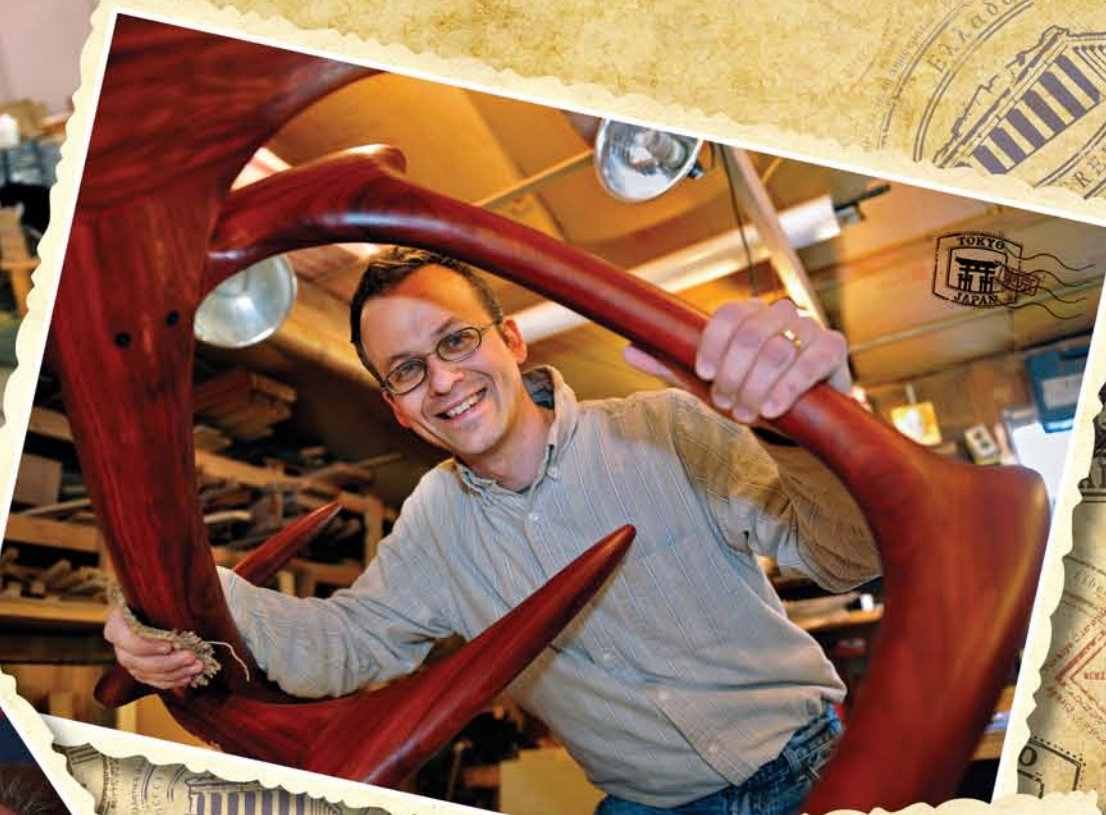




Clockwise from top left: Lara Moore peeks through a Bella Bella frame, Nathan Hunter polishes a hand-carved coffee-table leg, Judith Rose of Textillary Weavers loads a giant bobbin onto a loom, and Robert Harman relaxes on one of his custom-upholstered chairs.



LOCAL ARTISANS WHOSE CREATIONS ARE IN HIGH DEMAND

BY Elisabeth Andrews | PHOTOGRAPHY BY Steve Raymer

If you were to browse the furniture section of the American Craft Council's annual show in Baltimore—the foremost event for designers of hand-made home goods—you'd come across a type of ultra-stylish Little Bloomington. Featured there among the nation's elite furniture makers are three of our finest craftspeople: Lara Moore, Nathan Hunter, and Robert Harman. They, like Judith and A John Rose of Textillary Weavers, have earned national reputations for the unsurpassed quality and distinctive design of their creations. Their work is coveted not only for its beauty but also for its ingenuity, originality, and boldness.

The Roses, for example, started a national trend with their chenille throw blankets, first produced in the 1980s. Moore's artwork is made through a process she invented entirely from scratch. Hunter's inspiration comes from his background as a musician, while Harman's upholstery defies all logical order.

Yet while there's little common ground in these artisans' styles, there are remarkable similarities in their stories.

