

The Artisan Transforming Broken Glass Into Something Beautiful

After two decades at luxury houses including Hermès, Sophie Toporkoff opened a stained glass studio and introduces some of her design sensibilities to the craft.

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Sophie Toporkoff rarely sits. On this fall day in Paris, she is moving swiftly and energetically from one workstation to the next with the music of La Rvfleuze playing in the background, typical of her preference for French rap. She prefers standing while drawing, painting and kilning.

This whirl of activity represents a striking contrast from her old job as creative director at Hermès (and at Maison Margiela before that). In fashion, her days consisted of "meetings all the time," she said, and after 15 years in the industry, she found herself itching for work she could do on her feet.

"I needed more physicality in my job," Ms. Toporkoff said. And she

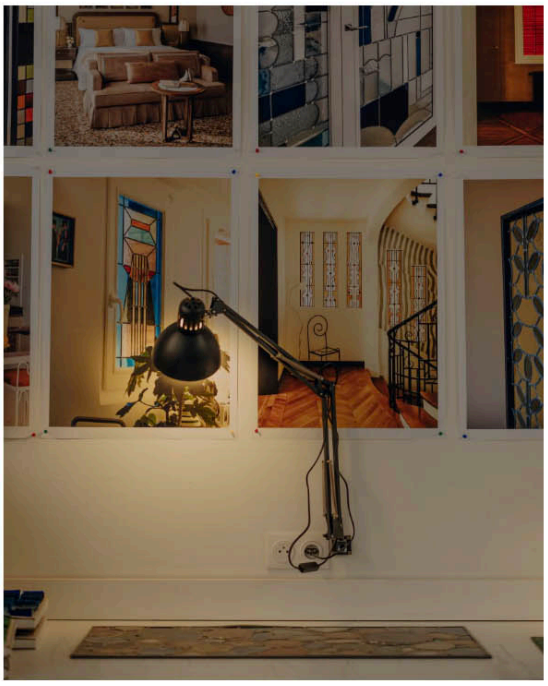
turned to stained glass.

“I genuinely think there’s nothing more beautiful,” she said. “I love all the arts and all the crafts, but stained glass has an extra dimension.”

So in 2023, at the age of 47, she became a student again and began learning the craft. The following year, she passed an exam that showed mastery of the core aspects of making stained glass: drawing and designing patterns; and cutting, painting and assembling glass.



Sophie Toporkoff said she “needed more physicality” in her job, so she left fashion and began working with stained glass.



“I genuinely think there’s nothing more beautiful,” Ms. Toporkoff said.

Ms. Toporkoff said working with stained glass brought together the graphic design training from her youth, her creative direction experience and her “inner nerd.”

The finished product is made of pieces of colored glass, sometimes painted or stained for detail, held together by lead came. Ms. Toporkoff, who describes herself as an artisan rather than an artist, put it more poetically: “I take broken pieces of glass and try to make something beautiful.”





"Saint-Just has the deepest color range you can get," Ms. Toporkoff said of the glass she uses. "It's absolutely gorgeous glass that has these beautiful imperfections.

Ms. Toporkoff wanted to open her own studio instead of going to work for an existing one because she craved the creative freedom of being her own boss. She also worried that it would be difficult to find a job at her age.

"If I had been 20 and starting out, I would have loved to work for someone else for five to 10 years," she said. "I didn't know if anyone would have hired me, an old person who might be annoying with opinions, over someone in their early 20s or even teens."

So three months after passing the exam, she dipped into her savings to open Atelier Toporkoff in the Ninth Arrondissement.

