

Design Metallurgist: How Modern Metals' Annie Kantor Turned Her Passion Into a Business

by LISA BOQUIREN 3 days ago



Feature photo by Sam Sargent Photography

“Woman of Steel” describes Annie Kantor perfectly, and she lives up to her sobriquet in more ways than one.

Steel is Kantor’s preferred material for creative expression, as founder and design director of Modern Metal, and she possess qualities often associated with the alloy — strength and endurance. Kantor earned her B.F.A. in Textile Design from the Rhode Island School of Design (RISD), then worked in the contract textile industry — designing woven upholstery and panel fabrics, and serving as Head of Custom Studio at Maharam — before founding Modern Metal in 2015.

Kantor shares her creative journey — from finding her passion early in her childhood and pursuing it, then turning it into a thriving design business that gives new meaning to staring at the wall, or the ceiling.

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Modern Metal craftsmanship.

Textile design is such a specific area of study and expertise. What drew you to it, and why did you choose to attend RISD?

I attended law school for a year and found myself knitting and designing sweaters on the spot to relieve stress. I was miserable and dropped out.

My grandmother was a painter (M.F.A. San Francisco Art Institute) and introduced me to head of painting at Stanford, who introduced me to head of painting at RISD. After about ten minutes of talking to me and looking at my work, he said, “I think I know where you need to be”, and marched me down to the textile department.

My jaw dropped when I walked in and saw all of the looms and said, “You mean this is a thing? I could do this? This is what I do for fun!” I naively had no idea one could have a profession in this field, so as soon as I learned I could be a textile designer, I was determined to turn my lifelong passion into a career.

Having had no formal background in design, yet determined to get in, I spent a year putting together a portfolio so that I could apply to RISD. There were two spots for transfer students and I got one! Getting into RISD’s Textile Design Department was a dream come true. At RISD, I was encouraged to apply the old and modern technologies of weaving with out-of-the-box creative thinking, using my hands.

You worked at Maharam which has been around for 122 years, since 1902. Talk about the highlights, as well as the creative and business take aways, from your time with such a storied company.

Maharam is where the Modernist movement played into my journey as a designer. Working in the Maharam design studio was very influential. Michael Maharam was a visionary and taught us all so much through his passion for all things Modern. Just being surrounded by his extensive library and furniture collection was inspiring.

I also saw how hard he and his brother Stephen worked. They each focused on different areas of the company, and brought the long established family name into a more design oriented business. Every detail mattered. That’s what I learned!



Modern Metal repeating patterns in metal.

Your medium of choice went from fabrics to steel. What was that change like for you as a designer?

Designing wovens for commercial use was exciting for me because I loved the challenge of making something beautiful within strict industry criteria and constraints.

I feel the same way designing in metal. I still think as a textile designer so in that respect it's not much different. There are definite constraints to working in this medium — no layers of woven structures, or mixing yarns to create colors, just positive and negative spaces, and the challenge of creating a flowing, repeating pattern in an unforgiving material.

Repeating design is my forte because RISD really trained us well, and that's what I use every day here at Modern Metal. All of my designs are designed to repeat seamlessly at any scale.

Tell the story of why you founded Modern Metal.

While tackling the renovation of a period home in Oakland, I became frustrated by the lack of enticing designs in metal. I saw an opportunity to apply my expertise in repeating-pattern design and developed a line of custom metal work that blossomed into Modern Metal.

Modern Metal offers interior designers, architects and discerning homeowners distinctive and well-made designs for everyday products that most people don't think about. The first product we brought to market (vent covers) was born out of my home renovation project.

Modern Metal also works on artistic installations. Describe how you take concepts into the real world setting of an architecture or interior design project.

Modern Metal installations be found all over the U.S. — KAIYŌ Rooftop in San Francisco; the lobby at Hotel Virginia in Santa Barbara; Monterey Breast Care Center; Sub-Zero Wolf & Cove Showroom in Arizona; and the Cafeteria at Proskeur Rose, LLP and PEM America Showroom, both located in New York City, among other venues.

the bar. As I dove into history, I learned that many Japanese immigrated to Peru. This fascinating discovery helped me as I incorporated the clients logo into a repeating pattern, which has undertones of traditional Peruvian textile patterns. This brought extra meaning to the client’s vision and history.



KAIYO Rooftop San Francisco.