Despite their success, none of them are trained in their fields. Each one came to Bloomington to attend Indiana University for another purpose. They were all called away by the desire to create, and took the leap of faith that resulted in their present achievements.

Also, though they all do the bulk of their business at shows like the Craft Council's and with buyers outside of town, each has stayed in Bloomington for its supportive atmosphere. People here want to see each other do well, the artisans explain. And they don't look at you funny when you say you're an artist. "It's a very creative environment," says Judith Rose.



Lara Moore among the tiles she sells by the hundreds to galleries across the country.

If you've spent much time in Bloomington, you've almost certainly encountered Lara Moore's art. Even if you missed her giant mural along the B-Line Trail (on the rear façade of the Bloomington Monroe County Convention Center), you've probably sat at one of her tables at The Uptown Café or Laughing Planet, or perched on one of her stools at a Copper Cup coffee shop.

And you must have wondered—taking in the elegant and richly colored designs, so strangely luminescent—just how on earth they were made. The details are so delicate and the hues so vibrant. The texture is smooth but almost warm to the touch. Is it marble? Glass? Fabric? Paint? You surely didn't guess the true basis of Moore's handiwork:

tissue paper, the kind you'd stuff in a gift bag.

"I love that it's just this normal, everyday material and we're elevating it and making it really beautiful," says Moore, 42, who started her company, Bella Bella Arts, in 1997. She invented the tissue-paper technique from scratch, experimenting with ways to layer different colors and finding the perfect finish—resin—to make her work both striking as fine art and functional as furniture.

Moore's painstaking production process takes several weeks to complete. It starts with a wooden base made by Hewins Cabinet Company in Solsberry, Indiana. That gets covered with several hundred layers of tissue paper. The designs—which often combine both nature-inspired motifs

and geometric elements—must each be hand-cut from more tissue paper before getting multiple coats of resin. Both the glue Moore uses and the precise combinations of tissue colors are her "secret recipes," meticulously engineered to produce Bella Bella's distinctive look.

Now almost a million-dollar operation, the six-person company sells about 120 one-of-a-kind original art pieces each month, ranging from 6-by-6-inch tiles to a 21-foot counter for a restaurant bar. Moore works with galleries, designers, architects, and hoteliers across the country, in addition to selling directly through her Bloomington showroom. Eighteen weekends a year, she's on the road doing craft shows and visiting patrons to discuss custom-designed artwork for their homes or businesses.

Moore is still astonished at how things have worked out. "I wasn't an art student, and I'm not a good drawer, but I found out accidentally that I'm a good cutter-outer," she says. She discovered the talent some 15 years ago when she was diagnosed with lupus and was unable to sleep because of the chemotherapy. Looking to fill the time and relax her mind, "I started playing around with papier mâché," she recalls.

The bowls she made were an instant hit, selling out at what was then the Grant Street home goods store [now Relish]. Customers urged her to branch out, so she tried her hand at sprucing up second-hand furniture. She took her handiwork to a national craft show, and the business was suddenly off and running.

'I'm not a good drawer, but I found out accidentally that I'm a good cutter-outer.'

"It was a Cinderella kind of thing," Moore recalls. "That first show I made \$140,000 in three days. We were the show darlings."

Now that Bella Bella has become beloved nationwide, Moore says she gets the most amazing response from her Bloomington fans.