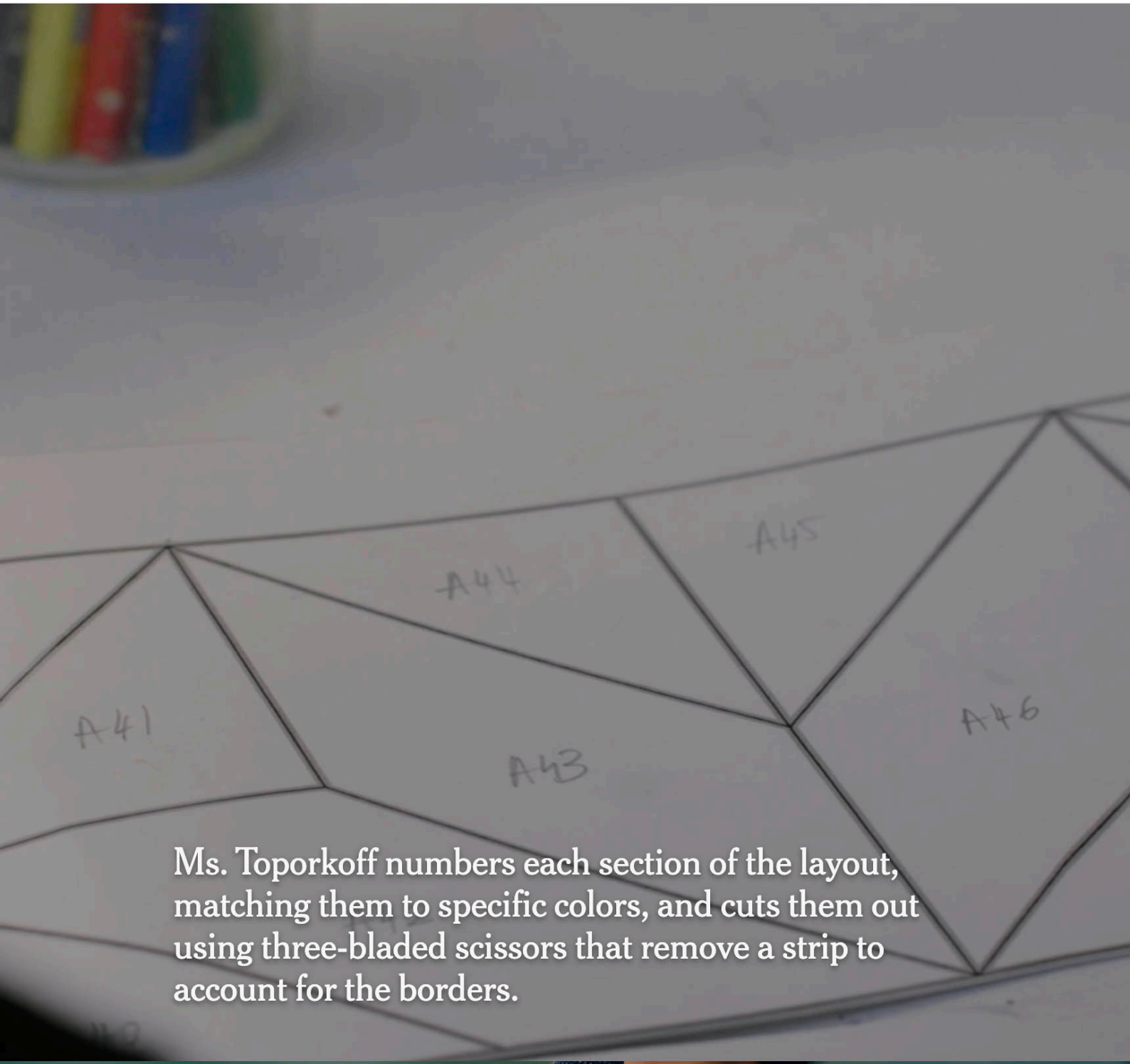
At first, Ms. Toporkoff relied on relationships she already had with architects, interior designers and others in her network to secure work, but people began to find her through word of mouth and Instagram.

Her creative process begins with a brief from a client, typically an architect, a business owner, homeowner or hotel brand. She likes to visit the location where her work will eventually live before she sketches a few ideas. Then she presents black-and-white drawings, graphic sketches, digital layouts or collages to help the client choose a concept.

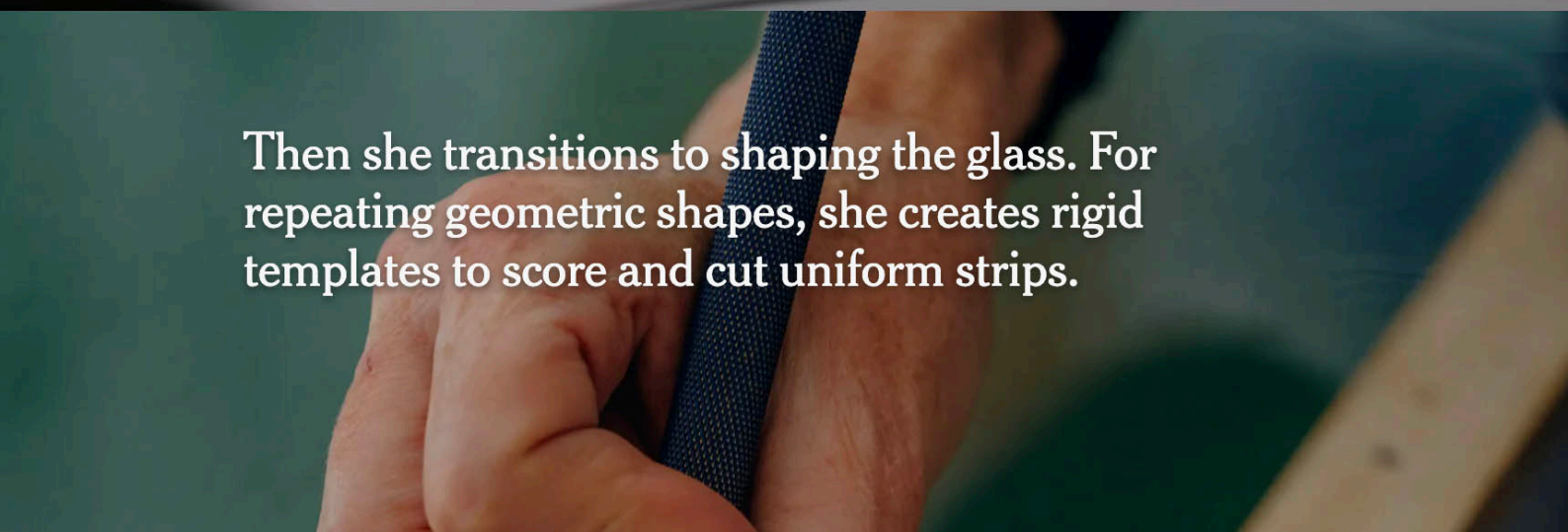
Ms. Toporkoff has found that she prefers working with mouth-blown glass because of its depth of color and texture and natural imperfections like bubbles and ripples. She sources the glass from Saint-Just Glassworks in the Loire region of France.

