

Right Aiveen Daly with the intricately pleated and embroidered Paradise chair, inspired by a Gucci gown.

Far right Bronze and pearl beadwork is delicately set by hand



Materials are often sourced from the world of haute couture – metalwork comes from a firm that supplies chains for Chanel bags



COVERED IN GLORY

Hand-dyed feathers and exquisite beading inspired by Gucci elevate the domestic chair to the level of haute couture.

Diana Woolf meets London's most glamorous upholsterer. Photographs by Mark Henderson

When the Irish designer Aiveen Daly reveals that she used to spend hours knitting poodle covers for gin bottles as a child, it is apparent that she was always destined to create. Today, it's more a case of covering elegant chairs with hand-beaded silk satin, but marrying textiles with domestic objects has clearly been a long-standing interest, and one that Daly has built on to create her highly successful upholstery business.

Her work, which ranges from dining chairs encircled with twinkly art-deco-style 'belts' to sumptuous feathered wall panels, is innovative and unashamedly glamorous. It is characterised by the use of luxury materials, often sourced from the world of haute couture –

hand-dyed feathers come from a specialist who works with Alexander McQueen, and metalwork from a firm that supplies chains for Chanel bags. Daly admits much of her inspiration also comes from fashion: 'I love looking at the detailing on the clothing and how belts and shoes have been constructed,' she says.

Complex pattern cutting and fabric manipulation are also key ingredients of her work, a point Daly illustrates by talking me through her new Paradise chair. 'You've got pleating, stitch-work, embroidery, metalwork, upholstery... the layering of techniques and detail makes for a really luxurious piece,' she says. Indeed, it's an eye-catching, glitzy object covered in a dramatic panel of pleated emerald silk skilfully joined on the bias to a contrasting

panel of smooth satin and finished with a delicate hand-beaded swallow.

It was inspired by the vibrant embroidered creations of Gucci's creative director, Alessandro Michele, and the glossy black lacquered legs are finished with bespoke 'shoes' – protective brass sabots that were specially made as Daly wanted them supersize. It is this attention to detail that sets Daly apart: each of her creations is more a piece of attention-grabbing textile art than it is everyday, functional furniture. Such decadence is costly: prices start at £1,500.

Given her present success, it comes as a surprise to learn that Daly did not originally consider a career in design. 'Although I loved making things at school, there was never even



From above Daly's north London studio; the high-backed Flourish chair was inspired by 1940s Lesage embroidery, and the lilac Chevron chair by the work of fashion designer Azzedine Alaïa

a question that it might be more than a hobby,' she says. Instead she studied business and Russian at Trinity College, Dublin and went on to work in marketing at the online travel agency Expedia. However, her heart was never truly in it: 'I always wanted to do something a bit more creative and I wanted my own business. As I didn't have a clue what to do I started going to evening courses,' she says.

She instinctively gravitated towards textiles, taking courses in embroidery and sewing. It was during an upholstery class that her light-bulb moment came: 'I thought, this is really interesting, but why can't you do something to the fabric before it goes on the chair?' Daly, then in her early 30s, knew that she had finally found her creative niche and immediately gave up her job to study upholstery at London Metropolitan University before setting up a studio in the capital in 2005.

She started small, re-covering antique furniture, but always adding something a little different – be it pleating or buttoned detail – and after a couple of years was able to start having her own furniture frames made as a vehicle for her upholstery. Beneath Daly's easy charm lies a pragmatic business brain, and she targeted the luxury market from the outset. 'I always knew that the business had to be top-end, so every evening after finishing up in the studio, I researched the market and the people with the big budgets,' she adds.

Her break came in 2010, when she was commissioned by the property developer



Candy & Candy to make a set of dining-room chairs and a leather headboard for a show flat at One Hyde Park. 'It opened a lot of doors for me as so many people saw the work,' she says. Six years on, Daly employs three full-time upholsterers and a part-time machinist, while she concentrates on designing. 'The team in the workshop are proper craftsmen and are obsessive about quality. They do the work a million times better than I ever could,' she says. 'Seeing my ideas bought to life by them is really rewarding.'

Most of Daly's work is for interior designers who commission pieces for clients around the world. They include the jet-setting super-rich, property developers, yacht builders and luxury hotels such as the Langham in Hong Kong and the Mandarin Oriental in London.

She's currently working on a giant pleated-silk bedhead for a client in Nigeria and a 23ft-long suede wall panel worked with a raised pattern of branches and beaded flowers destined for the wall of a private cinema. These bespoke luxe pieces may not be suited to most people's lifestyles or budgets, but it is now possible to own a smaller piece of Daly's work. She has just launched a collection of beautifully embellished cushions. Bugle beads, ombré feathers and pleated silk will add a dash of Daly's trademark glamour to even the most time-worn armchair. 'It's like putting on your favourite lipstick – an instant pick-me-up,' she adds. And that's something that never goes out of fashion. aveendaly.com