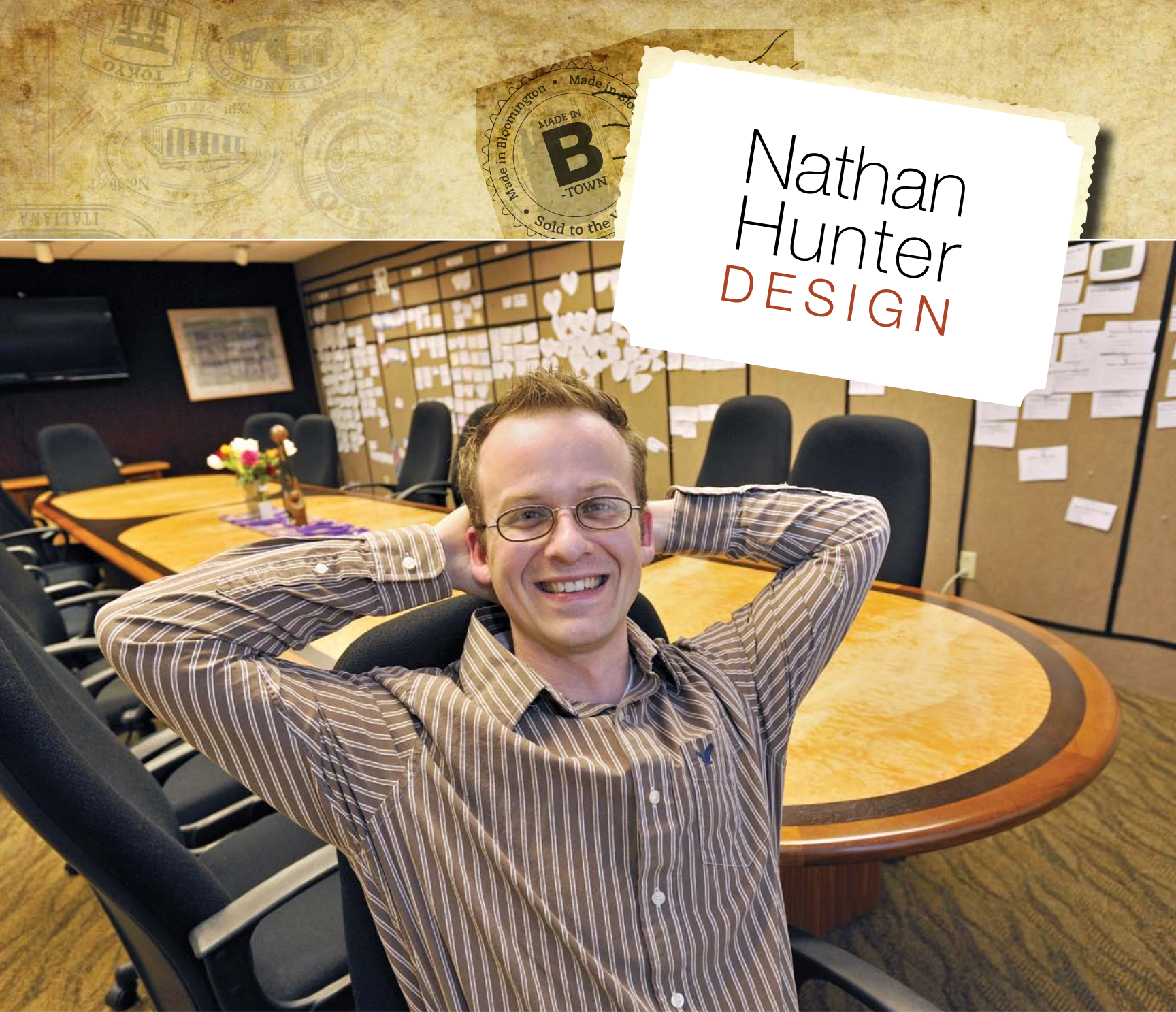
"It's just extraordinary how people here are so proud of me. It's like I'm everybody's daughter."

Bella Bella is at 241 W. Grimes Ln. and online at bellabella.com. The showroom is open Monday through Friday 8:30 am to 5 pm and on weekends by appointment.

Clockwise from top left: Bella Bella's 10,000-square-foot studio, some of Moore's well-known nature-inspired motifs, vibrant color on wall tiles, a pair of tree tiles, and a mirror framed in Moore's "tapestry" pattern.



Courtesy photo



Nathan Hunter designed and crafted this inlaid-wood conference table for St. John Associates in Bloomington.

Twenty years of piano study made Nathan Hunter the craftsman he is today.

His furniture designs, he explains, are based on compositional concepts absorbed through countless hours preparing to become a virtuoso performer. Each chair or table has its own “arc” and opposing “counterpoint,” just like a phrase in music.

“I started taking piano lessons from a college professor when I was twelve, and I was very serious about it from then on. A lot of that sensibility just sinks in,” he says. “It’s a way of rounding artistic ideas.”

Hunter, 32, never expected to use his musical discernment for anything other than music. He came to

Indiana University in 1999 to study piano performance, after teaching lessons in his native Ohio for six years. But something about the Bloomington environment awakened his interest in other possibilities.

“After the first year here, I came to realize that I hadn’t really tried other things. When you spend six hours in the practice room seven days a week, there really isn’t time to do anything else,” he says.

Hunter started to branch out in his academic pursuits, and also to take on odd jobs to earn some money. Because his father had a passion for woodworking, Hunter knew his way around a chop saw, and was able to step in when a client wanted a backyard arbor. He found the



project surprisingly satisfying in a way that performance was not.

