

# Frieze

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Frieze London /

## Interview: Ronan Bouroullec



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The Paris-based designer on his drawings featured in the 2018 Frieze London campaign



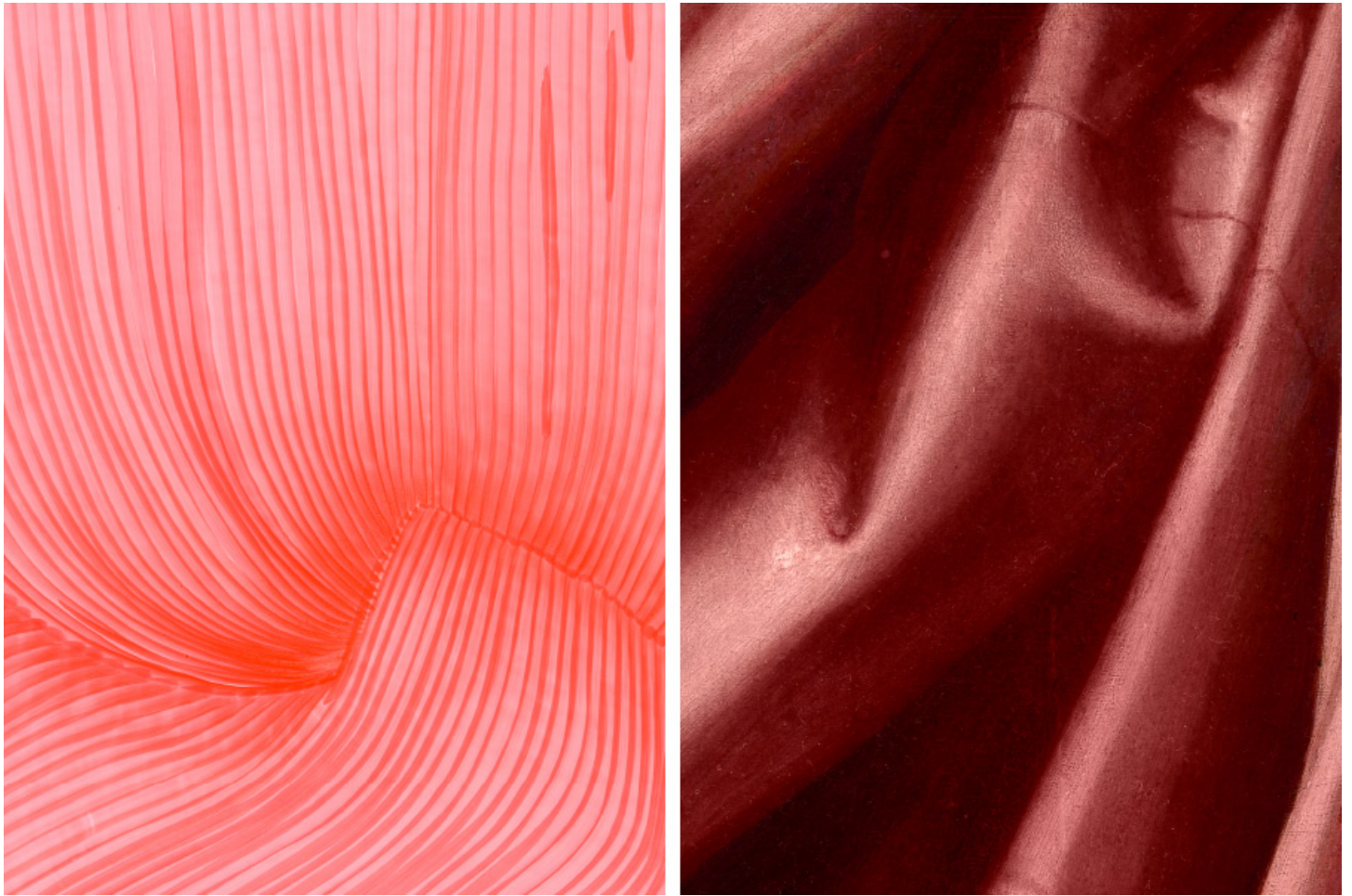
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This year's marketing campaign for Frieze Fairs celebrates the beauty of line and form, with drawings by Paris-based designer Ronan Bouroullec for Frieze London and a focus on drapery in classical art at the National Gallery, for Frieze Masters.

