

What the well-dressed chair is wearing this season

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Upholstery gets the couture touch from Cork woman Aiveen Daly

My upholstery is very fashion inspired – from couture shows, from seeing the jewellery, handbag and shoe detailing, but the hardware used in furniture has to be hardwearing and can't be gimmicky." So says London-based Aiveen Daly, the Cork woman who has become the most sought-after specialist upholsterer in the UK. She is known for craftsmanship and extraordinary fabric-manipulation techniques like pleating, leather-stitching, hand-beading and feather work. She has, as one observer noted, knocked the stuffing out of traditional upholstery.

Her latest collection "Treasured Possessions", which will be showcased at Decorex in London in September, will include her green Paradise chair (inspired by Gucci) which is beaded and embroidered entirely by hand. It features bronze birds on emerald cotton sateen with satin pleats, gloss black legs and brass sabots. This elaborate and elegant piece constructed on a hardwood frame takes six months to complete and uses haute couture decorative skills normally associated with fashion.

"We use traditional frame makers – a father-and-son team – along with painted metal workers, handbeaders and pleating specialists so there are six or seven craftspeople involved," she explains from her showrooms and workshop in west London.

Also on display at Decorex will be two new headboards, long slim panels with twisted leather and silk details in an arc shape with 20 different sections that feature more than 100 twisted leather details.

Her success has disproved those critics

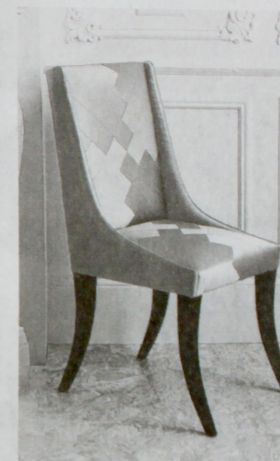
who dismissed upholstery as a dying trade.

Daly says her entrepreneurial spirit was inherited from her father, who built up a major law practice from scratch. After school at the Ursuline Convent in Cork, Daly studied Russian and business studies at Trinity and worked in marketing in Russia and Australia for a time before ending up in London with the travel website Expedia. "When I started there were 12 people and it was good fun but it became a massive company and very corporate and I began to think of doing something more creative and having more autonomy," she recalls.

That impulse made her take up evening courses in embroidery, textiles and sewing during which she "stumbled" on upholstery. So Daly quit her job and took on a full-time, hands-on course in traditional upholstery at the London College of Furniture, stripping down antique pieces and re-assembling them using horsehair, coconut fibre and hessian and learning concealment tricks. "It was conservative and I could see that things could be done differently with a more quirky approach," she says. In many old pieces of furniture that she deconstructed, she found little notes from or the signatures of the upholsterers, the fabrics themselves revealing the hidden history of the pieces. She quickly established a reputation for a more free-spirited approach to the craft.

Her first customer was an architectural salvage company in London called Retrouvius, whose clients included Bella Freud and Paul Smith, who commissioned several pieces from her, and before long she had built up a strong client base. Today, her customers come from all over the world and she has projects in Nigeria, Shanghai, Mumbai and Moscow and works with major interior designers, architects and yacht specialists.

"We have just completed a package of cushions with Fendi-style detailing and special leather lacing for a luxury yacht with everything colour-matching the scheme of the boat. Each cushion used three different fabrics and techniques and each had to be



■ Left: Aiveen Daly with her Paradise chair, and other designs; she has been described as having knocked the stuffing out of traditional upholstery

perfect," Daly explains. "It is all about layers of detailing – for example pleating work, hand embroidery, metal work, polished show wood, fabric specially dyed or woven. So layers of luxury are expected. We do a lot of wall panels and some of the techniques use several hundred metres of pleated silk and 3km of hand-glued silver and bronze chains set into leather. Such ornate work pushes the boundaries of techniques," she says.

Haute couture

Daly keeps a keen eye on haute couture shows. "I look at Fendi, Balmain and Givenchy in terms of details and workmanship, and Alexander McQueen for embroidery inspiration. Gucci has been showing some amazing beading and embroidery recently and I would look to YSL for tailoring and beautiful detailing. I look at every single show every season to see what techniques they use and how they are fulfilled. For example, the way you cut satin will throw a different tone around the room."

Some of the luxury hotels with whom she has worked include the Langham in Hong Kong, the Mandarin Oriental and Corinthia in London and Gansvoorst in New York and Miami. "I work with amazing interior designers with amazing budgets," she says. "Nigeria was absolutely amazing in terms of the scale of the project and its demands: the guys who work with me are not just upholsterers but also engineers; they make special tools and are very inventive and their skills go way beyond upholstery."

Married to an Australian cameraman, the couple have two small daughters and their home in London reflects her love of fabrics and antique textiles with wardrobe doors, for instance, covered in 1930s' Indian saris. "I suppose what I do is all about refined detail and simple elegance executed with perfection and innovative in terms of what can be done," is how she describes her style. Her pieces can be viewed at Decorex B21A from September 18th-21st.

See aiveendaly.com