



Exclusive Interview

Alexa Hampton is the president of Mark Hampton, LLC in New York. A perennial A-list designer, she is the author of two decorating books, and has lines at Kravet and Hickory Chair. We talk with Hampton about her rigorous training, the untimely circumstances of taking over her late father's firm and her love of classical art, architecture and interiors.

ALEXA HAMPTON

interview by LAURA BAUGHMAN

SAVE THE DATE

Thursday May 19, 2016

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Alexa Hampton
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Hampton's living room in New York blends European antiques, Grand Tour artwork and her own furniture designs.

Your late father, Mark Hampton, was recently lauded as one of the 20 greatest interior designers of all time by *Architectural Digest*. What was it like growing up with him and did you always want to be a designer?

Yes, I always wanted to do it, and because I could draw, I would look at my father and think, 'Hey, he's a person I have things in common with. I should look at what he's doing.' So that's what started the ball rolling.

What did you study in school? Art history?

No. I went to Brown and I studied literature and history because I knew I was going to go to grad school. Both my parents went to grad school and got their master's. We were a very education focused family and I knew my father would not have let us approach it as a finishing school. It was to be taken seriously and in a scholarly way.

After Brown, where did you enroll?

I went to the Institute of Fine Arts at NYU. It's where my father got his master's. It's where John Pope-Hennessy taught. It's THE PLACE. But you cannot say that you're going to be a

decorator if that's where you want to go. It's all art and architecture, and is certainly not a trade school, which I actually found really sobering. However, if you are me or my father, or anyone else who loves art and architecture and is planning to be a designer, then you couldn't be more inexplicably connected. If you love Caravaggio, and you see deep shadows and contrast, those are the things that inform your understanding of color and composition. You can't dismiss the meaning of art.

So I took those classes, obviously, because I had spent my life looking at those paintings and buildings. I mean the first slide they showed in class was of the Brancacci Chapel, and I was like 'Oh yea, you walk in the door and that Masaccio fresco is on your left.' I knew them backwards, forwards.

So graduate school was great, but it was incredibly demanding. The German was just a killer. It was part of the demise of my pursuit of my master's. I'd grown up learning French. I pretend to speak Spanish and bits of Italian, neither of them successfully. But if you're going to get your master's at the Institute, you have to

learn German. You can't be an art historian and not learn German. So I realized that, for good or for bad, I wanted to be working.

What a fortunate decision. Not only did you work closely with your Dad during the last part of his life, but you transitioned quickly into a leadership role. What was that like?

There was so much love for my father in the industry, and so much goodwill, that I was afforded the luxury of figuring it out. And you know when people say, 'You are so fortunate. You have a beloved parent in the field.' You know, I really was. I mean, it was so unfortunate, his death, but yes, I had incredible good fortune in that I was given that room, that faith, that encouragement and love, just on the basis of people's love for him. It was a really wonderful thing.

Let's talk about style. We are becoming so casual as a society, yet some of us still yearn for those classically-inspired formal rooms. What does this say about us?

Well, it's important for me to be able to say that I like those things without saying that that is the person I need to be. I'm still a slob, and I



Hampton's 10th anniversary furniture collection for Hickory Chair debuted at the Spring Market Show in 2015. She also designs woven fabrics and trims for Kravet Fabrics and carpets for Stark Carpet.



ROSY COMES TO PORTLAND

Hampton has a Portland connection. Her great grandfather, Austin Flegel, was a Portlander who lived in Thailand as an economic adviser. In 1953, he and his wife donated a female elephant from Thailand to the Portland Zoo and named her Rosy in honor of the city's signature bloom. More than 100,000 Portlanders lined the streets to greet Rosy when she arrived.



eat on top of my bed wearing my husband's boxer shorts. But I really love a lot of fancy things and I feel comfortable indulging my love of certain looks.

It seems like there is a long trend in interior design moving away from formal interiors. Do you agree?

Well, for me, I went through a big period where I didn't want to use trim. I didn't want fringe. I didn't want tassels. I just was like, 'Enough already!' I had to cleanse my palette and go off the decorative saw. I wanted everything sleek and graphic.