An interview with Ronan Bouroullec usually also includes his brother, Erwan. Together, they comprise a powerhouse of Paris-based design, giving imaginative, contemporary expression to everyday objects over the past two decades. Sketches have often accompanied their design work and Bouroullec's colourful drawings, which he now regularly shares on Instagram, evoke any number of interpretations. Mastering line sequences using only markers, he arrives at dimensional shapes that are at once fluid and fibrous, conceptual and constructed. In conversation with Amy Verner, he notes the ease of letting his subconscious take over and the challenge of articulating the outcome.



Left: drawing by Ronan Bouroullec. Right: Sebastiano del Piombo, *Portrait of a Lady* (detail), mid-1520s, The National Gallery, London; on loan from Longford Castle collection © Private collection

**Amy Verner Do you think of yourself as an artist or as a designer?**

Ronan Bouroullec I'm not at all interested in labels. I've had to explain myself a lot because I've been drawing since before I even started creating objects. I think I could probably stop making objects but I could never stop drawing. As a designer, at some point I started showing the drawings because I felt it could bring understanding to another type of work — that of making objects. But for me, it's the same, whether I'm taking a photograph,

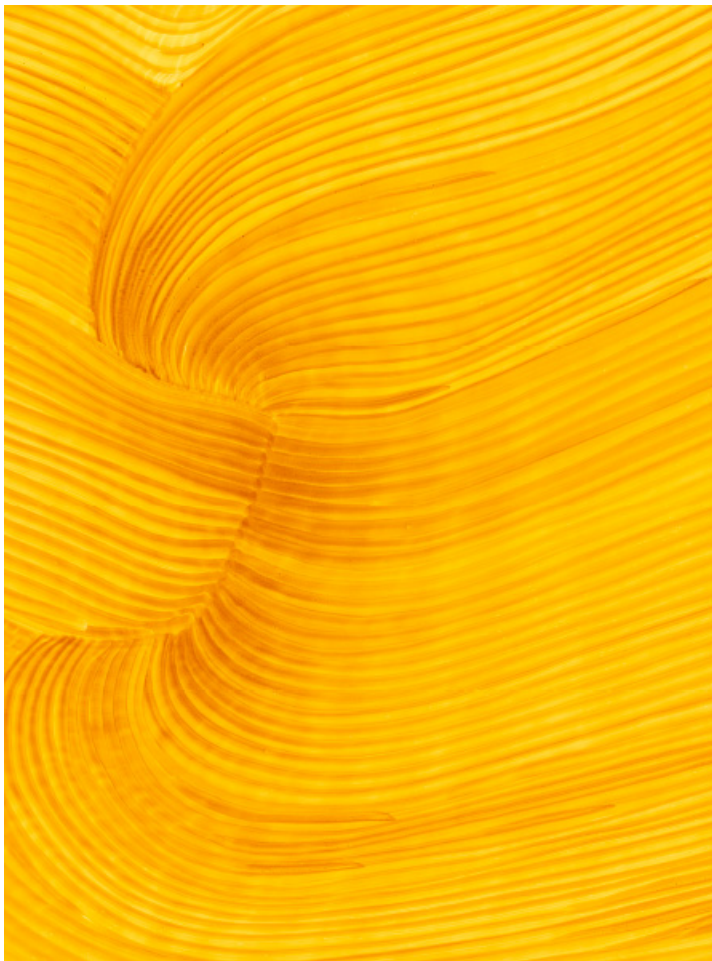
designing an object, or thinking about the format of a book; I consider myself a creator with a wide range of platforms and media.

**AV This makes sense, mainly because in your drawings, there's a fluidity — no beginning or end.**

RB Yes, the approach is very different. I'm not a very structured person. Drawing for me is not intellectualized in the sense that I don't think at all about what I'm doing. When I start, I don't know what I want it to look like. It's not automatic like writing, but a bit like self-hypnosis where you go from point A to point B and you don't remember how you got there. You're driven by some mechanical impulse.

**AV But little by little, you have to make choices: Will my hand go this way, what density, which colour...**

RB You'll notice that drawings are constructions; they can be mechanic and demand more focus, or organic and more like dancing, as when the body takes over. It's a practice that's very free, not organized.



Left: drawing by Ronan Bouroullec. Right: Philippe de Champaigne, *The Dream of Saint Joseph* (detail), 1642–3, The

**AV How has Instagram shaped the way you present your work? Clearly, you curate what you post.**

RB Yes, there are two types of drawings: there are sketches for research, and these have a goal: to drive my thoughts and take notes. The others are like a very spontaneous diary. I might post drawings on a daily basis, but in a very intuitive way, never calculated; it reflects the way I see the world and what I create.

