



DESIGN TRENDS

DOES MOTHER KNOW BEST?

by Marisa Bartolucci | April 11, 2016

Four design doyennes and their creative offspring talk about the evolution of decorating, the ways in which they've inspired each other and the (occasional) aesthetic rebellions of the younger generation.

Old stereotypes die hard. Say “family business” and most people still think “father and son.” Yet several leading interior designers have followed their mothers into “the trade.” To us at Introspective, this is an intriguing development, especially since many of the designer offspring are men. We wondered: Is it nature or nurture that made these individuals pursue design as a profession? Has it changed significantly over a generation or two? Do professional children influence their mothers in their approach to design and style as much as their mothers influenced them?

For our informal survey, we interviewed London’s Rita König and her mother, the legendary interior designer Nina Campbell; Kendall Wilkinson and her mother, Alice Wiley, who both have their own decorating businesses in San Francisco; Gideon Mendelson and his now-retired mother and former business partner, Mimi, of the New York-based Mendelson Group; and, finally, Tommy Clements and his mom, Kathleen, the sole duo in our story who work together as business partners, in Los Angeles’s Clements Design.

Mimi and Gideon Mendelson



When New York—based Gideon Mendelson launched his own design studio, after working with Steven Gambrel, he tapped his mother, Mimi, to join him. Although she'd been easing into retiring from her own interiors business, she jumped at the opportunity. Photo courtesy of Mendelson Group

Mimi and Gideon Mendelson partnered up seven years after he graduated from Columbia University with a degree in architecture. He'd minored in film studies at college and after graduating had a brief stint at the talent agency William Morris before working at Steven Gambrel's design studio. If it took him a few years to home in on interior design as the right profession, the same could be said for his mother. But when she realized her calling, in 1974, she was already a mother *and* a working stockbroker, which made her a trailblazer back then. Ever the professional, she went back to school to get a degree in interior design before opening her own design studio in tony Scarsdale, New York.

When her son joined the business, he was already well-versed in the basics. So, from the start, they did most things together, including project management and accounting. But he also played the role of apprentice. "I took over the technical drawing — we were still using ink and Mylar," he says, "and I did *all* the schlepping!"

Growing up, Gideon remembers evenings spent watching TV with his mother while leafing through *Architectural Digest* and *House Beautiful* during commercial breaks. Together they'd comment on the balance of the furnishings, the palettes and the layering of patterns in the rooms.

Were these shared pastimes what turned her son into a designer? Mimi isn't so sure. "Children show you who they are. When he was a toddler, he would comment on the architecture in the neighborhood. 'Nice shutters,' he would say, or 'Big window!'"

Yet her son feels that his early life with his parents — “doing a lot of drawing and talking about color, form and proportion; traveling and visiting museums; and meeting lots of people” — had an important influence on his career choice. It has been his architectural training, however, that has determined the way he approaches projects. “I start my work thinking about function and circulation rather than rugs or fabrics,” he says. That said, his years working with his mother have dramatically altered his process: “When I started, I was very concerned about how everything looked. Now I’m more concerned about how it *feels*. I’m more focused on telling stories and creating atmospheres for living.” This concern for “mood and drama” also derives, he thinks, from his college film studies.

Mimi, in turn, has been greatly influenced by her son in regard to the evolution of her taste. “His academic experience certainly enlightened me, and his love of mid-century design proved contagious,” she says, adding, “I’m much happier with gray than I used to be.”



MIMI'S LIVING ROOM: “My approach might be somewhat less ornamental and simpler,” Gideon notes of Mimi’s scheme for this living room. “But I have always appreciated my mother’s use of color and pattern. She creates a cozy space.” Photo by Annie Schlecter

