



# Dream Weaver

Sophie Mallebranche blends old-world techniques with industrial materials to create one-of-a-kind tapestries

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FABRIC FANTASY: Mallebranche's studio is a theater of surprising experiments in metals that are woven on a traditional loom. Stainless steel, tin, copper, bronze and silver are mixed with low-tech plastic tubing, fisherman's wire and silk to reflect light in the most versatile ways

Portrait and details on this page by Thomas Rusch; portrait opposite by Carlos Munoz Yague; all other images courtesy of Sophie Mallebranche

"I am not a weaver," says self-proclaimed "material specialist and colorist" Sophie Mallebranche. Nevertheless, she has crafted striking tapestries of stainless steel, copper, bronze, silver, molded silicone and even sycamore wood—largely in two Paris workshops where she uses traditional wooden looms. "Weaving is fastidious and not necessarily in sync with the times. My know-how is in experimentation," she says. "I push technical limits and find industrial materials that allow these techniques to express themselves, and vice versa."

Mallebranche's most recent work, award-winning curtains for famed Paris hotel Plaza Athénée, manifests all these skills. The monumental curtains are a truly original sleight of hand. Woven from stainless steel, they reflect a different gradation of light according to the level of natural lighting in the room, an inherent characteristic of the material used. Over the course of a meal in the hotel restaurant, you can sip a cocktail in cold light, eat the

main course bathed in silver, have dessert in gold and drink your coffee in brass. When the light fades to a dreamy penumbra, you know that it's time to leave.

Closer examination of the metallic fabric reveals that the organization of the weave is surprisingly random. The client specifically requested this effect, hoping to give the illusion of handcrafted work. Ironically, this illusion of irregular, handmade movement was created using high-tech looms that make it possible to skip chain threads on woven materials up to four meters wide. The ancestral nature of the loom contrasts with the modern industrial material and the extreme tension the loom is forced to withstand. In order to achieve this seemingly unbalanced weave—a suggestion of both void and fullness—five kilos per square meter tension is required, as opposed to the 300 grams needed to form more traditional materials. >

These technological feats are nothing new for Mallebranche, who has worked with unusual weaving materials since she was a student at the Duperré School of Applied Arts, from which she graduated in 2000. She grew up playing in the kitchen of her family's restaurant in Normandy, where she dashed between refrigerators, stainless steel worktables, and pots and pans. Influenced by the kitchen environment, Mallebranche devoted her thesis to none other than the materials used to make refrigerators. Despite the scepticism of professors, who considered her project utopian, she decided to continue putting her training to the test by further exploring materials of the second industrial revolution that are rarely found in textile design.

By transporting her mastery of industrial materials into other fields, Mallebranche found herself at the leading edge of an emerging revolution. Her skills, heightened by a focus on innovation, have led to the creation of textiles that have attracted attention from very different creative industries: haute couture, interior decoration, tabletop and product design, architecture and urban planning. And each project is supported by a set of specifications that take into account the technical prowess that has become Sophie Mallebranche's trademark. For the Galeries Lafayette's stand that she designed for Guerlain, she created an oversized lampshade under which the company could air their fragrances. Guerlain requested a "magical" material, so Mallebranche inserted a chrome-surfaced reflective film into interwoven bronze and tin. The resulting material created an optical illusion, the transparency of the shade shifting according to where one stood in relation to the booth.

Typically, the luxury industry takes the greatest interest in her work, and for obvious reasons. The cost of the weavings is high (up to 2,500 Euros per square meter). Everything that glitters belongs, in essence, to the world of luxury—all the more when its pioneering methodology is taken into account. Recently, architect Peter Marino, familiar with her talent, brought the young woman to the LVMH group where she worked with him on the Chanel Ginza Building in Tokyo. Mallebranche covered the elevator panels in stainless steel wallpaper and added white silicone to the metal in the restaurant walls. Her luxurious materials also appear in street-level display windows, enticing the common passerby. In Hong Kong, an identical version was used for the Chanel flagship store which opened last December.

But can this precious skill be democratized? When will we see a Mallebranche blind available at Ikea? "I want to restrict this procedure to being handcrafted for the luxury market," she says. "But I also want to do more in the field of urban planning, as well as moving toward a democratization of other creations that will still allow me to pursue my experiments." Sound idealistic? Silver can be replaced by stainless steel and the brass used is inexpensive, so perhaps not. Especially if Sophie Mallebranche demands of herself what she demands of her materials and techniques: a shock treatment that can overcome any resistance. **CB**

(From left to right) 1. Manufacturer Lampshade 2. A copper sample for Bismut architects 3. A luminous painting detail 4. and 5. Sun screen details 6. Stainless steel curtains for the Plaza Athénée hotel 7. Wallpaper for Peter Marino's Chanel building in Tokyo 8. A stainless steel and linen experiment