Before cutting any glass she must get the frame dimensions. With that in hand, Ms. Toporkoff considers how much lead came will be used in the composition so that she can calculate the precise measurements of the glass she has to cut.

Then she creates a full-size master drawing of the panel.



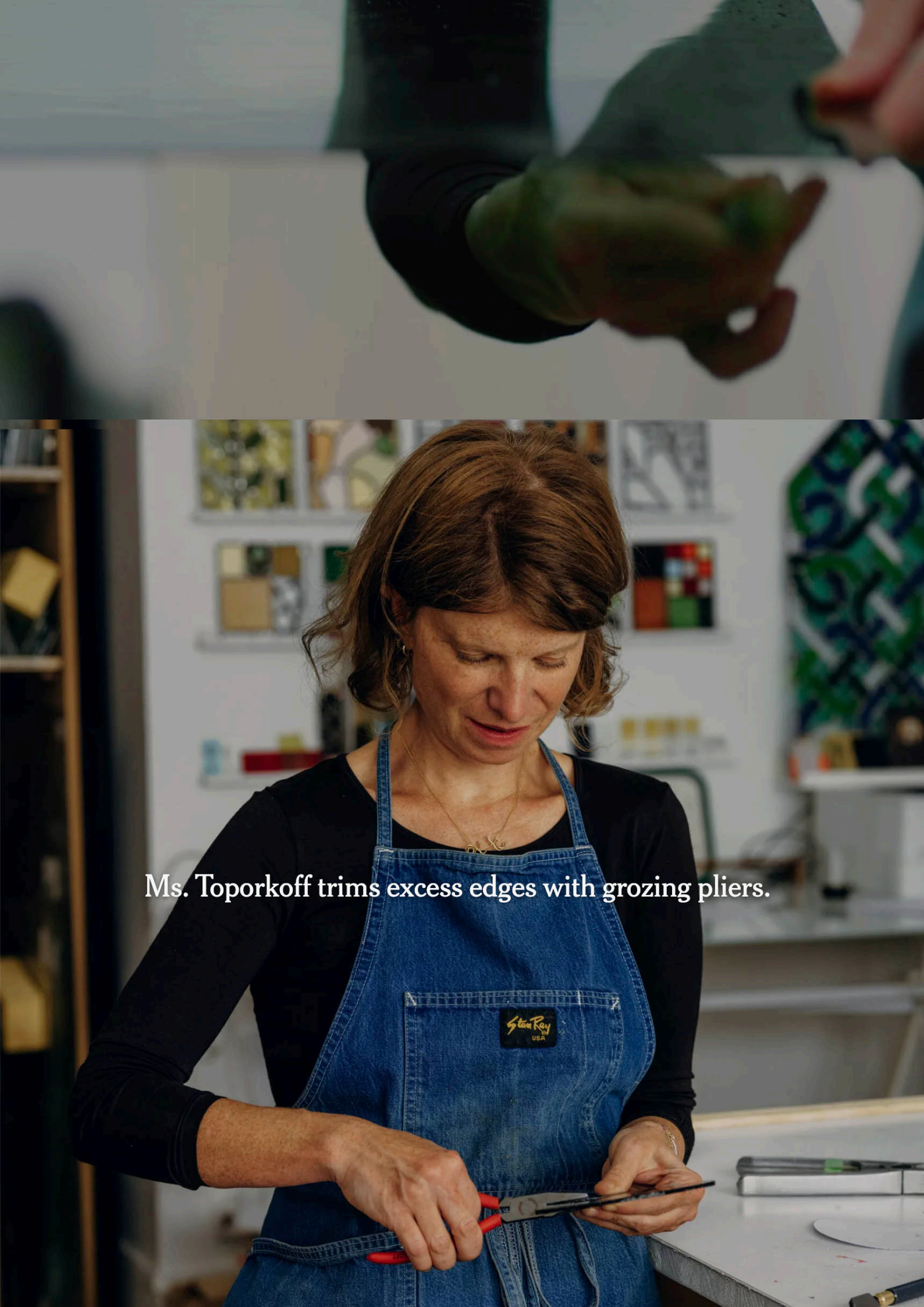
Ms. Toporkoff numbers each section of the layout, matching them to specific colors, and cuts them out using three-bladed scissors that remove a strip to account for the borders.



