tradition, and with a paintbox of modern chemical dyes with which to play, women indulge themselves with riots of cheerful colour and pat-

tern. 'Their designs can reflect anything, from their moods and aspirations – the house they would like to live in – to motifs from the local environment,' says Souad. 'Sometimes you will see the domed outline of a mosque, sometimes stylised trees, rivers, flowers and animals. They might put in a hand of Fatima, as a charm against the evil eye. Or they may come up with something completely abstract that looks like a modern painting.'

While dowry rugs are sold only out of necessity – a drought some years ago forced farmers to raise cash to feed their animals, for example – these mats are not treated as such treasured possessions. Souad found people willing to sell several at once. 'I have now collected about 30 of them, all completely different and original,' she says. 'I want to highlight their beauty, so I am displaying them in a selling exhibition. Used as wall hangings they look so

contemporary. The women who make them may have had no education, or contact with the outside world, and yet they have this tremendous creativity. *Zindekhs* are a genuine, unselfconscious means of self-expression for them.'

Made entirely from bits and pieces no one wants and ingeniously transformed into something useful and desirable, they are also brilliant examples of imaginative recycling. 'I am always fascinated by how materials are kept and reinvented in these remote villages,' says Souad. 'People will hang old plastic sacking across their doors, make it into shower curtains and cushion covers, or storage bags that they will hang on hooks on the wall. Necessity is the mother of invention. If you can't afford to buy things, you make them, and waste nothing,' she explains. 'My mother has this same attitude. She brought up six of us, supporting us by working as a master embroiderer, making wedding veils, ceremonial babouches, kaftans. Even now she never throws a piece of fabric away if she thinks she could make some-

thing out of it, whether an old cushion or a worn-out apron. She has even made tote bags from the plastic packaging of my rugs.'

The Beni Ourain rugs that were Souad's first retail success have become such a popular interiors accessory that originals are now a rarity. And as so often happens when fashion gets a hold, the market has been flooded with copies. 'I walk round the medina in Marrakesh and see them everywhere,' says Souad. 'The quality is not good, and many have been treated with harmful chemicals.' 'Upcycling' is a more recent fashion, and also open to abuse. These bold, vivid splashes of what Souad evocatively calls 'chaotic beauty' are the genuine article. Like the rag rugs and patchwork quilts our ancestors used to make from clothes that were no longer wearable, they are a timely reminder that there are better things to do with rubbish than pile it up in holes in the ground, or let it wash into the sea ■

'Waste Knot', a selling exhibition of *zindekhs*, runs at Larusi, Studio 7, 109 Bartholomew Rd, London NW5 (020 7428 0256; larusi.com), 1-14 Feb. To register, visit larusi.com





This page: while the abstract patterns of *zindekhs* are often open to interpretation (top left and bottom right), they can also depict landmarks such as a mosque (top right) or themes from nature (bottom left). Because windows in homes in the Middle Atlas tend to be small the intense colours help brighten up gloomy rooms. Larusi came across one interior so dark in the village of Ait Arfa that she had to hang the family's handwork on a washing line outside to photograph (middle). Opposite the teenage oldest granddaughter of Fatima (previous pages) shows off one of her granny's creations. She herself can weave but has decided not to



This page: Souad Larusi has collected the *zindekhs* seen here over many years. The pattern and palette of some of them are almost Sonia Delaunay-esque (top left and bottom left), while another has shades of Keith Haring (bottom right). Natural recyclers, the people who make them leave nothing to waste, even using plastic sacking as a base, which is still visible in one (top right). A recent buying expedition took Larusi to the countryside outside Ait Ourir, a small town about 30km east of Marrakesh, where she found a Berber grandmother, Fatima (middle), repairing one such piece outside her traditional mud house