

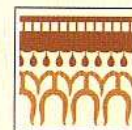
SHOPPING

Women Who Make Beautiful Things

Weaving silky sheets, painting exquisite porcelain, or shaping lampshades with a sense of humor, these three designers fascinate **Susan Mulcahy**.

Fatim Thiam's African-inspired designs include the light wool blanket draped over her shoulder, \$375, and silk pillows, \$150 each.

BELOW LEFT: Instead of using all seven pieces from the same set, Fatim mixes a quilted coverlet, \$650, a queen sheet, \$325, a striped pillow, \$175, an embroidered pillowcase, \$90, and a pillow sham, \$120, from different Sahelia lines. BELOW RIGHT: Her shams and pillowcases are \$135 and \$95, respectively.



Fatim Thiam

Tucked between her bed linens, you'll be dreaming of Africa.

Like any mother raising three young daughters and running a small business in a big city, Fatim Thiam is perpetually sleep-deprived. "If extra time becomes available," she says, "I'll choose sleep over other things." No wonder, then, that the Harvard MBA left Colgate-Palmolive to make bed linens.

Her company, Sahelia, is based in New York, but her inspiration is Africa: The Sahel is a semiarid region that runs through Senegal, where Fatim was born. She'd originally envisioned a business involving Senegal's handwoven textiles, but the venture would have required more resources than she could commit, given the developing country's lack of manufacturing facilities and skilled workers. So she took what she loves visually about Africa—the people, colors, textures, art, and architecture—and presented her concepts to a textile designer in Italy, renowned for its fabric-making. Her first two collections are startlingly original, with rich colors and subtle patterns unusual for 600-thread-count Egyptian-cotton sheets and pillowcases. Prices vary according to the weave, the color, and whether there is quilting or embroidery.

Fatim spends a few weeks each year in Africa when her daughters are on vacation. That's when she might see a woman walking down the street and think, *What incredible colors. I wonder if they would work?* More than anything else, she says, Sahelia is a "translation of a feeling." Take the Walata collection. Named after an oasis city on the trans-Saharan caravan route, these linens combine coffee brown and pearly sky blue, enriched by a motif based on a door that Fatim noticed in Mauretania and photographed on the spot. ▶

PHOTOGRAPHS BY HENRY LEUTWYLER
STYLING BY REBECCA OMWEG