

Interview

Louise Ford talks to Susan Llewellyn



Susan Llewellyn started her interior design company over 30 years ago, and has seen it grow into the leading multi-talented organisation that it is today. She is a fellow and founding member of the BIDA and has lectured and written widely on design.

Louise Ford discovers what inspired her to follow a career in design.

What did you do before art and antiques/interior design?

My life's passion ever since I can remember as a very young child for a treat was to visit a museum, stately home, house of interest or wander around an antique shop. I was also very involved in dance and theatre and I feel that my interior design career has benefited by the latter as Interior Design is creating a set or backdrop to complement the client. The discipline of theatre has been essential as it helps no matter what goes on in your personal life – the "show" must go on.

What was the first antique you bought?

I was about seven or eight when I saved up 10s. 6d. to buy a Victorian dressing table set which consisted of a white china tray and three boxes covered in roses; it is still on my dressing table after all these years.

What brought you into the trade?

Having small children and being on my own it was very difficult to be involved in theatre. My dream was to have an Antique and Interior Decoration shop; this dream came true about thirty-five years ago when I opened

my first shop in Walton Street at Brompton Cross, SW3. I learnt by doing; getting to know what people wanted from their surroundings, and what objects of desire and usefulness did they want to own. The Interior Decoration was very closely linked and both grew and grew. I was able as a result to work in the Middle East as well as Europe, exporting as far as Japan and the USA. This prompted me to open a second shop in Kings Road and also a company in Malta where I decorated at the height of the Maltese Property boom, villas, hotels and a night club.

How do you see your role in the trade?

Both Interior Designers and Antique dealers need each other especially now when Antiques are back in fashion; not only because of their beauty, investment and character, but they are also fulfilling green recycling issues that have come to the forefront in the past five years and are growing more urgent each day.

What do you see for the future?

I am hugely optimistic for both antiques and interior design. The public have a need for the latter in their exceptionally busy

lives and therefore require the service of a professional to guide them through and help them design their most important asset, which is their home. The world is becoming an ever more dangerous place and they need to have a sanctuary of safety, shelter and comfort, their needs to be thought out and carefully designed so that all of their requirements are fulfilled as well as aesthetic qualities being met. They look to someone to trust to help them gain this sanctuary. Once they have confidence in the designer, they trust their recommendations and judgments in purchasing antiques, contemporary art, as well as bespoke designs; therefore interior designers need in turn to have similar relationships with their antique dealer colleagues so they can tap into their expertise and current market trends and prices.





What are you working on at the moment?

My head designer and I have been working incredibly hard putting together three presentations for major refurbishment and design for high-end residential projects. This has taken the last couple of months and it has involved taking the client's brief, sourcing and researching every detail. This has taken long working days and the presentations are now complete. We then presented formally to the clients and I am glad to report they were thrilled by the outcome and have given us the go-ahead to carry out the work and supply our services.

We have been organising a twelve-day trip for interior design students and designers to Buenos Aires which includes visiting Interior Design practices, suppliers and antique shops and two interior design shows which are the biggest in South America. I look forward to telling you all about it on my return. Later in April we are taking another interior design group of students and professionals from the industry and the BIDA to the Milan Salone Internazionale del Mobile.

Jennifer and I are also preparing for a number of lecture circuits. We are carrying out extensive research requiring a lot of time and energy!

Would you ever retire and if so when?

Certainly not. Like my father, an old soldier, I wish to fade away.

What is your favourite film?

I have a number of films that have influenced my interior designs and it is difficult to choose between them, but if I have to, "La Belle et la Bete", Jean Cocteau, as the sets are so extraordinary. I believe interior design is creating a fantasy. Of course I have to be practical but, above all, I want to create something beyond their wildest dreams.

What are your interests outside the world of interior design and antiques?

Because my work is so demanding it is essential to have masses of energy and creativity; therefore it is essential to exercise. I teach yoga in my home to friends. I walk my dog along the river as he is incredibly important to my sense of wellbeing; he often sits in on lectures! As you can see I love research.

I am also a founder and member of the BIDA, British Interior Designers Association. I am very involved in the education and promotional side of operations.

I have had and still I am having such an exciting and fulfilling life. It is very important to help up-and-coming designers who will be our future and will help save our planet. Therefore green issues are very much to the forefront of our practice together with animal issues which our both linked to our environment. □

Watch out for Susan's Interior Design article in the next issue.

In the next issue of

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