

DESIGNING WOMEN:

It Takes More Than Fashion Sense for Success

by Marcella Rojas

Interior designers with a keen sense of form and function, as well as a head for business, comprise a cadre of Capital Region superstars who are making expressively creative marks on homes and offices. Most of them in this market, as in the rest of the country, are women, who still well-outnumber male practicing interior designers.

Surveys by the American Society of Interior Designers in Washington, D.C., confirm that 60 to 80 percent of the interior designers in the United States are women.

Most local area designers felt the pinch of the national and statewide economic downturns of the past few years, a business slump that has had a noticeable impact not only on interior design work itself, but also on how it's practiced and perceived.

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Rebecca Saggau-Russo, CEO of J.R. David Gallery Africa in Sacramento, for instance, sees a greater embracing of ethnic designs in both the workplace and home. "I think people are looking for uniqueness. They want something that evokes a personal feeling," she says.

Emotional Links

Saggau-Russo, 47, offers clients a sense of relationship with Shona art, the stone sculptures that began surfacing in Zimbabwe in the 1950s. "It's important to feel an emotional connection when you walk into a room, whether it be an office or a home," she says, and Shona art helps establish that.

Nestled on Auburn Boulevard, the J.R. David Gallery Africa shares the diversity, beauty and history of Africa with imported art and cultural artifacts.

Saggau-Russo, former director of marketing for Round Hill Securities, an Alamo, Calif., stock brokerage, opened her gallery last fall to expose the local market to a unique collection of contemporary and authentic tribal art work, crafts and furniture from Africa.

Started as a hobby that continued for 35 years, Saggau-Russo was inspired to open J.R. David Gallery Africa by personal adventures in Africa. In 1994 her husband, Leonard, took her on a first safari that changed her life.

Bringing a Room to Life

"I wanted to connect with the country as being more than just a place to visit," she says. "Working with the peo-

ple and arts and crafts is what I wanted to do with my life." Her gallery is stocked with artifacts that can bring a room to life with wall hangings, pottery and furniture.

"It's not all about dark colors, ceremonial masks and wooden statues with nails in them," Saggau-Russo says. "People are surprised when they come into the gallery because they find pieces that don't just scream 'Africa!'"

Shona art, ranging from 8 to 3,000 pounds, represents nature and humanity. Zimbabwean artist Chituwa Jemali's work is displayed at the Shona Stone Gallery, next to J.R. David, and carries price tags ranging from several hundred dollars to \$89,000.

Besides selling for her business, Saggau-Russo wel-

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(Right and below)
Bank of Sacramento lobby;
Howe Ave., Sacramento

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comes the opportunity to pay it forward, designating portions of the proceeds from exhibitions for the Mother of Peace orphanage in Zimbabwe.

"I want to give something back to the continent that has enriched my life," she says. "Shona sculptures all exemplify the Zimbabwean reverence for spirituality, ancestry, family and ideals of the human experience." Gallery hours for the public are Wednesday through Saturday, 11 a.m. to 5 p.m.



PHOTO: ED ASMUS



Jennifer Breschi (left) and Sue Patterson, partners at Breschi + Patterson, Inc.

PHOTO: JASON CARPENTER

A Vocation for Interior Design

Raised on a farm outside Lodi and despite no exposure to art or design, Paulette Trainor, at age 8, announced to her parents she wanted to be an interior designer. Trainor is now 53 and owner of Trainor & Associates Design in Sacramento. "My father's comment at the time was how did I plan to make a living," she says. "I was never encouraged to go into the arts. Back then, it was not recognized as a profession."

Some 20 years ago, Trainor went to work for the California State Legislature as an administrative assistant, but never gave up her dream of becoming an interior designer. While working in government, Trainor attended school evenings and weekends for several years, earning a degree in interior design. Since then, she's received recognition and honors for her designs.

Trainor opened her design firm in 1983, specializing in sophisticated and timeless interiors. "I'm never off the job. I'm constantly aware of the aesthetics in the environment and have great appreciation for nature, which allows me to introduce my clients to new design concepts," she says.