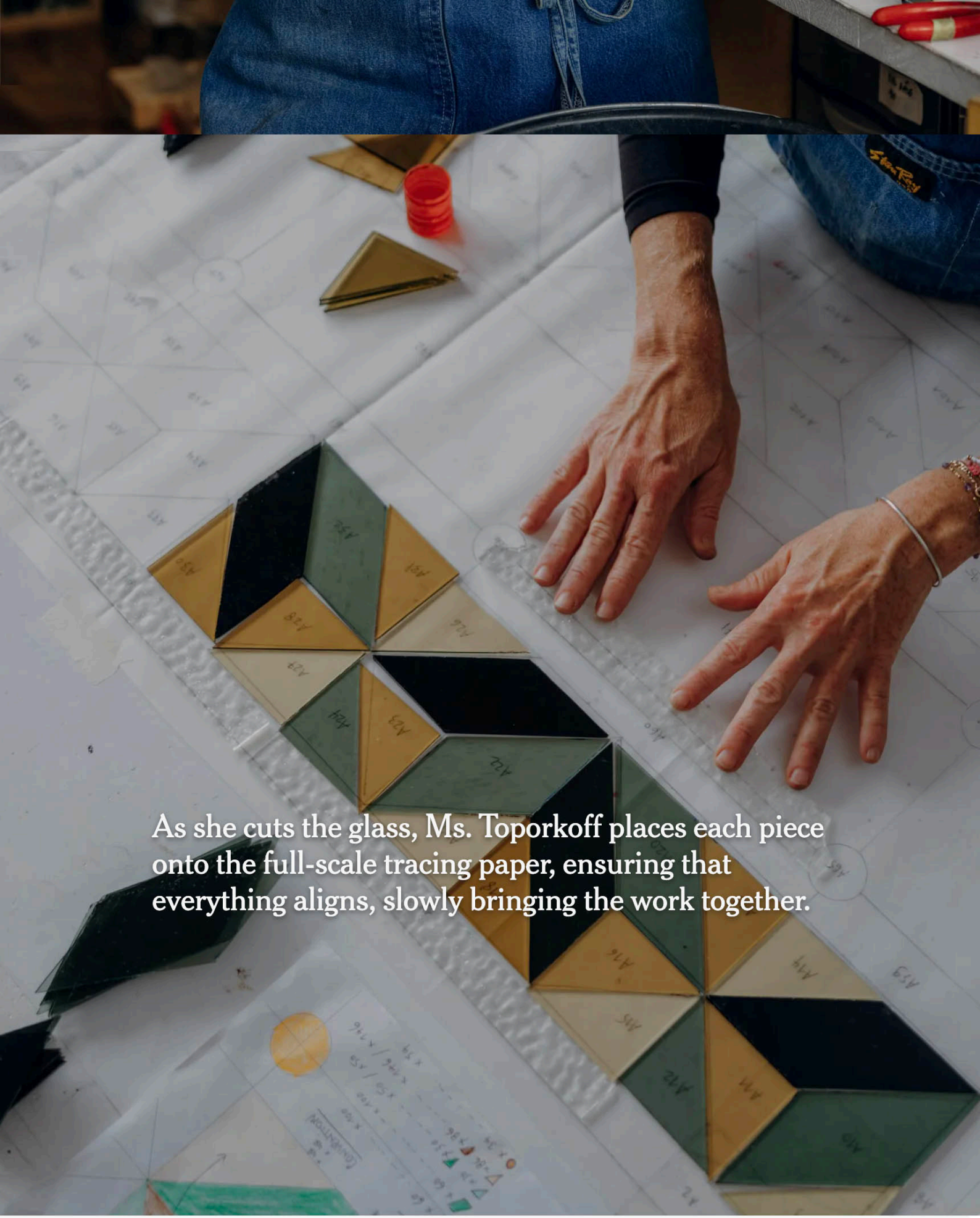
Then she transitions to shaping the glass. For repeating geometric shapes, she creates rigid templates to score and cut uniform strips.



She positions the pieces tightly on the glass sheet before using a tungsten cutter to score the glass surface and snap each piece along the line.



Ms. Toporkoff trims excess edges with grozing pliers.



