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Elizabeth Dinkel

Classic Décor With An Elegant And Contemporary Dash Of Chic



INTERVIEW BY DIANE DORRANS SAEKS

With her confident and refreshing approach to interiors, Elizabeth Dinkel has captured the attention of the California design world. Based first in San Francisco, where she gained a passionate following, she moved to Los Angeles in 1995 and has diversified her portfolio. Deeply knowledgeable and experienced in classical design, Dinkel shakes it up with jolts of color, unexpected textures and a joyful approach to life.

Elizabeth Dinkel, founder of Elizabeth Dinkel Design, Los Angeles. OPPOSITE A paneled library in Brentwood has walls painted by Danny Franzen to simulate antique boiserie. The room is enriched by "Sirenas" bronze wall sconces by Jean de Merry, Los Angeles, antique French Art Deco bronze chandelier from Holmes-Samsel Antiques, and antique Georgian mahogany library steps from Daniel Stein Antiques, San Francisco. One pair of bookcases cleverly hides a separate hidden bar behind bookcase paneling. "The antique pieces are what give this project its own identity and individual style," said Dinkel. "I try to impart to my clients the importance of collecting or acquiring antique or vintage pieces to give each project its own particular character."

> CH You design interiors around the country and have gained clients among a discerning California clientele. When did you decide to become a designer?
ED I have been exposed to the world of interior design my whole life, via my mother's company, Leta Austin Foster & Associates, however my decision to follow the 'family business' did not come until my mid-twenties. After graduating from Georgetown University I spent a few years in television news production and convinced myself that I needed a change. I went back to school and took classes at Parsons School of Design and the New York School of Interior Design before I began my apprenticeship with my mother's company out of New York. That's how it all began.

CH Did you formally study architecture?
ED While completing my undergraduate degree at Georgetown University I took courses on the history of architecture. The breadth of my design schooling came later on from the classes I took at the New York School of Interior Design.

CH When and where did you found your own firm?
ED After working for about twelve years running the various locations of Leta Austin Foster (New York, San Francisco and Los Angeles respectively), I decided to branch off to start my own firm, Elizabeth Dinkel Design Associates, on Melrose Avenue in West Hollywood. My work has been very intense and it's very exciting and involving.

CH Which design movement has inspired you most?
ED The Modernist and Art Deco movements incorporated with the traditional styling I adopted from my mother liven and freshen design up to create my own updated style. Specific designers from these periods that I love—my icons—include Mies van der Rohe, Syrie Maugham, Billy Baldwin, Phillip Johnson, Eero Saarinen. Each of these designers used clean lines and really pushed the openness of a home toward the outdoors. I try to incorporate these same ideas into my own work—just with a more modern beat. I also like to use classic furniture pieces from these specific designers, such as the Barcelona chaise from Mies van der Rohe reinterpreted in Brunswig & Fils' beautiful "Leopard Velvet" or even a lovely silk velvet, as statement pieces



in buildings with good traditional bones—to make the rooms more interesting and relevant to today's culture.

CH Who has been the most important mentor as you started and ran your own business?

ED Having started my career working for my mother, she became an important mentor when I founded my own firm. It was through the experience I gained working with her that I was even able to handle going out on my own and she still, to this day, gives me client and business advice when I'm in a bind. I also have strongly relied on the advice and styling of my good friend Michael Tedrick, the leading San Francisco interior designer. Michael has a very pure sense of style and everything is a very clean interpretation of traditional, very refined and elegant. I absolutely love everything he does, and because we have a very similar style aesthetic he's proven to be a wonderful sounding board. I appreciate his insights and wisdom, always.

CH Which designer has been your greatest inspiration?

ED The Paris based fashion company, House of Lanvin, makes some of my favorite clothes and the attention to detail and European influence in the clothes are something that have really inspired me in my own work. I love how Alber Elbaz, the Lanvin designer, makes clothes that are truly beautiful, timeless, incredibly detailed yet understated and elegant. The mix of fabrics and details, such as a tiny ruching on a skirt hem or bodice can be similarly applied to a curtain leading edge or pillow trim with beautiful effect.

From an interior design perspective, Stephane Boudin of Maison Jansen had a similar effect on me. His classic work is essentially beautiful interiors with the utmost attention to detail. I've read about all the amazing houses he designed—Elsie DeWolfe's house, palaces for the Shah of Iran, the Kennedy White House—and just the scope and success of these interiors are inspiration!

I especially love his use of full height bookshelves in rooms other than just the library. They really make the room look more livable and intelligent. One of my favorites of his interiors with bookshelves is the entry hall at Babe and Bill Paley's house at 820 Fifth Avenue in New York. The creamy color of the walls in conjunction with the intricate wood parquet floors and the walls of books create a very masculine, yet truly beautiful, feel to this gallery. And his Chinese altar tables add just the right amount of color and interest to an otherwise simple space.

CH What is your favorite interior of all time?

ED Although I'm not really sure it qualifies as an interior, the curved loggia at the Duke and Duchess of Windsor's 1927 Chateau de la Croe in the South of France is one of the prettiest places ever. There is the wonderful full height awning-stripe curtains and the simple dark wicker furniture that are so evocative of an era gone by. This villa was nestled among the pine trees



In a breakfast room in Los Angeles, Dinkel chose a French antique toile and crystal chandelier with star detailing from Blanchard, London, a pair of Italian 19th century painted toile wall sconces from Carlton Davidson, London, a French provincial antique vintner's table, and English side chairs with upholstered seat cushions of Alan Campbell "Zig Zag" in jungle green.

