

Sheila Bridges

Using rich colors and refined furnishings, this New York decorator creates a classic style for today

ELLE DECOR: How has the design world changed since you started out?

SHEILA BRIDGES: Twenty years ago design was an elitist, closed profession. With the Internet, social media, and television, good design is now accessible to basically everyone. You can buy a Thomas O'Brien lamp or a John Derian plate at Target.

ED: How have new technologies helped you?

SB: I'm now on Twitter and Facebook, which I never thought would happen in a million years. They help bridge the gap between me and younger clients and designers. Building new relationships is important in this field.

ED: What hasn't technology been able to improve upon?

SB: Shopping online will never replace the thrill of the chase. Finding the perfect giltwood table hidden in the back of a store, having to practically dig it out, brings a whole different level of satisfaction. Design is tactile and textural.

ED: What do design fans want?

SB: There will always be clients who are willing to wait for a custom piece of furniture, but the majority of the world today—especially younger people who are more socially conscious—has different aspirations. Green design is hugely important, but it's not just about the materials and manufacturing processes. Green, to my mind, means developing products that help artisans put food on the table.

ED: What has that meant for the creation of your product lines?



SB: Thanks to textile designer Patti Carpenter of Carpenter & Co., I'm now designing embroidered throws and decorative pillows—woven partly with wool from my own flock of sheep—handmade in Bolivia by men who would otherwise be forced to leave home to be migrant farm laborers. Knowing the workers can have access to better housing and education makes me feel good about the products I'm designing. I'm also making traditional hand-painted canvas floor cloths updated with modern motifs, such as bold geometrics or children playing jacks. There's too much stuff out there that's going to end up in a landfill. I hope what I'm designing now will retain its value as well as its quality, both real and emotional.

ED: How does it feel to be an icon for a new generation of designers?

SB: Last year I was part of a panel about diversity in design, and I was surprised so many young designers of color stood in line to meet me. At the beginning of my career, I didn't feel like I fit in, which is a continuing challenge for nonwhite designers, from product to fashion. Whether it's as a black interior designer or as a woman who has lost her hair because of an autoimmune disorder, I try to be as visible as possible as a role model. I have spent my professional life focused on beauty. A personal transformation made me redefine what beauty is.

INTERVIEW BY MITCHELL OWENS