



# Grande dame designs

Much-acclaimed interior designer Sheila Bridges discusses her extensive art collection, love of birdwatching and the difficulties of constructing your own home from scratch

WORDS GRACE CAIN

SHEILA BRIDGES AND I are in a transatlantic fight with technology. I am in my storm-battered home in London, while she is in her house in snowy Hudson Valley, New York State. The video link between us is in dire straits. I catch glitchy glimpses of the interior designer in her white-walled living room, the double-height ceilings soaring beyond the edges of the screen. Bridges – whose much-lauded career has spanned more than three decades and seen her named America’s best interior designer by both CNN and *Time* magazine – is evidently a woman in demand. “Let me turn my email off because that’s going to make all sorts of noise,” she says, clicking about on her laptop. “So, I moved in here at the end of 2019, right before the pandemic thankfully...” Her phone rings, flipping her train of thought – “I should turn that off too” – but she quickly picks up where she left off: “I’ve always had very old homes, so I really wanted to design something modern. *Now* what is dingy, my computer will just not stop...”

We decide to go old school. “This is better,” says Bridges, now on the other end of a phone. “We’re so reliant on tech and sometimes a simple call is best.” And simplification is a key theme in the origin story of her Hudson Valley home, which she constructed from scratch after making the decision to downsize. Her previous residence in the area – a 19th-century farmhouse where she had lived for 18 >



*This page: Sheila Bridges in the living room of her Hudson Valley home, which features a vintage chair by Ernst Schwadron, a stool by Grosfeld House and artwork by Kyle Meyer (behind the chair). Opposite page, from top: The exterior of the interior designer’s house is painted in Black Tar by Benjamin Moore and has a flag – which is a replica of one designed by artist David Hammons – attached to it; Bridges’ collection of African-American art includes works by Clemantine Hunter, Dox Thrash, Calvin Burnett and Henry Tanner*



HOW THEY LIVE



*Clockwise from left: A bed dressed with a vintage Kantha quilt and wallpaper by Adelpi Paper Hangings; a vintage sofa by Albert Hadley covered by a throw from Iceland, an armchair that previously belonged to Bridges' parents, and a table lamp with a shade by Vaughan; one of the bathrooms – painted in a custom design by Bridges – includes a Kohler sink with Waterworks fittings, a stool from Ghana and cat artwork by Earl Swamgan; the main bedroom features a Swedish desk in the Gustavian style from Finch Hudson, walls painted in a custom colour by Benjamin Moore and a collection of Hudson River School paintings*



Picture the scene: Sheila's Harlem Toile de Jouy...



Le Creuset x Sheila Bridges mug £23



Le Creuset x Sheila Bridges pitcher £52



Gingerlily x Sheila Bridges silk robe £359



Gingerlily x Sheila Bridges silk pillowcase £79



Gingerlily x Sheila Bridges silk eiderdown from £1,650

years – had become too much to manage. “I had horses and sheep, and it was just a lot,” she explains. “I didn’t need that much. This has a much smaller footprint – 1,600 square feet – but it suffices. There’s plenty of outdoor space for my dog, and for me to garden – which is something I really enjoy.”

Although Bridges also has apartments in Harlem and Reykjavik, this is the first home that she has built herself. The exterior is distinctive, painted jet black and finished with sliding doors and a pointed roof. Bridges describes it as “kind of a modern barn” and has dubbed it accordingly. “Yeah, I called it Hay House,” she says wryly. “It was sort of a joke, a play on the fact that a lot of old houses have this important provenance and mine doesn’t.”

I posit that – even for the most accomplished of interior designers – building your own home must have its difficulties. “It was very stressful,” she replies, without hesitation. “I ended up firing my contractors midway through the job and managing it myself, which made it less stressful.” The pay-off, of course, is complete freedom; a space perfectly suited to Bridges’ lifestyle and the best canvas for her many treasures.

“I love collecting things,” she says. “In all my homes, I love to be surrounded by art. It makes me happy.” Bridges describes her taste as “diverse”, explaining that she has spent the past 40 years gathering artworks



from flea markets and antique stores around the world. “Photography, paintings, collages. Some pieces are valuable and some I inherited from my parents.” How does she decide which pieces stay in Hudson Valley and which end up in Harlem or Reykjavik? “Each space reflects its environment,” she explains. “So, my pied-à-terre in Iceland is very colourful and filled with pieces by Icelandic artists. My apartment in Harlem was built in 1901, so the furnishings are quite traditional. Here, everything is a lot more contemporary.”

Bedrooms and bathrooms – “rooms with doors” as Bridges puts it – are filled with the colourful wallpaper, playful patterns and mixed textures that fans will recognise as her signature style. However, the walls of the open-plan living room and kitchen are painted white, allowing the art to take centre stage. This is Bridges’ favourite part of her home. “It has lots of windows, so it’s full of light. It’s uplifting. I feel like it’s a great space for the things I collect, like my hand-carved birds.” She pauses, then adds: “I really love birdwatching.”

The hand-carved creatures in question perch silently beneath clothes atop an antique Swedish table. And suspended in the air above them is one of two large-scale mobiles that Bridges designed in collaboration with artist >

*From top: Bridges' love of birds is evident throughout her house; the dining area, with its antique Louis XV and Biedermeier chairs, vintage Fornasetti chairs, lamps from Stair Galleries and photograph (centre) by Fabiola Jean-Louis*



“Too many people RUSH when they’re DECORATING because they’re in a HURRY to get it finished”

Elizabeth Parker. “I’ve always been inspired by Alexander Calder’s mobiles,” Bridges tells me. “There’s one in the entrance of the Philadelphia Museum of Art, near to where I grew up. I remember being really taken by it as a child visiting with my mother. Then I always had small mobiles in my bedroom when I was young, so I wanted to make sure the ceilings in the house would be high enough to allow for bigger versions.”

Throughout the house, you’ll also find examples of Bridges’ best-known (and perhaps best-loved) invention: her signature Harlem Toile de Jouy, which rehashes the traditional French pattern with vibrant scenes representing the black experience. At once art and political commentary, it exemplifies the power of truly great design. Initially created as a wallcovering (it’s part of Cooper Hewitt, Smithsonian Design Museum’s permanent wallpaper collection), the motif can now be found on bedding, cookware and clothing.

And Bridges has it all. “Right now, I’m staring at my Le Creuset Dutch oven, which is currently on my stove and full of soup that I made for dinner this evening,” she says. “Every morning, I drink out of my Le Creuset stoneware mug. If you went into my bathroom right now, you’d see my Gingerlily silk robe hanging alongside my kaftan on the back of the door. And in my bedroom, I have the Gingerlily pillowcases on my bed and the sleep mask on the nightstand next to it. I only collaborate with brands on products that I use and are authentic to my own life.”

There’s one more question I have to ask: can anyone learn to curate their space in the multilayered way that Bridges has done in Hay House? “I think there is an art to it,” she says pensively. “Too many people rush when they’re decorating because they’re in a hurry to get it finished. I always tell people to slow down and enjoy the process, because this allows you to be thoughtful and the result will be more interesting. I mix a lot of different styles together – antiques, modern pieces, my own designs and things that belonged to my family – but it works because everything I surround myself with is meaningful to me. I hope people leave my house feeling inspired.” □



Frank Frances/OTTO