Paulette Trainor

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More attention also is being given to "green" design and sustainable planning to meet environmental concerns and requirements.

More Than 'Soft' Furnishing

With a large client-base throughout California and around the country, Trainor takes the time to listen and understand what her clients need and want and pushes herself to do the job better than anyone else.

"Most people tend to think of interior design as soft furnishing (furniture and bedding), but it's much more than that. My work involves changing floor plans and creating architectural additions. It's all about spatial relationships, how the rooms connect and how people move through the space," she says.

As in almost all businesses, technology has had a huge impact on the interior design world. "Although interior design



PHOTO: CATHY KELLY

was very slow to embrace technology, in the past five years the industry has become passionate about it," Trainor notes.

Jennifer Breschi, 58, principal of Breschi + Patterson, Inc., a design shop in Roseville, agrees. "Everyone uses CADD (computer-aided design drafting), digital imaging, digital cameras and PowerPoint for presentations, as well as computer modeling in 3D," she says.

'Green' and Recycled

More attention is also being given to "green" design and sustainable planning to meet environmental concerns and requirements. "We're using products that can be recycled and allow us to have a clean planet," says Breschi.

The American Society of Interior Designers reports that more attention is given to green design and sustainable planning as environmental problems accelerate. Environmental conservation is addressed primarily through the selection and application of materials, textiles, furnishings, colors and lighting for interiors and through the development of interior space.

"Tenants are more savvy in the areas of technology now and are asking for certain items that play a role with the environment and energy conservation as well as video conferencing capabilities," says Breschi.

Breschi + Patterson, celebrating its 26th anniversary in May, specializes in commercial office space design. "We're able to sketch in front of our clients a space plan and work with them in sketches. Before our meeting adjourns they have an idea of what their new space could look like," Breschi explains.

She relocated to Sacramento from the Bay Area in 1971 and began teaching interior design at American River, Consumnes River and Sierra colleges. A few years later, she worked as an interior designer for the state architect's office alongside some of the better architects and engineers.

As developers sniffed growth opportunities and began flocking to the Sacramento region in the 1980s, Breschi decided it was time to open her own design firm.

Breschi + Patterson's client base includes federal, state and private sector clients. "Our goals are to keep our client base diversified, increase our knowledge and ways of servicing our clients," Breschi says. "I'm most proud of our ability to provide the best possible service by establishing good com-



PHOTO: BOB WILLIAMS



Valerie Valentine



“We are going to have to reinvent ourselves as designers because our market is changing drastically.” — Valerie Valentine

munication and follow up through the entire project, even after it’s finished.”

Valerie Valentine, 52-year-old principal of Design Galleria by Valentine on Fair Oaks Blvd. in Sacramento, recognizes the changing industry and is preparing for it. “We are going to have to reinvent ourselves as designers, because our market is changing drastically,” she says.

To cope with the changing market, Valentine is opening two additional stores in the Capital Region over the next six months, appealing to individuals in their 20s and 30s. “I’m going to offer more scaled down, youthful, colorful furniture, draperies, area rugs and accessories,” she says.

Unlike most business professionals, Valentine discovered her niche at five years old. “I wanted to be an interior designer when I was five. I used to stay up late at night and move my furniture around in my bedroom. As I grew up I would help decorate my parents’ home. I loved

interior designing.”

Born and raised in Stockton, Valentine relocated to Sacramento in 1971 for college. By the time she was 25, Valentine had her own design firm. Three years ago, she opened Design Galleria, specializing in traditional and contemporary Asian design. “It’s been a long-time dream to own a large firm,” she mentions.

With clients throughout California, Lake Tahoe, Hawaii and Arizona, Design Galleria by Valentine has a staff of 30 experienced designers. “They are up to speed on the latest interior design methods and products and are capable of designing from ground floor to tabletop,” she notes.

They have done so for homes in Granite Bay, El Dorado Hills, Davis and Arden Park. “The most satisfaction comes from seeing the finished results and how happy a client is with their home,” Valentine says. “It’s so important to have good follow-through with your clients and make sure everything is installed correctly. Customer service and establishing long-term relationships is critical in this business.”