

# Introduction



*Fox Hall  
Farmington, Connecticut  
Summer, 2013*

My eldest daughter, Alexandra, had recently married and was about to move to Berlin, Germany. As I was helping her pack she asked me, “Mummy, how do I furnish my new house to look like a ‘big girl’ house?” I understood what she was asking: she wanted a house that looked formal, elegant, timeless and charming. She wanted to stop buying disposable furniture and begin investing in pieces that would actually appreciate in value. I realized with a certain sense of pride that she wanted a house just like the one she grew up in.

My husband Stuart and I have been collecting artwork and antiques for decades. Nearly every object in our house has a story behind it. The pieces were carefully selected to complement each other harmoniously. Alexandra could appreciate the end result; she just did not know where to begin. I told my daughter I would put together a few notes on how to create her first big girl house.

So I started with a list of design advice for my daughter. My list was peppered with words like “pretty”, “proper”, “polished”, “refined”, and “well-proportioned”. Each time I added an item to my list, I thought of two more. It dawned on me that the answer to my daughter’s simple question was going to be anything but simple – and it was *not* going to be brief.

Before she moved to Germany Alexandra had never lived more than a few hours away. I had been her personal decorator, choosing colors and furniture. I loved helping her



*Caroline K. Holden, Fox Hall Living Room, 2012, watercolor.*

and all three of my children. Decorating came naturally to me, as it had to my mother and grandmother. I think my mother learned by sheer practice. My parents moved thirty-one times in their lives, and my mother prided herself on being able to have everything in place for a formal dinner party within a week of changing addresses.

My professional career as a designer began twenty-five years ago when my husband received some unsettling news about his health. I was frightened by the prospect that one day in the near future the responsibility of providing for our three little children might pass to me. Decorating seemed a natural choice for a profession. I was confident in my taste and I knew that if I performed the work well I could provide for my family if necessary. Once I set course, it was not long before I had a business and I began accepting my first clients.

I threw myself into my work with a determination fueled by necessity. There is a certain permanence and calm in a well designed room. A timeless design will last a lifetime.

A proper, well-appointed and layered design with every element contributing to a cohesive whole is a lovely thing. Like a painting or a sculpture, interior design is artwork, producing emotional responses and influencing moods.

Thankfully, my husband recovered completely. Even though I no longer needed to run my design business, I was enthralled. I savored the gratification of enriching peoples' lives with the rooms I created for them. When I found just the right piece at an auction, it was as thrilling as finding buried treasure. I kept designing rooms. Friends became clients and clients became friends. I took projects of increasing scopes and budgets. I was proud of my work and my clients enjoyed the results.

A week had passed. Alexandra, now living on the other side of the Atlantic, phoned me to ask, "Are you done yet? Mummy, are you ready to share all your secrets on how to create my big girl house?" By that time I had filled half a legal pad with notes but there was still so much more to say. I told her that I would be done soon. "I'm working on it dear, I'm putting together a little notebook for you." I reviewed my notes again that evening. The notes had grown in size to a point where they needed organizing. I arranged them by room and singled out the living room as my starting point.

The living room is the center of entertaining in a formal house. A place for parties, teas, drinks, and conversation, it is the room where your guests will spend the majority of their time. It is a room you want to get right! The colors and themes established in the living room will carry over to the other rooms of the house. It is a place of first impressions for guests and an inviting room to be lived in with family.

Shortly after my notes had been written up and mailed, Alexandra called again and said, "Mummy, thank you so much! I read your notebook. But would you please clarify a few things. Maybe tell me what not to do? Also, do you think you could include some photographs?" Never one to back down from a challenge, I told her, "Of course Lambie,

but you are going to have to give me some time." I went back to work, this time determined to pass every last bit of my twenty-five years of experience on to my daughter. Several months later, when I reached a hundred pages and a few hundred photographs, I decided it was time to hire an editor and photographer.

Now, two years after she first asked for my design advice, I am proud to say to Alexandra and everyone else: *this* is how you create a big girl living room! I'm going to have to get back to you about the rest of the house. But remember, much of what you learn here can be applied to other rooms as well. I have tried to present you with good examples of what I feel are the most important elements of the living room.

To start, I give you a set of thirteen secrets that will guide you in smart buying and refined living. I have compiled practical knowledge into "Sensible Suggestions". Where appropriate, there are sections that will guide you in creating and displaying various items in the living room. My "Forbidden Faux-pas" will lightheartedly steer you away from no-no's and novice mistakes. Oh and also, I have included the photographs that my daughter requested - I hope you enjoy the close-ups of the "Darling Details"!

It is my hope that this book will guide you in creating a living room which is both pretty and proper. The pretty and proper style gets inherited, not reinvented. It is passed down from generation to generation like a secret code. And now I am passing this code on to you! If pretty and proper had a recipe, it would be: add one full measure of British Understatement; stir in equal parts Southern Gentility and Manor House Elegance; finally, garnish with a dash of Preppy Whimsy. Serve from silver... of course.

*Holly Holden*