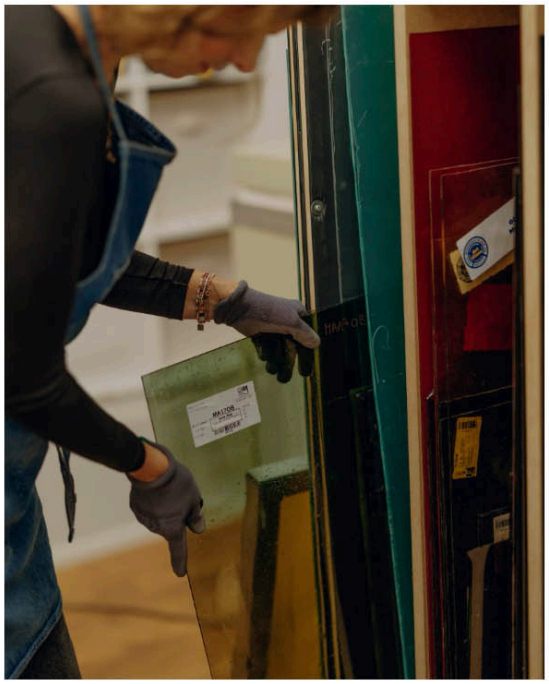
As she cuts the glass, Ms. Toporkoff places each piece onto the full-scale tracing paper, ensuring that everything aligns, slowly bringing the work together.

This year, Ms. Toporkoff was commissioned to create a window panel for a branch of À la Mère de Famille, the oldest chocolate shop in Paris. The client wanted something timeless.

While visiting the shop, Ms. Toporkoff was drawn to a small detail in the chocolatier's floor mosaic — a star in the middle of a broader pattern. She used that star as the geometric base because she loves classic repetitive motifs found in historic stained glass in castles and old churches.



You have to first know where you're going," Ms. Toporkoff said, "and map out every stage of the process in advance."