CH The design books you read again and again for ideas and inspiration?

ED Though it's not really a design book, I've found a great amount of inspiration and influence from "The Remains of the Day" by Kazuo Ishiguro (Knopf, 1989). Set in England in the 1930s (like seemingly everything I am inspired by and love), the novel is really a period piece that gives a sense of the traditional, formal, aesthetic and lifestyle of the era—an era with strong influence on my own style. The ideas of proper social etiquette and traditional design and how these influence a home are really important when considering the detailing of a project and how to make a space livable.

For specific detailing and space planning inspiration the reference books I refer to daily come from the same era as Ishiguro's novel. Dorothy Draper's "In the Pink" by Carleton Varney (Pointed Leaf Press, 2006) and "Billy Baldwin Decorates" by Billy Baldwin (Scribner, 1976). I also admire "Class Act: William Haines Legendary Hollywood Decorator" by Peter Schifando (Pointed Leaf Press, 2005) and "Frances Elkins: Interior Design" by Stephen M. Salny and Albert Hadley (W.W. Norton & Company, 2005) all have their bindings bent open at least once a week by someone on my design team. Draper's famous Hollywood Regency style has been especially influential lately with some new projects I've been working on in the Los Angeles area.

CH Who would be your dream dinner guests?

ED I feel slightly like a one trick pony and nepotistic with this answer but I'll have to start with my mother. She's a fabulous conversationalist and that which she doesn't know she makes up! Then on a similar note I'd have to invite my husband, Aaron Meyerson. He's one of the

on the rocks above the Mediterranean in a period of design history I happen to adore which makes it all the more significant to me. Photos of the chateau are produced in "The Private World of the Duke and Duchess of Windsor" by Hugo Vickers (Abbeville Press 1996).

CH Which is your favorite interior you've seen on your travels?

ED I was awed by the beauty of Villa D'Este on Lake Como, Italy. It was one of the many spots my husband and I stayed during our honeymoon in Italy and it was such a delight. The gardens are magnifi-

cent and the design of every room, even the guest rooms which tend to be rather generic at most hotels, are truly wonderful. The paint colors (classic blue/greys and creamy butter yellows) the architectural details (the molding and the curvature of the ceiling in the main hallway is fantastic!), the beautiful European antique commodes in the guest rooms. I love everything about this hotel. It's one of those places I think of constantly when looking for inspiration in my own work. If only I had a client with a home on Lake Como so I could have an excuse to return to Villa D'Este!

most intellectual people I know with such a brilliant, funny mind. A few writers must be considered, probably Truman Capote, Edith Wharton and André Leon Talley. Capote was a masterful storyteller who would be sure to keep all ears turned his way. Wharton wrote of the New York style and manners I was raised on which still influence the manner in which I design homes. André Leon Talley, editor at large of *Vogue*, would add a cooler element to the conversation. Another designer being obviously necessary, I'd select Elsie de Wolfe as she represents one of the first truly influential female designers. So much to discuss on how the industry has since changed! I'm an animal lover, so I'd have to invite Jane Goodall. I've been planning a trip to Africa for ages, though because of my busy schedule it keeps getting postponed.

CH Favorite restaurants?

ED My seemingly pretentious answer, the restaurant at Il Pellicano Hotel in Porto Ercole, Italy. I ate here on my honeymoon years ago and I still dream of how wonderful the ambiance and food were. A new favorite is Sant Ambroeus, one of my favorite Italian restaurants ever, in New York's West Village. It's the perfect neighborhood haunt. I love dining alfresco there on a warm summer night. On the west coast I like The Slanted Door in the Ferry Building in San Francisco. My husband threw me a surprise birthday party there last year and it reminded me how much I utterly adore San Francisco. It has the most wonderful views and great Vietnamese food.

CH Favorite piece of furniture?

ED I love glass-top desks with metal sawhorse legs. The concept has been reproduced and reinterpreted numerous times by many different designers. I last purchased a version of it from Ralph Lauren Home, called the "Highbridge" desk. Williams Sonoma Home makes its own version of the table called the "Mason." It's so versatile and can be used as a table or a desk. Its very open and unobtrusive, and I love the utilitarian feel of the sawhorse base.



CH Favorite paint color you use often?

ED I'll have two: Farrow & Ball "Pointing" which is a beautiful pinky-blush color which looks beautiful next to pure white woodwork and Benjamin Moore "Acadia Green." It's almost a non-color, a grey-blue-green, and works really well as a backdrop in both modern and traditional venues.

CH Which fabric could you use over and over?

ED Alan Campbell "Zig Zag" is a great print because it's graphic and really versatile. It's a modernist linen/cotton blend and is available through Quadrille at the Pacific Design Center. My office has used it for upholstery (big and small), curtains and pillows. It really works for nearly any possible application and it comes in great bright vibrant colors. I particularly like the 'Chocolate' brown and 'Inca Gold'—a rich saturated yellow.

CH Favorite travel destination—and why?

ED I really do love Paris. The food is amazing and the history is rich. Another favorite: New York. It always feels like home.

CH What do you enjoy most about being a designer?

ED Working with clients that have the courage to give creative license. Trust me—they are few and far between!

CH Advice for young designers?

ED Solid, specific and comprehensive contracts are key. I'd also have to mention how important it is to be selective when signing up new clients. You are interviewing them as much as they are interviewing you. This applies even if you are desperate. The work you do becomes your reference for future work and if you wouldn't want to put it in your portfolio, you shouldn't do it. Always aim for quality—in everything. 