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Kengo Kuma on Faces – His Jaipur Rugs Collaboration, and the Shared Soul of Japanese and Indian Making

With Faces for Jaipur Rugs, Kengo Kuma weaves Japanese restraint into Indian craftsmanship — and shows us how they were never far apart.

Kengo Kuma describes craftsmanship in both India and Japan as rooted in patience, humility, and respect for material. Kengo Kuma

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It’s easy to be drawn to the quiet, organic architecture by Kengo Kuma while travelling through Japan. Rooted in harmony and humility, his work has always chosen to dissolve into the environment rather than dominate it. So, upon learning about Kuma’s onomatopoeic oeuvre coming closer home with Faces — a collaborative collection with Jaipur Rugs unveiled at the Salone Del Mobile Milano 2026 — Robb Report India spoke to the architect to understand the philosophy behind this East-meets-East dialogue, and what it means for him to bring his vision to the tactile, storied craft of the Indian handmade rug.

Robb Report India (RR) : Working with Indian artisans on the *Faces* collection with Jaipur Rugs, did you discover any cultural similarities that stood out? What resonated with you the most and shaped the collection?

Kengo Kuma (KK) : What moved me most was the shared understanding of patience and humility within the act of making. In both Japan and India, craftsmanship is a way of living; a philosophy rooted in repetition, discipline, and respect for material. This collection exists somewhere between architecture and emotion. While working with the artisans, I felt an emotional closeness to the spirit I experienced in Japanese villages decades ago.

They brought an extraordinary sensitivity to texture and imperfection. Their work carries memory, instinct, and humanity. The *Faces* collection became less about designing an object and more about creating a dialogue between people, materials, and emotions. The irregularities, the softness, and the layered surfaces all emerged from this exchange. In many ways, the collection reflects a shared cultural belief that beauty comes alive when the hand remains visible.

Kuma believes India’s greatest design strength lies in its community-driven craft traditions and collective memory. **Kengo Kuma**

RR: What, according to you, is India’s biggest design strength?

KK: India’s greatest design strength lies in the social dimension of its craftsmanship. In many parts of the world, design has become increasingly individualistic and industrialised. In India, however, craft remains deeply connected to community, family, and collective memory.

What fascinates me is that Indian artisans do not separate life from creation. Design is embedded in rituals, festivals, daily practices, and relationships between generations. This creates objects that carry emotional depth rather than simply visual appeal.

I believe the future of design will not be shaped only by technology or innovation, but by the ability to preserve human connection within the creative process. India already possesses this naturally. That is why Indian craftsmanship has such profound relevance today.

RR: You spent the 1990s in the Japanese countryside, working with craftsmen on small rural projects. What insight from that decade continues to influence you?

KK: The countryside taught me that architecture is not an act of control; it is an act of listening. During the 1990s, I worked on many small projects where

craftsmen, local materials, and landscapes shaped the outcome more than my own drawings did.

I learned that true design emerges slowly through conversation with people and place. Rural craftsmen possessed an incredible understanding of wood, light, climate, and proportion. Their knowledge was intuitive rather than academic. That experience continues to influence me today. Even in large global projects, I try to preserve that sense of intimacy and sensitivity.

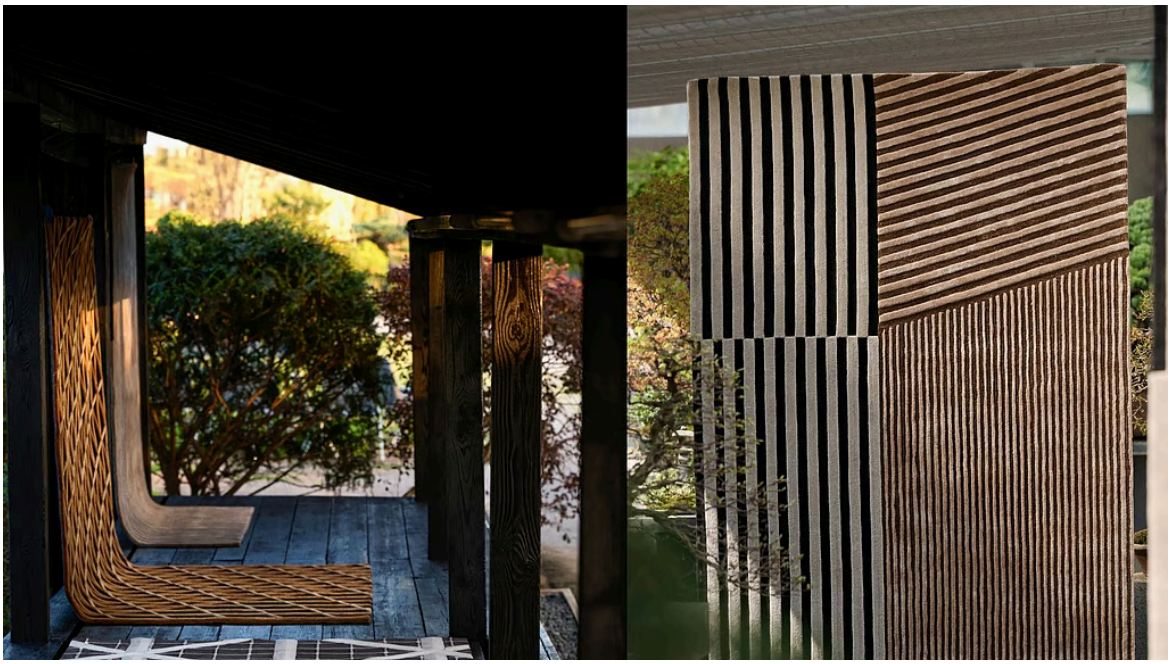
Working with textiles feels meditative to Kuma, who sees weaving as a slow, spiritual process that absorbs the emotions of the maker. **Kengo Kuma**

