

A stitch in time

Swiss carpet photographer Simone Haug devised a plan to encourage prisoners in Thorberg prison, Switzerland, to weave rugs. Denna Jones discovers the motivation behind Haug's intriguing project

All photos: Simone Haug

Rugs were the reason Swiss national Simone Haug became a professional photographer. "We lived across from a rug shop," she recalls. "I passed the shop every day on the way to school. My drawings were of rugs. I'm drawn to their mix of everyday utility. They were why I became a photographer." Haug began her professional career photographing rugs and rug restoration projects in countries from Nepal to Istanbul, all the while keeping interest in the perception of time. This connection to weaving seeded an idea for a time-based workshop with prison inmates. The Swiss penal code reflects the belief that vocational work is a key element of running prison in the Swiss countryside. A weaving workshop initially set up as a household enterprise, in 2018 Haug's request to work with prison weavers was accepted. "I wanted to find out how prison changes your perception of time," she says. "You can't jump time in prison; like writing it row by row by row." Thorberg prisoners are divided into three accounts. Two accounts are accessible for sundries and medical bills, while the third is a savings account prisoners access on release. Designers can book time with the weaving workshop to produce rugs for the designers to sell in the outside world, while prisoners have access to recycled textiles to produce their own designs to sell in the prison shop.

Seven prisoners work in Thorberg's weaving workshop. Three volunteered to work with Haug. Their ages ranged from 33 to 60 and their sentences from eight months to life. The project started in October 2018 with discussions on the concept of time and moved onto discussions of colours and patterns. Haug translated their ideas into notebook drawings, but final designs were developed with the prisoners. "Each prisoner was the final author of their rug," she says. One excelled at colour, while another excelled with shapes and concept. Each discovered their personal language, but all three expressed their ideas abstractly. Unlike the rugs that inspired Haug as a child, the prison rug project is 'art for the wall'. Asked whether the prisoners included woven signatures, she pauses momentarily. "I didn't have the idea to ask them, and they didn't

ask me," she replies, but anonymous designs reflect the anonymity the prisoners requested for the project.

Discussions with the prisoners revealed nuances of time are unique to each prisoner. "I was worried about my time ideas at first," says Haug, "but it turns out these ideas are quite normal to prisoners." One prisoner explained how he checked his calendar every day, then every month, until eventually he stopped. The prisoner with children recalled how it feels like one day in prison is a year of lost family time. Matt Haug's 2015 bestselling book *Reasons to Stay Alive* include his thoughts on time. To stop time you kiss. To time travel you read. To release time you breathe. While music, he believes, is how you escape time. For the Thorberg prisoners who worked with Simone Haug, weaving may not allow them to escape time, but it is how they momentarily forget time.

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