**AV Do you draw only in particular conditions: a certain place or time?**

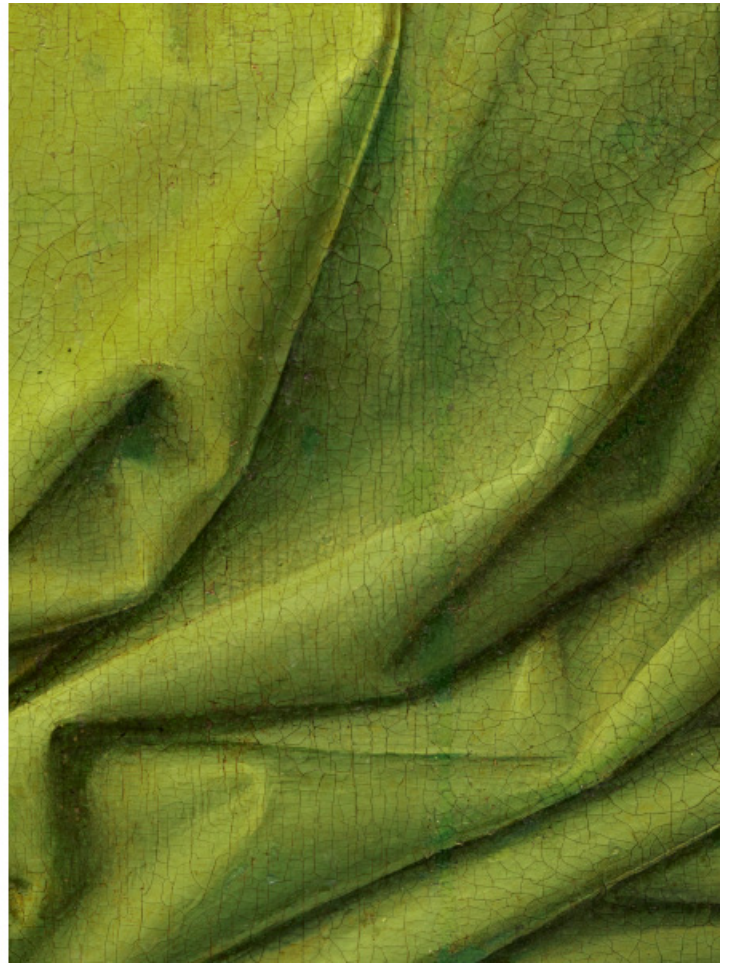
RB Yes. Never here in the atelier. Only at home, at night when I have time. Also, often in Brittany, which is where we grew up. I love drawing when complemented with surfing or just being in the water. For me, drawing is very organic; it's a special activity that has nothing to do with work. I could have been knitting instead – any activity that is a kind of meditation.

**AV Is the satisfaction of the outcome different when drawing than realizing an object?**

RB I love being a designer, but it can be very frustrating: from the initial idea to the physical object in a store or in someone's home; it's years of work – and years of joys and disappointments, because some things you believed in don't work. It's also collective work done with producers, engineers, craftsmen; whereas drawing is the purest form of creation, with no interferences, no technical needs.

**AV You said you've always been drawing?**

RB Yes, I grew up in the countryside and at a very young age, around seven or eight, my parents sent me to the École des Beaux-Arts in Quimper. So I started practicing as did Erwan. And I've been drawing ever since. We were pretty isolated and bored, and drawing was a way to fill the void and fight the solitude. Incidentally, my teachers actually often considered me a bad student because I start drawing a chair from its feet and go all the way up; I start with details. Which is not the way it should be done.



Left: drawing by Ronan Bouroullec. Right: Rogier van der Weyden, *The Magdalen Reading* (detail), before 1438, The National Gallery, London

**AV Your hand is extremely precise.**

RB Yes, just like dancing or playing the piano, it's also physical. It's mastering a technique, a culture of shapes. My first exhibition as a designer was almost 30 years ago, so it's a whole practice. Proportions and shapes are printed in my brain. That's what's paradoxical: it's not intellectualized, it's sensual, instinctive. Yet there's still 40 years of knowledge and experience behind the practice.

**AV Do you seek wonder in your work?**

RB Yes, wonder is important to me; like a shock or an emotion, it's a pleasure in opposition to intellectual, which needs explanations. This is what design lacks. When in music or cinema, wonder is entirely possible; you see something and you cry immediately. When you make a chair, it's more complicated to create this reaction, to take someone's breath away. But I try to get there.

