

By Cathy Whitlock



Interior designer Elizabeth Pynes's Manhattan apartment is a mix of Old World traditional with contemporary. (Photo: Gavin Ashworth)



DESIGNER GENES

INTERIOR DESIGNER ELIZABETH PYNE IS THE LATEST GENERATION OF MCMILLEN ROYALTY.

To prove there is truth in the old adage that “talent is in the genes,” one needs to look no further than interior designer Elizabeth Pyne. A descendant of interior design royalty—her late grandmother Betty Sherrill was founder of McMillen, one of the oldest American design firms, and her mother Ann Pyne remains a principal of the firm today—Pyne represents the firm’s new generation of Sherrill women.

While essentially growing up in the business, interior design was not a clear-cut path. After majoring in art history, the Trinity College graduate began her career at the esteemed Sotheby’s auction house, specializing in Old Master paintings. “I FOUND I LOVED BEAUTIFUL OBJECTS, PAINTINGS, AND FURNISHINGS, AND WANTED TO CREATE AN ENVIRONMENT AND NOT JUST SELL,” Pyne says of the experience that led her to becoming an interior designer at the age of 28. “Sotheby’s was a great training ground, and I learned how to tell if something has intrinsic value and how something beautiful is made. I love to work with people, and make them excited about buying and why they need something,” which are useful tools in the interior design profession.



Learning at the foot of the master, Pyne's grandmother Betty Sherrill taught her the importance of longevity in design, a principle she uses with her own clients. "Whenever I look for a client or buy something for myself, I try and think of the long term. Will I get tired of it or can it be reused in another space? This is useful for many of my (younger) clients who are in rentals or smaller apartments. I encourage them to invest in things now that they can see themselves with for a long time and that could be transferred to other spaces."

"What I also admired about my grandmother was how flexible she was," Pyne says of the design icon that was one of the first of her generation to study and make a successful business of interior design back in 1924. "She would change her mind and never get locked into any ideas. She always made the client happy, no matter what. I realize that you can't enforce your own will or vision, ultimately you have to be flexible. She didn't always have the answer right away and was never scared to say, 'I have to think about it.'" The process of osmosis also became an important teaching tool as her grandmother didn't necessarily school her on the basics. "It was a very fluid

procedure. Through her interiors, I learned the importance of seating groups (a Sherrill trademark), as she had many in her living room."

Ushering in a new generation of clients to the firm became the basis of the concept McMillen Plus, which was started by her mother Ann. "While the commission structure remains the same, we take on smaller projects and attract a younger generation in their twenties and thirties," the designer says of the process that should be a smooth and painless one for clients where the starting budget is not a major consideration. "Lately I have been getting new clients in their fifties and sixties, and no job is too small, such as reupholstering a sofa." Clients have access to the same services as any McMillen client and benefit from the firm's "white glove service," as the designers always meet personally with the vendors, offer great support, and even instill a "no coffee" rule. (They don't walk around the showrooms or enter a client's home with coffee in hand as "it looks sloppy," perhaps a remnant from her grandmother's past.) Some things have changed as designers now wear jeans to work as opposed to white gloves in Sherrill's day.



Left: Three generations of designing women—Elizabeth with her mother Ann Pyne and grandmother Betty Sherrill. (Photo: Jay Ackerman)

Right: Pyne took a page from her grandmother and added lots of seating options via the use of ottomans in her Manhattan living room. The Louis XV velvet chairs provide a nice contrast to the paneled floor to ceiling curtains made with a Nina Campbell fabric by Anthony Lawrence-Belfair. (Photo: Gavin Ashworth)





Butterfly-patterned wallpaper forms a whimsical backdrop in this modern dining room. (Photo: Gavin Ashworth)

Left: Pierre Frey covered dining chairs from Hickory Chair center this dining room in Richmond, Virginia. (Photo: Tony Giammarino)

As a designer in her 30s (34 years of age to be exact), Pyne knows the needs and tastes of her audience. "I think people my age want everything immediately. They do not want to wait. My clients think about investments and they are willing to spend money on lamps, sofas, and artwork rather than lacquered walls." As a designer, she also feels the need to educate people her age on the importance of working with a professional. **"MANY HAVE NEVER HAD AN INTERIOR DESIGNER BEFORE. I TELL THEM THAT WHERE YOU LIVE SETS THE STAGE FOR YOUR WHOLE LIFE. YOU NEED TO WAKE UP AND BE HAPPY WHERE YOU ARE AND FEEL PROUD OF IT. SOME PEOPLE MY AGE PUT THEIR EMPHASIS ON A HANDBAG OVER DESIGN. PEOPLE NEED TO REALIZE THAT INTERIOR DESIGN DOES MAKE A DIFFERENCE IN THEIR LIVES."**

While one traditionally thinks of McMillen as formal, Pyne's work represents a mix of traditional furnishings with contemporary art, decorative objects, and pops of color. Pyne's own apartment

reflects the style of a generation who wants classic design but with a less formal bent. A whimsical Osborne & Little butterfly-patterned fabric, "Papillon," forms the backdrop of her apartment—"It's graphic, not trendy, black and white with touches of gold that packs a lot of punch." Instead of a formal dark mahogany table and an Oriental rug combination for the dining area, the designer selected a contemporary iron and glass by Mathieu Matégot with chairs by René Prou sitting atop a white sheepskin area rug. And keeping her legendary ancestor's spirit alive, Pyne's love of Old Master paintings and charcoal drawings coexist with decorative yellow elephants and Jansen bucket chairs from her grandmother.





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Pyne was named one of House Beautiful's 2015 New Wave designers. And as the baton is passed, there is no doubt her grandmother would be proud.

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Pyne created a soothing open and airy interior for a young Manhattan couple with soft blues and brown as an accent. (Photo: Marco Ricca)