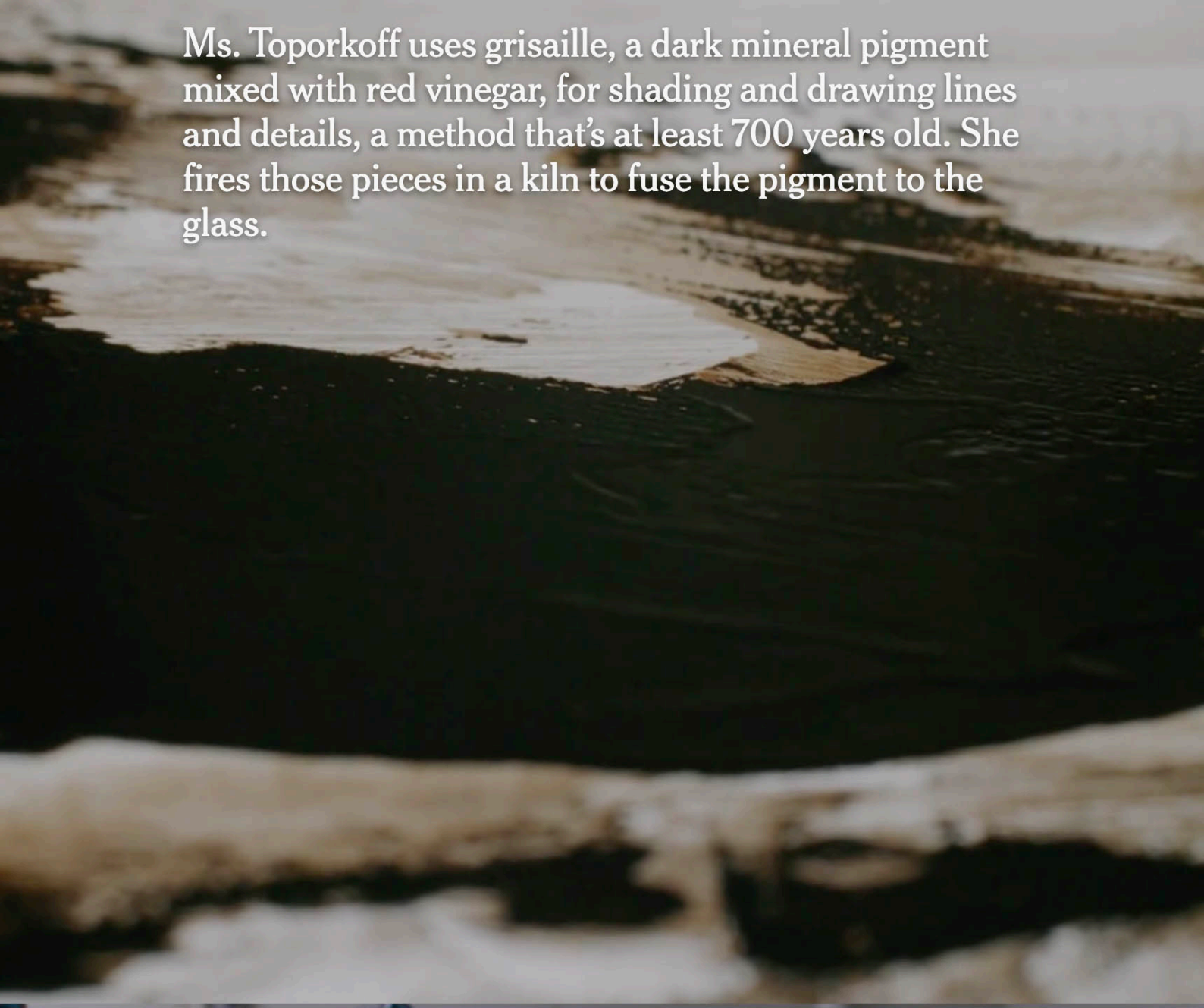


She found that she preferred mouth-blown glass for its natural imperfections and depth of color and texture.

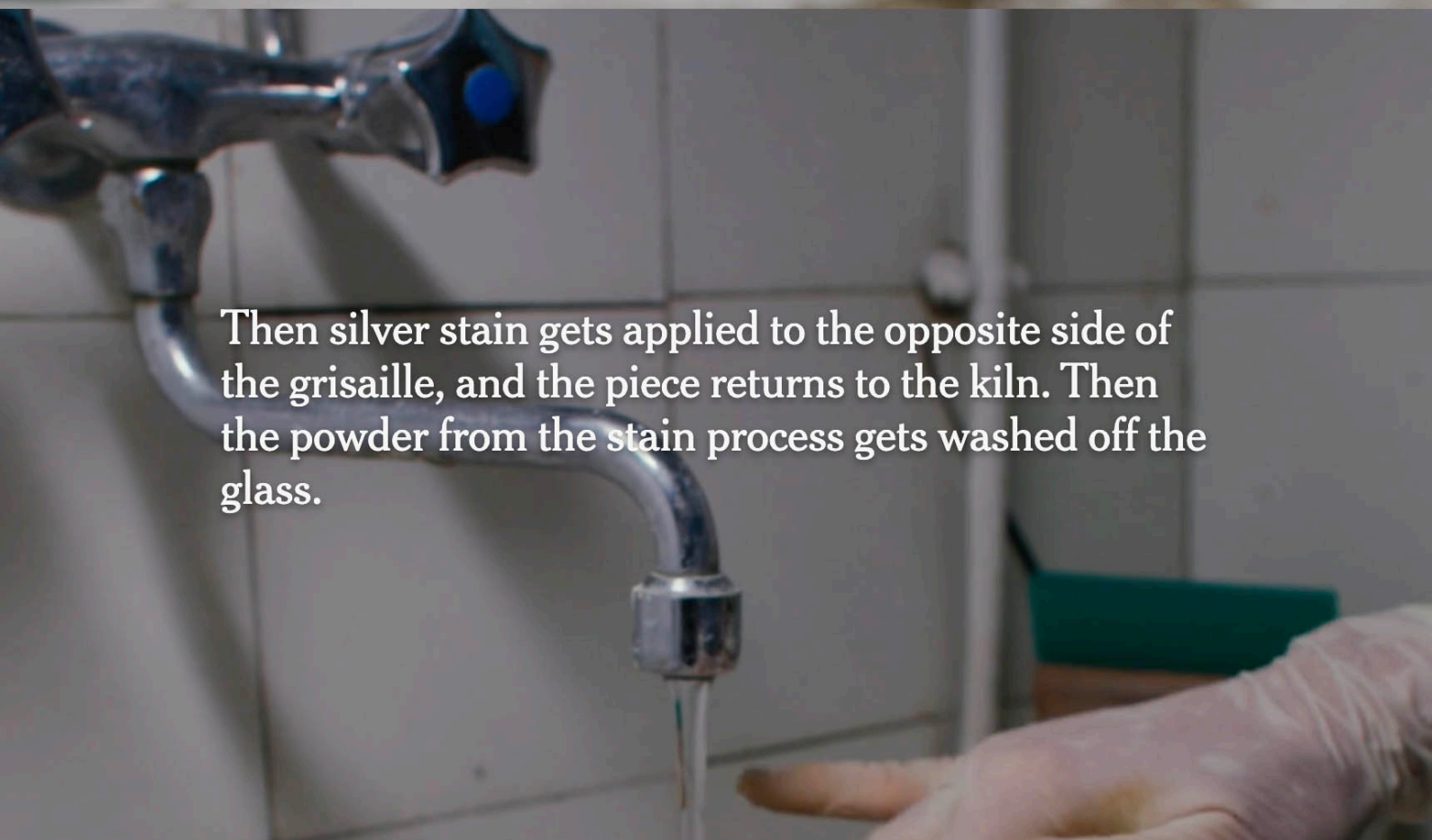
"One thing I learned at Hermès is the art of reinterpretation," she said. "How do you use a pattern or object from 200 years ago and be cool about it, use it with freedom and in a fun way?"