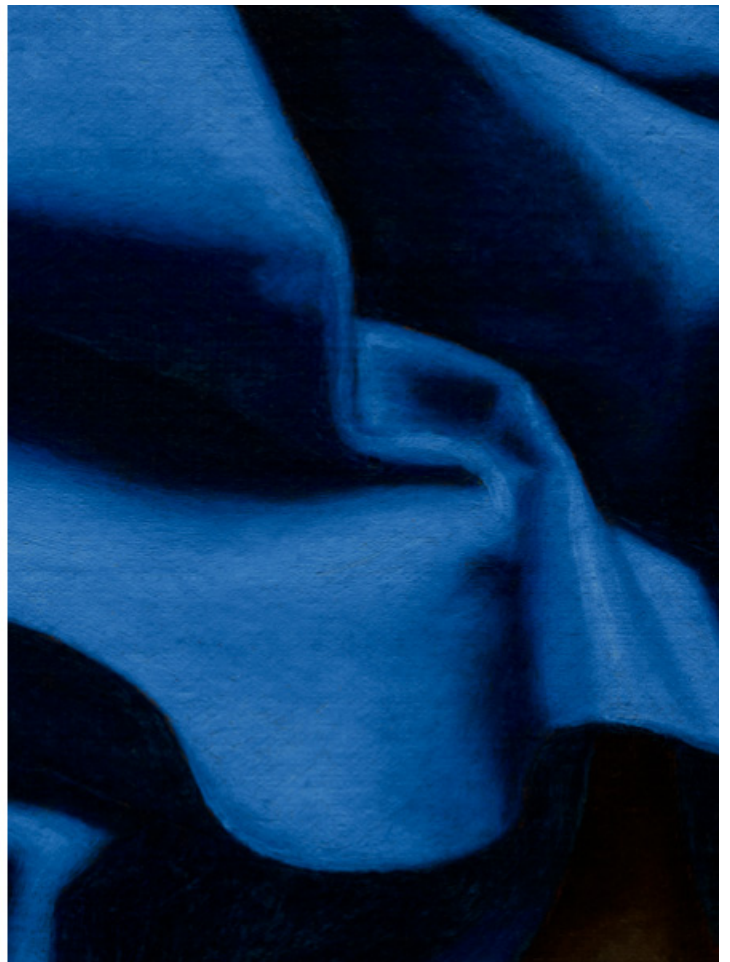
**AV It seems obvious that you are trying to convey dimension – 3D shapes on a 2D page.**

**Is this related to your work as a designer?**

RB Probably, yes. It's a fact, a reality. I work on depth, on volume, translated in very different ways.

**AV By contrast, do you need to draw your designs in order to realize them?**

RB It's interesting, because now I don't need really to make sketches for projects anymore; I simply see them. That's the benefit of being an old designer. So now drawing and design are even more separated; I need to draw more and more, and at the same time I don't need sketches anymore.



Left: drawing by Ronan Bouroullec. Right: Sassoferrato, *The Virgin and Child Embracing* (detail), 1660–85, The National Gallery, London

**AV Are you inspired by classic arts?**

RB No, I'm not very cultured art-wise or even design-wise; and I'm happy to not know too much. I was lucky enough to be interested in design since around the age of 15; I was living in the countryside where there were just a few design books, and I loved that time when I

knew nothing. Each time I saw an image, it was like a treasure. Today, I see very few exhibitions, I try to stay naive. Sometimes when you research something, you see someone had the idea before and you stop right there. If you don't know, you go for it and the final object turns out different anyway.

**AV As this campaign shows, many classical and academic painters have a certain signature when it comes to depicting textiles. Would you say you have a signature?**

RB Maybe in the constructive mode: line after line, like a construction worker with bricks, or how I use lines to build volumes. But it never starts with the silhouette of a shape, because that would mean I have projected an idea. I don't plan on colors, they come naturally. I don't really know how to talk about my drawings, all I can say is it's instinctive and intuitive.

**AV Then the inevitable art question: when do you know a drawing is finished?**

RB With objects it's never finished until it's perfect; on the other hand, with drawings, I'm just happy to know people find them interesting because I don't have specific criteria. But there's a need for it to be quick – in opposition to the lengthy work of design. And I like the adrenaline of this intensity.

*This interview has been edited for length and clarity.*

*Images courtesy of Ronan Bouroullec and National Gallery, London.*

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