“When you sit behind a piano and play, all of your output goes into the air and it’s gone,” he explains. “I wanted to make something that I could put time into, and then there it would be.”

The arbor project led to a deck railing that led to a set of custom-designed kids’ furniture. Although he had no design experience, Hunter never had a moment’s hesitation.

“I don’t know if it was naïveté or just gumption,” he says. “I remember designing the bunk beds—I was lying in a hammock with graph paper and I just started drawing squiggles.”

Five years and a couple hundred projects later, Hunter still sometimes uses the squiggle method. He often starts with an entirely intuitive sketch. “Then it’s just a matter of fleshing out what it can become in a three-dimensional piece,” he says.

To do so, Hunter uses 3-D design software that lets him create virtual furniture to show his clients. The software enables him to “explode the piece into its parts” and assign each part dimensions. Hunter uses these guidelines to handcraft each individual component from hardwoods like Indiana walnut and African wenge or sapele. He does much of the metal work in his shop as well, although the most complicated metalsmithing is handled by Bloomington’s Hoffman Design Works.

It often takes weeks to turn Hunter’s ideas from lyrical daydreams into sought-after objects of functional art. The cost of materials

‘I was lying in a hammock with graph paper and I just started drawing squiggles.’

and the time it takes to produce each item put his work in the “luxury” category, with small tables costing anywhere from \$550 to \$1,250 and dining sets \$7,500 to \$22,000. The majority of his work is custom-designed for clients, many of whom are on the East Coast.

Although it wasn’t the life he originally envisioned, Hunter says he couldn’t be happier.

“I feel like I’m just sitting in the catbird seat to be doing this, to be a working artist.”

Hunter’s work can be found online at nathanhunterdesign.com.

Top: Hunter at work in his studio, (right) printouts from his design software.

Right: (top) a “Mesa” dining set, (center) an assortment of tables, (bottom) a “Pas de Deux” table.





Robert Harman enjoying the fruits of his labor.

A first glance at Robert Harman's furniture brings the word "eclectic" to mind. His custom upholstery seems to follow no rules, piecing together 6, 10, or even 20 premium-quality fabrics in unpredictable combinations of color, pattern, and texture. Purple velvet abuts yellow striped silk, while a red-and-white floral sits alongside green and black diamonds. A jacquard could pair with sculpted mohair, chenille, or damask—or even all three.

By all rights, these juxtapositions should be jarring, yet the end result is somehow comforting instead. Each chair or loveseat manages to harmonize, creating a satisfying sense of balance. Harman's choices make no sense, follow no clear order—but it all comes together, and it works.

"The process is all about trust," says the 64-year-old artisan, who has focused exclusively on his multi-fabric furniture for the past 15 years. "Invariably, I have no idea what it's going to look like before I begin. I have to trust my intuition or my creative process, knowing that I'll recognize the path along the way."

Harman's faith has been rewarded with great success along both American coasts. While his furniture is made entirely in Bloomington, with his custom-designed furniture frames produced by local cabinetmaker John Rinne, most of Harman's sales are outside the area. The majority of his customers are "middle-aged professional couples," but when pressed he'll disclose, "There are

Academy Award winners who have my furniture."

In all, Harman has sold several hundred pieces, with chairs going for \$3,500 to \$4,500 and loveseats upwards of \$6,000. The prices reflect the cost of the fabrics, most of which are several hundred dollars per yard.

It's not a bad record for a plumber's son from Aberdeen, Scotland. Harman recalls growing up in the northern port city, where his grandfathers had been shipbuilders. Making things, he says, is in the genes.

"Some of my earliest memories are of making stuff, playing with Plasticine. I'd make lots of plastic models—the smell of that glue should probably have killed me. It was really endlessly fascinating, just an abiding passion," he recalls.

Although he continued to construct things for fun, making his own clothes and shoes during the free-wheeling '60s, Harman thought he needed to follow an academic path to make a living. He came to Bloomington in 1978 for graduate school, but soon decided it was not for him.

Luckily, the city provided many opportunities for Harman to return to his craftsmanship. Having taught himself upholstery, he started a successful business reupholstering fine old furniture. He also found work fixing up booths and other furniture for local businesses like The Uptown Café, Nick's English Hut, Trojan Horse, Yogi's Grill & Bar, Kilroy's, and Bloomington Hospital.