To that end, Ms. Toporkoff opened the design by splitting the geometric star motif to create space for hand-painted details. She introduced whimsical confections related to the shop, such as Eskimo ice cream bars, calissons, chocolates and baba au rhum. And to match the store's shopping bags, she incorporated a bold pop of orange.



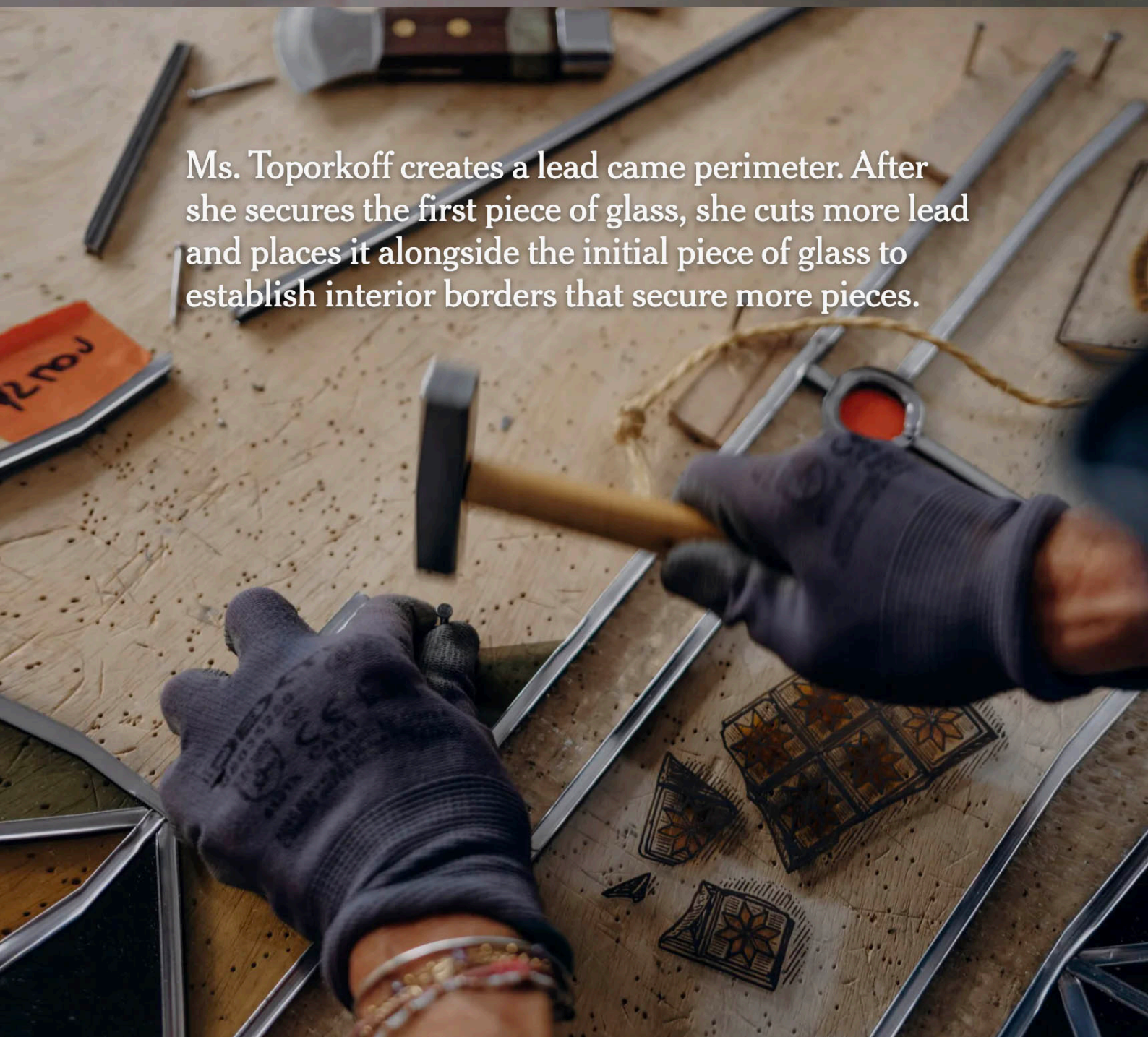


Ms. Toporkoff uses grisaille, a dark mineral pigment mixed with red vinegar, for shading and drawing lines and details, a method that's at least 700 years old. She fires those pieces in a kiln to fuse the pigment to the glass.

