

WEST SIDE STORIES

Portobello Road purchases, life in Shepherd's Bush and early trips to Harrods; fashion director turned entrepreneur LUCINDA CHAMBERS reveals all

WORDS GRACE CAIN PHOTOGRAPHY TOBY COULSON



ONCE UPON A TIME at boarding school, Lucinda Chambers received a letter from Harrods' chief store detective – a gentleman by the name of J Cleaver Loophole – notifying her that a £247 fine was to be charged to her mother's account. Young Chambers' crime? Parking her bicycle in the store's pharmacy while she browsed the womenswear department. "In those days, it may as well have been £10,000," Chambers remembers, as we stand in her sun-dappled garden. "I couldn't admit it to my mother because I thought she would kill me."

After a few weeks of living in abject fear, Chambers discovered that the letter was a complete fabrication, penned by a family friend who had somehow got hold of Harrods headed paper. "I should have known it was a joke," she says, good-naturedly. "I mean, J Cleaver Loophole? But I never took my bicycle to Harrods again." Luckily, she was always close enough to walk. As Chambers tells it, her family had moved 18 times by the time she turned 18, but always within strolling distance of Harrods and the Brompton Oratory. "My mother was either shopping or praying," she says, wryly. "I used to go to Harrods every day to just look at the clothes. I'd try something on, measure it, and then make my own version." She pauses. "But don't tell anybody about that." Sorry, Lucinda.

I posit that growing up on the move must have some lasting impact on your perception of 'home'. Chambers inclines her head in response. "Well, by contrast, my husband and I have stayed here for 30 years." "Here" is their five-bedroom Edwardian house in Shepherd's Bush, where we now sit. And today it is a place where Chambers enjoys what she calls "sailing into calmer waters", which seems to involve a great deal of gardening and intimate dinners with close friends. Not that she's retired, of course. Since she left her post as fashion director of *British Vogue*, Chambers has co-founded two new ventures: shopping platform Collagerie, and innovative lifestyle brand Colville. Doesn't exactly sound like "calmer waters" to me, but perhaps everything feels calm in comparison to raising three (now adult) sons. "We were very lucky to find somewhere like this so close to central London; somewhere that >

This page, top: A small selection of Lucinda Chambers' extensive collection of ceramics peeks out from a corner; bottom: The shelves in her bedroom are a repository for an eclectic assortment of books and curios. Opposite page: The airy back-room office is the designated space for objects that are waiting to find a permanent spot – and is used to store items that Chambers plans to transport to her home in France





we could grow a family,” she says. “We do think about moving to an apartment one day, but I’m not ready to give up the garden yet.”

Staying still doesn’t, though, mean staying the same. As in most family homes, you can’t turn a corner without running into the start of an old story or a reminder of the passing of time. In the kitchen – where Chambers pours jugs of juice for the crew and tells us all to help ourselves to anything – the walls are papered with Polaroid pictures, children’s drawings, and hundreds of handwritten notes and cards from friends. On one side of the doorway, the wall is scribbled with pencil marks denoting heights, names and dates from about 2006 to 2013. On the other, a chair sits under a framed impression of a rapeseed field and a heavy grey sky. Chambers points in its general direction. “That wall was once covered in cards too, but they started dropping on people’s heads every time they sat in the chair. I got fed up with it.” And the artwork? “That’s an iPad painting by Charlotte Faber Marais, who is brilliant. She painted this with her left hand after she had a stroke. I really liked the colours.”

In each act of the Chambers family home, colour has played a defining role. The downstairs living room is a good example. Its walls are currently an unforgettable combination of postbox red and bright yellow, but past iterations of the room didn’t need the extra exuberance. “This is our TV room now, but back when it was my sons’ playroom, we just painted everything white. There was already so much colour



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because of all their toys and stuff!” The Chambers’ youngest son picked the current scheme. “I think he basically wanted everything to look like Lego,” she explains. “But I’m always open to suggestions, and the fact that this one happened to come from a 12-year-old was fine by me.”

“I often say that painting a room is like posh dusting,” Chambers continues. “If you’re not happy with the shade, don’t stress. You can always paint over it.” Her advice to avoid such disappointment is to put up huge swatches and watch how they react to the light at different points of the day. “Then hold up your favourite picture and try to echo some of its tones. If you can find a thread of a certain colour, you can follow it through the rest of your accessories. That will draw the eye and get different colours talking.” Surrounded by scarlet walls, navy-and-pink geometric-patterned carpets, and a cacophony of pastel-hued posters, I admire the way that she is able to match the unmatched. “It’s definitely not deliberate,” she says, slowly. “Perhaps it all becomes easier as you get older, because there is less worry and more enjoyment. I think it’s really important to experiment. It’s the same with clothes – it took me a long time and a lot of mistakes before I found my style.”

