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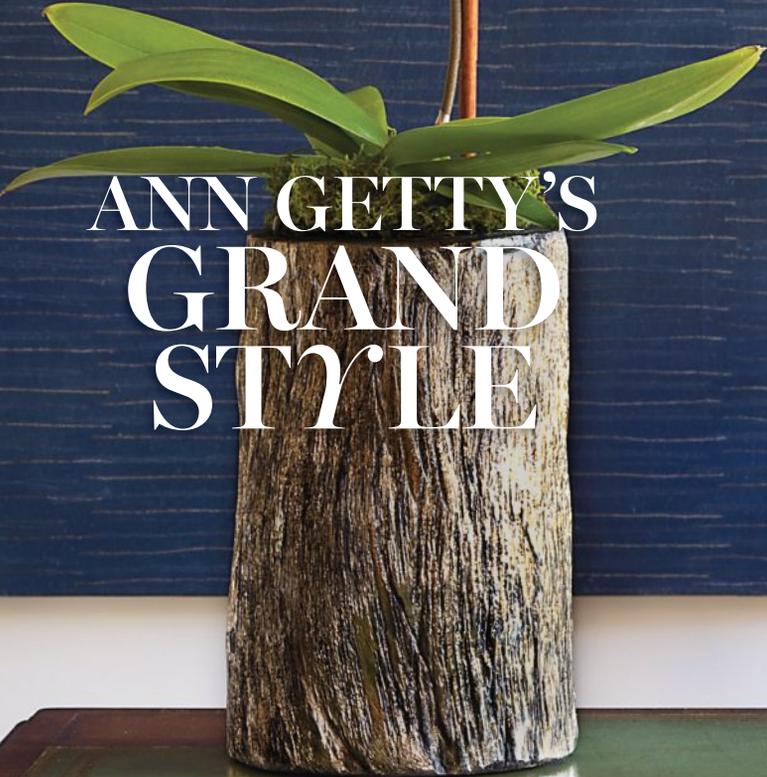
HOME



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A Visit With:

DESIGNER RUTH LIVINGSTON
HOME THEATER EXPERT CONNIE NORLANDER



Worldly Wise

She thought she would work as a United Nations translator, but Ruth Livingston decided to take a different path when she found her calling as an interior designer. Her homes have appeared in numerous publications, and she produces a furniture line carried by showrooms throughout the world. Gentry Home talks with Livingston about her journey.

STORY BY KRISTINE CARBER

W*hy design?* I grew up in Israel and was always designing. I helped friends with their rooms or I designed fashion or floral arrangements, but at the time, it was just a hobby and I was planning a career in linguistics. My father was in the Foreign Service and I went to high school in Bangkok for two years while he was working there. I went to the American School, where I learned English, and I later attended Tel Aviv University and studied linguistics before transferring to UCLA. Studying languages was the impetus for coming to the U.S. since I was planning a career as a translator for the United Nations (following after my parents). I was supposed to attend UCLA for two years but graduated after one year and moved to San Francisco and fell in love with the city.

And then? I thought I was going into merchandising, so I took night classes at Golden Gate University, where I got my MBA. I knew I wanted to design—I just didn't know if it was to be fashion or interior design. I had remodeled my house in Tiburon and people loved it. I got so many compliments that in 1980 I decided to go out on my own.

What was your first break? My first break came when an editor from *Better Homes and Gardens* featured one of my homes in a decorating magazine. The editor came out to look at the gardens but thought the interior was fabulous and immediately set up a photo shoot. That helped to launch me.

I then opened my house to charity tours, and business poured in, mostly from Marin. But soon I was working all over the ➤➤



An elegant Atherton residence (above) by Ruth Livingston and a custom mirror and console (below) installed in a Tiburon home.



world. In 1986, I moved my business to a shop on Ark Row in Tiburon, and in 2002, I had more than doubled the space, offering my own line of furniture as well as art and decorative gifts. My business office is there as well, and this is where clients come to see my furniture, which is sold to the trade all over the world. Michael Taylor's showroom in the San Francisco Design Center just added my line.

What was your first big project? My first big project was the Bay Area Dream House. I won a design competition with the *San Francisco Examiner* to decorate the interior of a 4,000-square-foot house. It was huge, and I did every room. It was hard work, and I collaborated with many people, including upholsterers and custom designers. I placed an ad to invite artists to submit designs and got over 200 submissions. These were wonderful artists: Eric Powell, Nicholas Weinstein. I still collaborate with some of them. In fact, I just finished a collaboration with Kyle Reicher (metal sculptor), who is very successful and makes fireplaces, hoods, waterfalls, railings, gates, and doors.

How do you find your clients? Most of my business is word of mouth or storefront, people who like my shop and want my design. Many of my clients are repeat, and I have been ➡➡



Custom Ruth Livingston chairs and a foyer table mix bold lines with classical elements.

working with some for 25 years; I just finished the fourth home for one family. As far as selling my furniture, it has been featured in many books and magazines, including *Architectural Digest*. Barry Dixon uses my pieces, and one won an outstanding achievement award in *Interior Design* magazine.

What are some of your favorite projects?

There are so many: the house of a major collector in Berkeley. A small condo in Alameda. It was very site specific and the owner had a luxury yacht business, so I designed the condo as a resort with references to the water. Another favorite is a complete renovation of an 8,000-square-foot house in Marin with its own putting green and playground.

I now have an architect on staff who helps with new as well as historic residences such as a Victorian house we did on Beach Road in Tiburon and a 200-year-old Georgetown townhouse in Washington, D.C..



Any mentors? I have admired Agnes Bourne for quite some time. I've always been impressed by her collaboration with artists and artisans and I have done the same: I find the artists at gallery shows, open studios, and sometimes they find me. I had the pleasure of working on her Stone House, which in 1995 was the San Francisco Decorator Showcase. It was a magnificent Willis Polk house and I designed the Revolving Column Bookcase and my first Cone Occasional Table for the library. I admire her philanthropy and support of the design community. She was instrumental in saving the Cooper Hewitt Design Museum. She now carries my collection.

Any other design idols? Also Michael Taylor, for his eclectic design approach, such as mixing antiques with contemporary furnishings, highly polished rich textures with rocks and plants, and for his innovative large-scale furniture designs. He was truly a groundbreaking designer. I am also in awe of Antoni Gaudi, the Barcelonan architect who worked as an interior decorator and furniture designer 140 years ago. His unique organic creations are timeless and frequently used by contemporary designers such as Philippe Starck.

Are there places that inspire you? I travel a lot and buy decorative items wherever I go. I went to Burma/Myanmar and I was inspired by this gentle society, both the innocence and piety of the Burmese people and the magnificence of the landscape and ancient temples. I visited arts and crafts workshops, including silk weaving, woodcarving, silver hammering, and lacquer. I purchased antique lacquer boxes and jewelry, which are for sale in my studio.

How about favorite interior design books? Anything by John F. Pile. These are virtually textbooks: comprehensive and beautiful as well as a great resource for the professional and the layperson.

If you could list five must-haves for a beautifully designed room, what would they be? 1) Good lighting, both natural and artificial. 2) Proper layout and scale, the “form follows function” approach, meaning the furnishings, layout, and scale must follow the activities taking place in the space. 3) Great paint or wall treatments. 4) A textural mix like old and new and polished and rough. 5) A reflection of the owner’s personality. That’s what makes a room. ♦

