



DESIGN EDUCATOR EVE MERCIER'S FAVOURITE HONG KONG OBJECT: A PAIR OF CUSHIONS

CATHERINE SHAW • SEPTEMBER 17, 2020

Ask Parisian interior designer and art historian Eve Mercier to name her favourite Hong Kong object, and she doesn't hesitate, selecting an elegant pair of cushions in an intriguing silver-grey fabric interwoven with gold and silver threads that add a soft metallic sheen. The design is by Irene Noh, a recent graduate from the Insight School of Interior Design Mercier founded in Hong Kong in 2013.



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"The fabric has an organic pattern as if someone drew it by hand, so I can feel the human touch behind it," she explains, sitting in her airy seaside home in Stanley, where the cushions have pride of place on the living room sofa. "To me, it has a calligraphic character that expresses an Asian sensibility."

Mercier also prizes the understated tone reminiscent of the sea, which makes a visual connection between indoors and outdoors and reflects the British-Indian artist Anish Kapoor watercolours on the wall above.

Favourite works of art and furnishings collected over the years reveal the family's peripatetic life. They have moved 13 times—twice to Hong Kong—in 30 years. The family returned eight years ago. Mercier says she had to learn to control the impulse to buy everything she likes long ago, and she is quick to emphasize that her homes are not about looking like a magazine shoot. "Comfort is often underrated, but at home it is essential," she says. "I am very busy at the school, so when I come home I just want to close the door and relax. The cushions are very inviting to the touch."

Beyond the cushions' aesthetic appeal, Mercier appreciates the versatile, practical fabric and says these qualities are often underrated in contemporary design. "These days people live and work in a particular space, so designers need to create things that will work in different settings," she says. "I think there is beauty in refinement, balance, and especially in humility, but often in design there is a lack of humility and it feels as if everything is shouting for attention. That might be okay for five minutes, but you wouldn't want to invite it back home."



Detail of an Ingo Maurer
Poul Poul table lamp

A watercolour by artist
and sculptor Rina
Banerjee

Ingo Maurer Poul Poul
table lamp made with
Japanese pleated paper

Originality is another aspect that Mercier admires. One of the first things her school teaches is to avoid Pinterest and interior design magazines. Students learn how to create an image bank of folders for elements like textiles or texture, and to seek inspiration in the world around them, noticing details like the colour combination of a saffron yellow leaf on a grey-black path. This compels them to find their own inspiration and avoid repeating world around them, noticing details like the colour combination of a saffron yellow leaf on a grey-black path. This compels them to find their own inspiration and avoid repeating what they have seen elsewhere. Of her own interior work, Eve insists she does not have "a style" and is equally happy designing an 18th century castle, an Art Deco apartment or a modernist house in Ibiza.

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Eve Mercier at home in Stanley

“We tell our students that creating their image bank is the soil their creativity and design will grow in,” she says. “So when you want to design a living room you go to what caught your eye. We have more than 250 students a year and we don’t want them all to design the same thing. They must learn from good people, but have their own voice – that is their individual value.” There are short courses as well as longer ones teaching the history of 20th century furniture, lighting, designing for small spaces, textiles and sustainable design, and students are also taught to interact: how to present to and interpret their client. Practical experience is essential, and students design interiors for real-life contexts and, as was the case with Irene’s fabric, for product designers.

"Most years we plan a competition with product suppliers who commission students to create something new and the winner has their creation put into production. We also collaborate with clients to design retail, office, restaurant and residential interiors. This year students designed for an architect property developer with a house in Bangkok who wanted a Soho House-style interior," says Mercier, referring to the global chain of private clubs.

Keen to showcase Hong Kong artisans, Mercier invites local manufacturers and designers to meet her students, widening the creative network of the city and exposing the students to the practical challenges of how to make things work and get them made. Hong Kong's proximity to factories means designers can make up an idea very quickly, Mercier notes, and more manufacturers want to participate in the whole design process. "We always think of Hong Kong as a trading hub, but it is increasingly somewhere to make things again," she says.



Local textile designers Cally Chan and her husband Jacky Hung, whose textile manufacturing company Coltex Furnishings Limited produces fabrics for architects such as André Fu and David Collins Studio, commissioned students to design a new material around the concept of "Golden Galaxy" for a fictional sophisticated female client's home.

"Cally represents the new generation of Hong Kongers wanting to do something different, more creative," says Mercier. "She studied at Chelsea College of Art and Design and then

came back to Hong Kong. That is the kind of person we like to collaborate with because she is part of the new Hong Kong.”

Many of the Insight School’s students are seeking a career change. Irene was an investment banker and had no previous experience of design before taking the course. “She was a fantastic student – a bit shy to start with, but she already had a good eye. Her progress was amazing to watch,” Mercier recalls. Irene now works in Hong Kong architect Nelson Chow’s NCDA studio.

Mercier, whose previous careers include working in journalism, for the modern art department of auction house Christie’s, and in the fashion industry, says that while one of the most difficult things to teach is to understand the market and the target customer, these were things that Irene knew instinctively. “Other proposals were very creative and flamboyant, but that was not the brief. Irene nails every presentation because she understands what the client wants.”



Mercier's home reflects the family's peripatetic lifestyle and her appreciation of arts and crafts

Cally Chan agrees. “We love storytelling and Irene is obviously very accomplished at weaving a narrative that leads us on to the next chapter by extending our existing collection. We loved how she had an instinctive appreciation for our brand identity and philosophy,” she says. Mercier laments that creativity is still not valued in Hong Kong’s schools or at home, “probably because it is so difficult to measure its value,” she says.

"Although I can see a difference [compared to a few years ago], there is work to be done there. To be creative is to be allowed to take risks and break things – and not to know where you will end up. It is a bit scary." She does note that things are changing and Hong Kong's famed work ethic includes hunger for progress. "Students here always ask me how they can do things better."

And the city is changing too. Mercier says just five years ago restaurants all looked the same with concrete floors and black metal. "It was so boring!" she exclaims. "This is changing now, and people want more elaborate layers and designers think more about how a texture feels. They understand that you have to feel good in a space: it is not just about what is fashionable and as Hong Kong people's tastes have become more sophisticated, so interiors have evolved."

She also cautions that for a lot of designers it is all about ego, whereas their ultimate goal should be to change the space so that people feel happier there. And, perhaps the biggest compliment for a young designer, Mercier says the fabric holds a special meaning for her because it is part of Hong Kong's transformation. "This is more than a cushion fabric," she says. "It is the result of nurturing someone with potential to the point where they were able to design something that is now in production. And in some ways it is our story as well: a beautiful reminder of what we try to achieve."

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