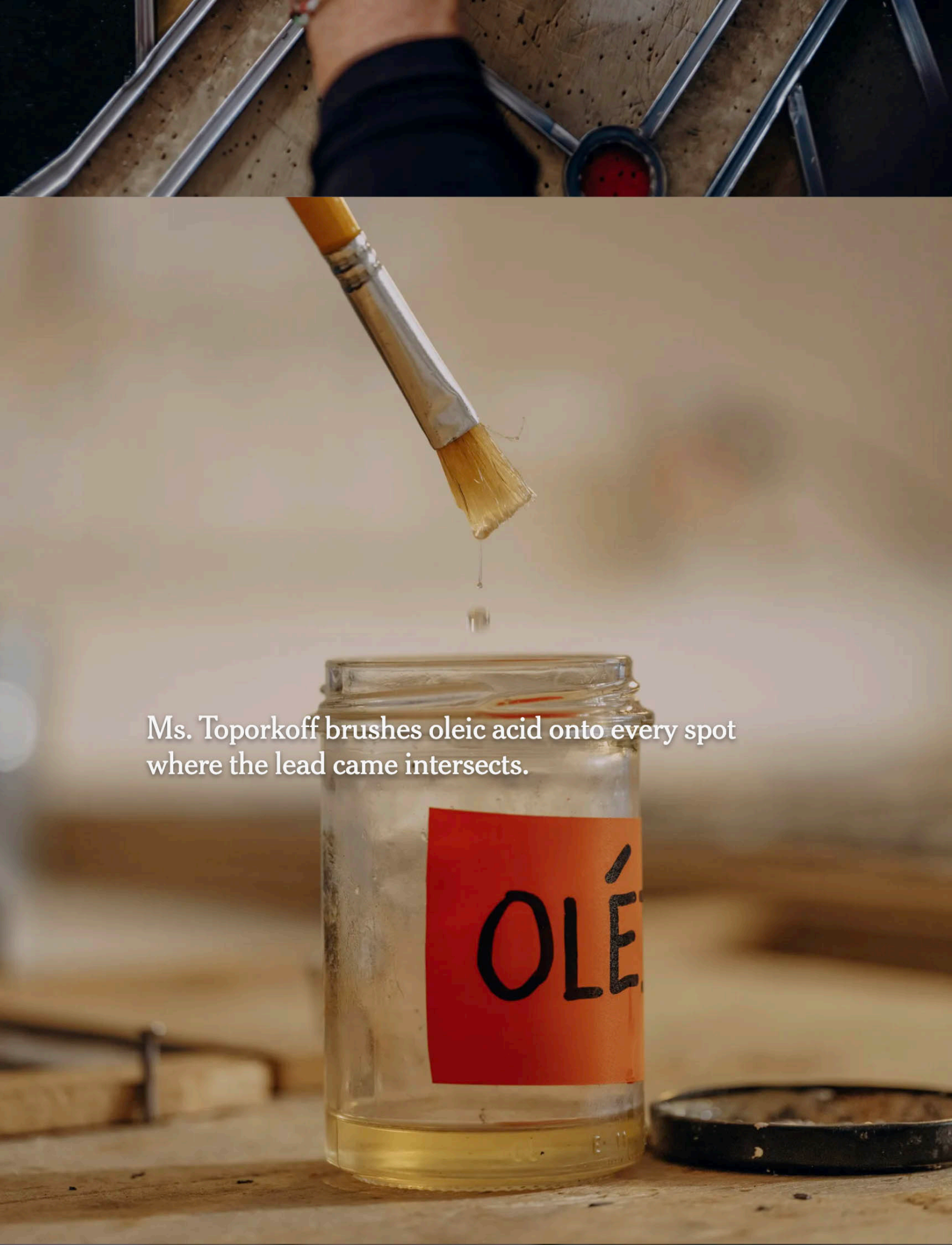


Then silver stain gets applied to the opposite side of the grisaille, and the piece returns to the kiln. Then the powder from the stain process gets washed off the glass.





Ms. Toporkoff creates a lead came perimeter. After she secures the first piece of glass, she cuts more lead and places it alongside the initial piece of glass to establish interior borders that secure more pieces.



Ms. Toporkoff brushes oleic acid onto every spot where the lead came intersects.



Using a hot soldering iron and a tin solder, she welds the connecting points on both sides of the frame. Then she applies a patina to darken the lead, scrubs it down and cleans it up.

Now complete, the piece has been installed into the chocolate shop's storefront, elevating a window with a whimsical yet historical flourish.

She said the process was time-consuming, so "you can't be money-driven." But despite the financial challenges, she said she found this chapter of her career to be the most rewarding because of the satisfaction she derives from seeing the results of her painstaking work.

"You have to first know where you're going, think 20 steps ahead

and map out every stage of the process in advance," she said. "Stained glass is the zero-improvisation art."



Ms. Toporkoff introduced whimsical confections related to the chocolate shop to the design of the stained glass.



The work was installed into the window of the Victor Hugo location of À la Mère de Famille.

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