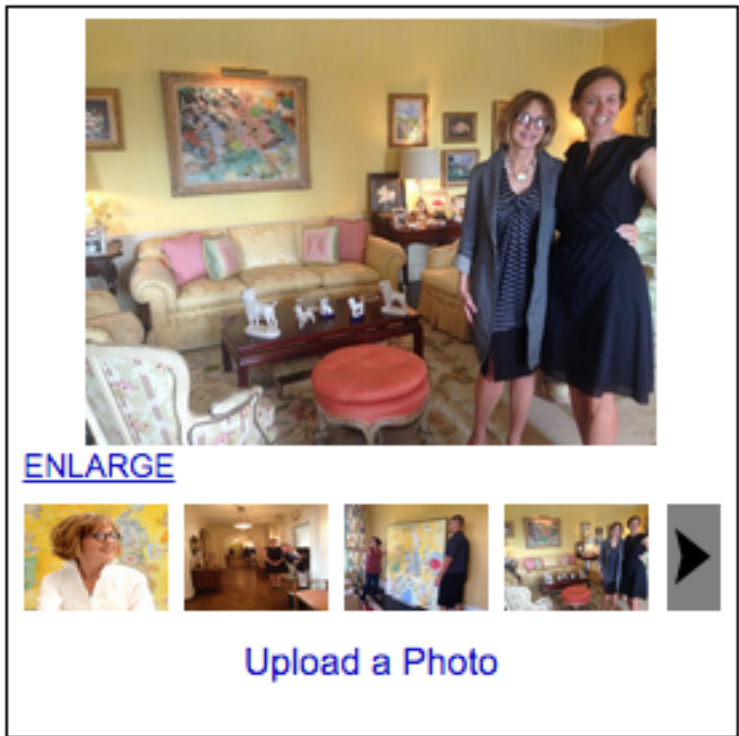


Designers Pay Tribute To Betty Sherrill Of Southampton

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By Virginia Garrison Jul 7, 2014 10:33 AM

POST A COMMENT



The story goes that Betty Sherrill, a pillar of Southampton’s summer colony, who died on May 12 at age 91, elbowed her way into a job at McMillen, New York’s oldest interior design firm, as an inexperienced housewife in 1951.

Ms. Sherrill, a Louisiana débutante, pestered McMillan’s founder, Eleanor Brown, until Ms. Brown agreed to let the young woman hand out pamphlets at a showcase of French furniture artists that McMillen had organized.

From there Ms. Brown landed a Légion d’Honneur for her work on behalf of the French, while Ms. Sherrill landed a position with McMillen, going on to become president and, in 1975, principal owner. By then, she had well established herself as an arbiter of conservative WASP-

ish taste for decades of wealthy housewives in New York City and elsewhere.

Back in 1951, at the French furniture show, Ms. Sherrill had also landed four Gilbert Poillerat chairs—she was partial to expensive furniture of a certain provenance—which, much later, in 2005, were featured in a room decorated by her daughter, Ann Pyne, at the Hampton Designer Showhouse raising money for Southampton Hospital.

In fact, Ms. Sherrill’s “daffodil luncheons” on behalf of the hospital—she favored daffodils, lush floral patterns and animal prints in addition to French pieces—used to trumpet the arrival of the social season in Southampton, according to Steven Stolman, a designer and author who met Ms. Sherrill at a party at Mayfair, her summer home on Pond Lane, and named a pink-and-green print sold at his Southampton clothing shop in her honor.

“I fell in love with Betty Sherrill about 100 years ago,” Mr. Stolman said last week at Citarella not far from where his shop used to be. That is why he is assisting Gil Walsh, a Palm Beach interior designer, in creating a tribute to the late and much-revered interior decorator at this month’s Hampton Designer Showhouse in Bridgehampton.

“Betty Sherrill led the way for women like me, who aspired to grow their love of interior design into a real business,” Ms. Walsh said in an email from a “monsoon” on Friday at Martha’s Vineyard. “I have always admired the work of McMillen,” she said. “Betty Sherrill’s exquisite taste and sense of color and comfort is so evident in every project I have ever seen accredited to the firm.”

Last Thursday at Citarella, Mr. Stolman flicked through photos on his iPad of the room-in-progress, including one of Lauryl Guse, senior project designer, painting curtain rings to match the room’s yellows and rectify a last-minute snafu.

“I wanted this to be a love letter to her, not a ripoff,” Mr. Stolman said of the tribute.

For him, the late decorator represented “what’s left that hearkens back to a gentler time”—of dog shows and rose shows and social gatherings like ones hosted at her home in Southampton.

Ms. Sherill was a steel magnolia and a businesswoman, Mr. Stolman said, who at the same time kept “a glorious house, a lovely home” with gracious seating arrangements, a layered look, yellows, flowers and florals, and always a place to put a drink.

“We tried to be inspired by it,” Mr. Stolman explained. “We wanted to use the vocabulary of Betty Sherrill and create something totally new and fresh.”

The room will be lightened up just a bit compared to the more formal type of decor Ms. Sherrill was known for, Mr. Stolman said, adding, “It’s essentially a beach house.”

Also among his photos was one of a scheme board of key components of Ms. Sherrill’s vocabulary to be integrated in the showhouse room. Among them are fabric swatches, a strand of floral curtain (“Les Bouquet”) from Brunschwig and Fils, along with a green-and-white treillage (a lattice-like strip to complement curtains), and a photograph of Ms. Sherrill, whose own homes displayed family photographs on many a flat surface.

In keeping with the curtains and a painting by David Miller, also in what Mr. Stolman described as being “the style of [Jean-Michel] Basquiat,” Venetian-plastered walls have been stenciled with a subtle floral motif, then buffed to a very hard finish to reflect light.

The project has the blessing of Ms. Sherrill’s daughter, Ann Pyne, who took over McMillen, and granddaughter, Elizabeth Pyne, Mr. Stolman said.

Also at the Designer Showhouse, of course, will be rooms decorated by 27 other designers. All of them can be visited each day from July 20 to September 1.

“Every interior decorator owes her a debt of gratitude,” Mr. Stolman said of Ms. Sherrill, who he said packaged a variety of artistic trades related to interior design into one “quantifiable business.”

“Too much of contemporary interior design looks the same: All of a sudden everyone has to have a light fixture with dangling crystals,” he said.

By contrast, largely because “she was able to provide provenance” as opposed to trendiness, Ms. Sherrill’s aesthetic successfully conferred, and continues to confer, a quiet yet recognizable classiness upon McMillen’s clients’ homes, and by extension upon themselves.

“Who knew that your living room curtains could get you somewhere in life?” Mr. Stolman marveled.