The multi-fabric experiment started by accident, when Harman found there was no single fabric that was right for a loveseat on which he was working. Although it took some time to venture into his present, vivid palette, that first piece awakened him to creative possibilities he had never before considered.

Now, with the freedom to follow his artistic whims, he'll often spend days just sorting through fabrics to find the perfect combinations. "I never know who's going to want to live with whom," he explains. "I need to look at the fabrics together to see who their friends and neighbors and loved ones are going to be."

When the right arrangement presents itself, it's a wonderful thing, he says.

"There's a feeling of happiness, a recognition. Once I've seen it and recognized it, that's it. At that moment there could be nothing else. There's a family of colors and they're happy together."

For more information, visit harmanfurniture.com.

'I need to **look** at the **fabrics together** to see who their **friends** and **neighbors** and **loved ones** are going to be.'



Top: Harman in his upholstery studio

Right: A sample of the unexpected upholstery combinations on Harman's chairs.



The Roses in their showroom on Rappel Drive.

Stay at a Four Seasons, Ritz-Carlton, or Fairmont hotel, and you might be treated to an indulgent helping of Bloomington luxury. In scores of these and other high-end hotels around the world, you'll find—draped beckoningly across the foot of each lavish bed—the ultimate comfort accessory: a handmade throw from Textillery Weavers.

These cozy, cuddly, colorful blankets match snugliness with sophistication—the look is perfectly posh but they are oh-so-touchable. Most of them are even machine washable, but with a retail value in the neighborhood of \$200, you'll want to use the gentle cycle. They may be made with chenille, cotton, rayon, or, increasingly, bamboo, and might follow any color scheme from deep

reds and browns to bright pastels. But even in this age of automation and off-shoring, every one is still made by hand on a wooden loom.

"It's the only way to make the product we make," says Judith Rose, who owns Textillery with her husband, A John. She explains that the finished edge on the sides of the throw distinguishes it from industrially produced blankets. Shuttle looms like theirs wrap a continuous yarn around the edge of the fabric, while machine-made blankets have a telltale fringe on the sides. The Roses are also able to use much thicker yarns than industrial producers can—some of Textillery's yarns are as big around as a pencil.



Their wares are 'typically selling in environments where people have not just two homes but four or five.'

Most importantly, although they ship out hundreds of throws each week, Textillery's method of production gives them the freedom to custom-design for even the smallest project, and to try out an endless array of color and texture combinations.

"I really like excess," explains Judith. "Some people have a concept of design that is very edited, but I'm all about giving choice."

It's this flexibility and responsiveness that has enabled the company to thrive for more than 30 years. When the Roses formed Textillery in 1978, it was in recognition of the popularity of Judith's hand-woven scarves and wall hangings, made for fun on her tabletop loom. Although she had worked as a teacher and A John had just completed a master's degree in instructional systems technology, they seized the craft-friendly cultural moment and started entering shows.

A John likes to say, "Judith's craft is the weaving and mine is the business," and it's clear his creative abilities gave the company opportunities that many others missed. He had the idea to place an advertisement in an

interior-design magazine, which started them down the wholesale path that was long their mainstay. During the '80s, their scarves were sold by Nordstrom, Bloomingdale's, Macy's, and Coach.

But when foreign-produced knockoff scarves became widely available, it was Judith's turn to come up with new inspiration. She began to weave throw blankets, and to focus on improving the quality of the product, even if it meant increasing its price. "We consciously went after the luxury market," she recalls.

The result was a boom in business, with the company rapidly growing "from eight, to twelve, to twenty, to forty employees," A John says. They built their current 37,000-square-foot building in 1998, with its 28 looms and huge storage areas for the 1,000 pounds of yarn they buy each week.

Now, with most large retailers buying from outside the United States, Textillery has downsized and shifted its focus to hospitality. Two-thirds of their business is with hotels, and most of the remainder is distributed between independent retail shops and interior designers. Their wares are, Judith says, "typically selling in environments where people have not just two homes but four or five." But despite catering to this slim demographic, the Roses always make a point of stocking their onsite showroom to offer a deep discount for Bloomington customers and visitors.

You can visit the showroom at 2361 Rappel Dr., Saturdays from 2 to 4 pm or by appointment. Textillery is also online at textillery.com. ✨



Clockwise from top left: Weavers work the 28 shuttle looms, different patterns and textures on Textillery throws, the sample room, wide-ranging color combinations, a tiny portion of the 1,000 pounds of yarn shipped to Textillery each week.