That coincided with the New York espousal of mid-century modern, then beige, which then became gray. First it was avant garde when Axel Vervoordt did it in Belgium and now it has become synonymous with Restoration Hardware.

But I'm hoping that the pendulum will swing back like it always does. It has for me. I've gone from a much more graphic look to embracing maximalism again. And it's probably a little more than the normal person, because I'm in the industry, and I know what the outer edges of that can mean. But I do think, culturally, that we are on the path back. Then we'll go back and forth. Because when it hits the masses and it's ubiquitous, don't you want to go home and have things be different?

Your Instagram feed, @alexahamptoninc, is so much fun. You delight in everything from the Sargent paintings at the Met to bright blue lamps at a HomeGoods in D.C. Is there design inspiration all around us?

Yes, I find inspiration everywhere, whether it's a crown moulding on a building or some cool textile, or a Tory Burch dress, or a travel book.

There came a point in my life, when I was so young and so concerned about being serious that I confused seriousness of purpose with a lack of amusement. Then when I got old enough, I realized, 'If I'm not having the most fun I can have on every single project, then my work suffers.' I do much better when I'm excited. So, I really am available to be inspired. I'm looking for fun. I'm looking for the interesting thing.

Is there anything that's got you fired up right now?

I'm always in a state of being fired up. I'm working for a couple right now who have a ridiculous modern art collection. It's the world of art in which I'm the least comfortable or knowledgeable. So I'm loving learning about it. And the interiors that they most adore and are inspired by are Georgian interiors. We're going really, really traditional -- in a way that is faithfully traditional -- so this is just so much fun I can't stand it.

Wow. That art is just going to pop.

Isn't it? It's going to be astonishing. It's like they were teleported from the Georgian era into the contemporary art scene. They have such great taste.

I attract people who have very serious interest in design, whether they learned it in class or have had a bunch of houses and love doing it. These people are knowledgeable

ALEXA HAMPTON

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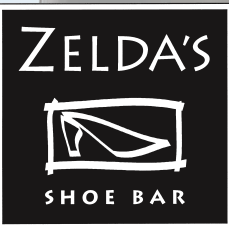
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ALEXA HAMPTON

Exclusive Interview (continued)

about art and architecture. And I'm so grateful because it makes it so much more interesting.

We know you fall hard for decorative antiques, architectural souvenirs and other neoclassical treasures from stores like Piranesium in San Francisco and John Rosselli Antiques in New York. What other stores are your top picks for furnishings and accessories?

On the West Coast, I would say Therien & Co. It's in Los Angeles. In New York, I love Niall Smith.

We know from your Instagram feed that you travel a lot. You were recently in China and Europe. Are you working on any projects overseas?

Well I have worked in China. And I'm considering a hotel project there. And I'm working in France. And I've got great projects in New York. I do travel a lot. The travel is a little crazy.

What is it like to work in China?

I think what's happening in Chinese design right now is fascinating in that they had this pause button put on them during the Cultural Revolution. They have this great historic Asian design history. And they have the great Speakeasy Era of Deco China. Then they paused. America is the closest thing you have to having a clean slate, and we all try on different styles all the time, but we have much more fluency with those styles, whereas in China, you see a lot of false French design in China. You see a pseudo Palladian villa with an oculus that's 15 feet in diameter. So their traditional design is emergent, but their modern design is developing at a much more rapid clip.

What's your ideal girlfriend's getaway?

My idea of a perfect weekend is being with my kids and my husband just because I travel enough the rest of the time. Also, it includes a lot of sleep.

What's left on your To Do list?

I want to do everything. I don't need to triumph at everything, but I want to do everything. Porcelain. Flatware. I really want to do paint colors. Really, really. And I want to do some building materials, some structural stuff like hardware or crown mouldings.

When you finish a huge project, what's your favorite way to celebrate it?

Well, it's never, "Oh, it's over." The evolution is more subtle. But heavy drinking always seems to work for me. And cheese -- cheese is great for all kinds of moments. I love it when people say, "I'm an emotional eater." I'm like, "Me too. I eat when I'm happy. I eat when I'm sad. I eat when I have any emotion."



Hampton is the author of two critically acclaimed design books, "The Language of Design" from 2010 and "Decorating in Detail" from 2013.

Alexa Hampton
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