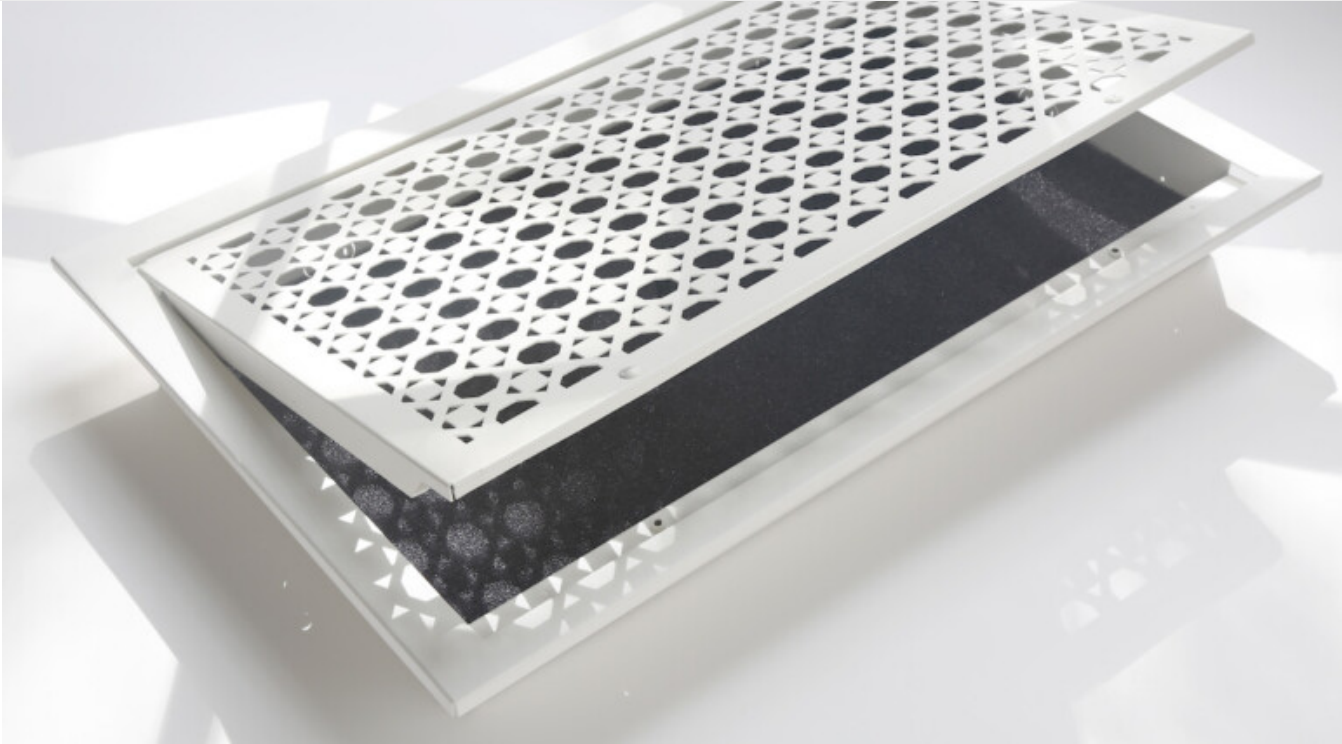
Modern Metal recently launched Air Filter Case. Why did you bring this product to market and what was the process like?

There was growing interest for our customers for such a product. While I don’t have air filters in my house, I do love the design challenge of making an everyday product into an artful object, and the Air Filter Case made sense as the next product for Modern Metal to bring to market.

The process from concept-to-market took more than two years. This included engineering the product based on feedback from designers and architects, and working closely with manufacturing experts to refine technical details. Air Filter Case has unique features including a concealed door hinge and fastener holes; single slotted screws which remain attached to the door and can be loosened to allow the door to open and shut. It is made in the U.S. by highly skilled fabricators from 16 gauge steel which is twice the thickness of off-the-shelf options.

This product is truly customizable — we offer it in 21 Signature Designs, including Rattan Remix; 10 powder coat finishes, brushed or polished stainless steel; and custom options for size, scale of pattern, pattern design, and thousands of powder coat finishes.

Everyone at Modern Metal is proud of this product — it is high quality, well-priced product, and achieves our goal of form-meets-function elegantly.



Air Filter Case in Rattan. Photo by Sam Sargent Photography.

Modern Metals works with highly skilled fabricators, including several with very specialized skill sets. Why did you decide to manufacture in the U.S.?

I vet every fabricator very carefully both for skill and communication, as these are equally important to me. By fabricating only in the U.S., I can visit fabricators in person as much as possible — we are creating something special together, so it’s very important for me to know *who* I’m working with. I am also able to go different fabricators for different skillsets, Perhaps someone in Indiana is excellent at spot welding, and someone in Boston is excellent at cutting brass.

I’m in awe of my fabricators’ ability to think out of the box, to use their backgrounds in engineering and advanced technology to think of solutions. For the Air Filter Case, my fabricators are in Indiana, and they are always suggesting ways we can improve things, down to the tiny pin in the hinge to the packaging. I tell them we have to package these like baby Mona Lisas!

You are quite active on social media. How does it influence what you design (form would seem to lead function in social media), and how you promote Modern Metal?

Social media can be inspiring—a place where I can see trends and interesting ideas come up. There is a buzz to getting likes for my own work too! Honestly, social media has not really influenced what I design, but seeing all the posts from talented interior designers and architects makes me want to design more cool stuff for their spaces!

Which everyday object are you hoping to make elegant next?

Dog doors!

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