

Classic design elegance

Discover how **Spencer-Churchill Designs Ltd** has charmed the modern world of interior design.

BY TANYA BLAKE

Lady Henrietta Spencer-Churchill, eldest daughter of the 11th Duke of Marlborough, launched her own interior design business called Woodstock Designs 33 years ago. Over the years her business has gained an international reputation in the interiors market and seen her move from one success to the next, with a shop in Woodstock and offices in London. She also formed a separate company, Spencer-Churchill Designs, which produces a selection of one-off classic furniture, fabric and wallpaper designs that has earned her equal international success and allowed her to establish a US design company, Spencer-Churchill Designs Inc, in 2003.

It is clear that Lady Henrietta is something of an unstoppable force in the world of interiors and design. Today, she not only continues to run both successful businesses but has 11 historical interiors books to her name, holds lectures around the globe and is regularly involved in charity events and the restoration of her own family home. Knowing all of this, I am keen to discover the secrets behind Lady Henrietta's success.

Lady Henrietta grew up in the stunning period property and ancestral home of Blenheim Palace in Oxfordshire. Built between 1705 and 1722 and designed in the short-lived English Baroque style, it has been home to Henrietta's ancestors for over 300 years, and is also famed for being the birthplace and ancestral home of Sir Winston Churchill. Upon discovering this, I have to ask Lady Henrietta what was it like growing up in such a beautiful setting and how it influenced her chosen career. Lady Henrietta explains that being surrounded by such a wealth of history and heritage from an early age undeniably contributed to her lifelong love and study of art and design; 'Growing up, living in, and seeing many beautiful period properties and having a natural curiosity about how houses evolved gave me an early interest in design and architecture. I then studied art history in Florence and Paris, gaining more knowledge and appreciation about other cultures. This made me realise I wanted to follow a career in the arts and led to my decision to go to the Inchbald School of Design.'



Woodstock Designs

The first interior design school in Europe, Inchbald provides training in high-end Interior Decoration and Design. Attending the school was the final piece of the puzzle for Lady Henrietta, who soon after graduation formed her highly successful interior design company, Woodstock Designs, in 1981. Combining knowledge of period design with current trends and technologies Woodstock Designs specialises in residential design from renovations of period properties to new build homes and undertakes commissions worldwide.

Lady Henrietta states that success in the field of interior design depends upon the flexibility of your design process and the ability to adapt your own personal style and expertise to take in both the style and period of the house as well as the client's lifestyle and tastes. With this in mind I'm intrigued to find out how Lady Henrietta would describe her own personal taste. In doing so she also perfectly describe the ethos of her interior design company; 'I guess it is classical rather than traditional, which in my view means respecting the origins of a property and trying to preserve the historic reference whether 50 or 400 years old.'

The challenge, Lady Henrietta informs me, can come when working on newer properties, where it is more about adding character than preserving it. It becomes clear when she tells me about one of her most memorable and enjoyable projects, a very large new build house in Invernesshire in Scotland, that this is a challenge she relishes. 'It took three to four years but gave me the chance to be really creative as you were working from scratch with the architect so every single detail had to be designed. We had some amazing plasterwork and woodwork and truly talented craftsmen.'

Spencer-Churchill Designs

Her career has regularly brought her into contact with skilled craftsmen, often using one-off or custom-made materials in her interior designs. Seeing such beautiful items made first-hand was simply too interesting a challenge for Lady Henrietta to pass up. She set up her second business Spencer-Churchill Designs, using her own knowledge of classic English design to make bespoke furnishings and accessories to sell to a global market. This range includes furniture, fabrics, lighting and accessories with the US company Maitland-Smith and a rug collection with Loloi, with new designs set to come out this year.

Lady Henrietta has managed to tap into a cultural desire for restoration and traditional design that has resurfaced over the past decade. I ask Lady Henrietta why she thinks our modern tastes have taken a turn for the nostalgic. 'Period design appeals to many people, as it is part of our history and culture and gives you the opportunity to respect the quality and diversity of the past and perhaps bring a certain romance to design. I think in the UK we have been brought up with that understanding and therefore have a natural appreciation of period design whereas in many areas in the US, through lack of preservation and the desire for modern comforts there are fewer old houses, so when people build a new house they want to try and emulate the past but in a 21st-century way.'

Spencer-Churchill Designs' success in the US market has



been phenomenal and much of Lady Henrietta's design projects are now commissioned from across the pond. So what advice can she give to similar companies trying to break into the US market, especially during this time of global recession? She is the first to admit that it is a difficult time to begin and a tough market to break into as there are so many successful US designers out there. Lady Henrietta attributes much of her personal success in breaking into the US market to her book tours that took her all over the country and proved to be an extremely successful PR and marketing tool.

However, overall her business advice is straightforward; set yourself apart from the mass market, be unique and desirable, affordable but by no means cheap. Overall the key is simply quality. If you trust in the quality of your product, your service and your company the customers will surely follow. We cannot help but think that with the continued successes of Spencer-Churchill Designs that Lady Henrietta is most definitely a follower of her own advice. ■

Spencer-Churchill Designs Ltd

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