It will come as no surprise to hear that Chambers’ relationship with fashion is “cojoined” with her approach to interiors. “It’s all about decoration,” she says. “An outward expression of how one feels >

This page, from top right: Chambers pottering in her garden – something she says she’s “literally spent my life doing”; the penchant for ceramics is clearly illustrated by a vast array of mismatched plates and cups; colours and patterns in perfect harmony in one of the family home’s five bedrooms. Opposite page: Alongside a pink-and-navy jute carpet made by a woman in Bangladesh is the irresistible ‘super shag rug’, one of several dotted around the house





“I LOVE SHOPPING, I’M NOT GOING TO LIE... THE SHEER JOY OF DISCOVERY”



This page, from top: Wallpaper samples from Portobello Road create artwork in the living room; packed shelves in the elegant Edwardian house’s library. Opposite page: The Collagerie and Colville co-founder brings a touch of her much-loved garden into the kitchen

internally. That’s why when people say that fashion and design are not serious things, I have to beg to differ, because I think they can be very meaningful. I know it can also be a source of anxiety, and that’s why I like to show people how easy it is to tweak things. I just love making changes.”

Like a vibrant thread of colour, Chambers traces her love of “tweaking things” back to her nomadic west London youth. “My parents would renovate each house we lived in very differently,” she remembers. “Once, we lived in a mews house that was very 1960s, with low leather furniture and plenty of glass and chrome tables. Then we moved to a house on Cheyne Walk that was totally Rococo. It gave me a certain freedom of style – the idea that you could kind of take the temperature of a room, see what would suit its proportions and then act accordingly. It was liberating. I still love all sorts of different styles, from graphic patterns and stripes to Miami prints and chintz – as you can see.” She indicates the sofa that I have inelegantly sunk into: a floral behemoth dotted with clashing cushions that somehow make a coherent group. “I don’t really have a set approach. I just follow my nose and fall in love with things.”

Chambers recalls her mother’s approach to home transformations. “One time,” she says, “she built a dry-stone wall. She loved to make things, and I’m the same.” She takes me through a current project involving a series of 19th-century paintings of eggs, which she plans to frame and display. “I’d love to know the psychology of collecting, because I find it very comforting. There’s something about having something to look out for...” Chambers flicks a hand at the rows of framed textiles that wait either side of the bay window. “Like these old wallpaper samples from Portobello Road. I could only afford one at a time, but eventually I had enough to make a display.”

Further evidence of Chambers’ magpie-like tendencies is not difficult to find. She has a penchant for anything wicker, from vintage chairs to the selection of bowls that sit on the golden dining-room wall like crumbs in warm butter. Beside those, you’ll spot a lampshade wrapped in a selection of clashing neckties garnered in (you guessed it) Portobello Road. Back in the kitchen, a cupboard opens to reveal a restaurant-worthy hoard of napkins and table linens. And when Chambers tells me she loves ceramics, it’s rather stating the obvious: in a rack above the kitchen sink, dozens of plates line up like a band of erratically dressed soldiers. “Nothing really matches,” she sighs, fondly plucking one particular dish from the fray: a crisp white design with a hand-painted motif in green, freshly procured from a local ceramicist in Marbella.

“Diana Vreeland famously said, ‘The eye has to travel,’” she continues. “I’ve been so lucky to have a job where I’ve always travelled. And I love shopping, I’m not going to lie. I love markets, flea markets, department stores, boutique shops, anything. It’s the sheer joy of discovery, of finding something nobody else has.” She turns earnestly to me. “Not that I’m competitive, because I also love to share what I find... I promote artisans around the world.” This, I do not doubt. It’s what Colville and Collagerie are all about, after all. Chambers has already sold me on the ‘super shag rugs’ that hug the floors in various rooms (“They’re created by a single artisan in Turkey! He’s had to take on an apprentice since we started selling them at Colville”), as well as the jute carpets made by a woman in Dhaka, Bangladesh, whom Chambers befriended over a lunch.

“Weirdly, I’m not very materialistic,” she says. “I’ve got a lot of stuff, but I’m happy for it to come for a while and then go to have another life somewhere else. I love rearranging things, and I love pottering.” She looks suddenly gleeful. “Actually, I read the other day that pottering is really good for the mind. I thought that was so exciting because it’s *literally* what I’ve spent my life doing.” And why not? Just as long as J Cleaver Loophole, chief store detective, doesn’t catch you at it. □

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