RR: You've likened good architecture to sushi earlier, dismissing design created to dominate the environment rather than embrace it. Over 35 years of practice, how has that philosophy evolved?

KK: I still believe architecture should never overpower its surroundings. Good sushi respects the ingredient rather than disguising it, and architecture should behave similarly. Over time, however, my understanding of harmony has

expanded. Earlier, I focussed mainly on the relationship between architecture and nature. Today, I think equally about the relationship between architecture and society, how spaces can encourage coexistence, empathy, and emotional well-being.

As architecture becomes increasingly global, there is a danger of uniformity. Many cities now look interchangeable. Collaboration across cultures has therefore become essential to recover local identity and human warmth. In projects like *Faces* for Jaipur Rugs, my interest lies in creating continuity between memory and contemporary life. Regeneration is not about returning to the past; it is about carrying its wisdom forward in new forms.



The Faces collection for Jaipur Rugs emerged as an emotional dialogue between artisans, materials, and architecture. **Kengo Kuma**

RR: Do you find working with textiles to be a meditative process?

KK: Yes, very much so. Textiles possess a softness and intimacy that is different from architecture. When I work with fabric, I become very aware of rhythm, touch, and repetition. It feels closer to breathing. Weaving especially carries a meditative quality because it is built slowly, thread by thread, almost like time becoming visible.

I feel there is a spiritual dimension within handmade textiles because they absorb the emotions and gestures of the maker. Perhaps that is why textiles create such emotional warmth within a space. They hold human presence in a

very direct way. Textiles soften sound, influence movement, create intimacy, and carry memory.

RR: The Indian landscape is anything but gentle – there’s a vibrant, vital chaos about the country. Was that a challenge for your usually quiet process?

KK: I do not see India’s energy as chaos. I see it as density of life, colour, emotion, and human interaction. There is an extraordinary vitality in India that can initially feel overwhelming, but if you observe carefully, there is also rhythm and harmony within it. My process remained quiet, but the textures and emotional layers within the collection became richer because of this encounter. India reminded me that tranquillity does not always come from emptiness. Sometimes it emerges from coexistence, from many voices existing together with dignity and warmth.

Kuma's experiences in rural Japan during the 1990s taught him that architecture is “an act of listening” rather than control. **Kengo Kuma**

RR: What do you think of the Salone del Mobile Milano as it stands today?

KK: Salone remains one of the few places where design can still generate meaningful global dialogue. It has become a cultural platform where ideas, materials, and philosophies intersect. At the same time, I feel the speed and scale of contemporary design culture can sometimes become overwhelming. There is pressure to constantly produce something louder, larger, or more immediate. For me, the challenge is to create work that invites silence and reflection amidst that intensity. Audiences are increasingly searching for authenticity rather than excess, and I believe that shift is very important.

RR: How do you define inclusive collaboration across cultures, and what does proper recognition of craftsmanship mean to you?

KK: Inclusive collaboration begins with respect. Too often, craftsmanship is treated as inspiration rather than authorship. I believe artisans must be acknowledged as creative contributors, not invisible labour behind luxury objects.

Proper recognition means creating systems where craftsmanship is valued intellectually, culturally, and economically. It means understanding that innovation does not belong only to designers or architects. Many traditional artisans possess forms of knowledge about sustainability, material sensitivity, and human-centred creation that the contemporary world urgently needs.

The future of global design should not be about one culture borrowing from another. It should be about building genuine partnerships where every participant is visible, respected, and empowered.

Tags: Jaipur | Japan | Jaipur Rugs | Kengo Kuma