

ARCHITECTURAL DIGEST

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Mimi London

A Fiercely Independent Spirit with a Love for Natural Materials

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"I'm a western woman," says Mimi London, which means, in addition to the informality of the West, an elemental attitude and a life lived by her own lights. Her career has not been an uneventful rise from college to professional school to a job in one of the better design

offices and that first commission from a well-to-do relative or family friend that launches the practitioner into a chain of successes.

Mimi London is self-made, and her path to success has been circuitously unique. "I grew up in the St. Francis Hotel, on the sixth floor—my father was in the hotel business. But I always went to Montana or the Northern California coast for summers or weekends. My mother was from Montana. She was born and raised in Kalispell and had property there that I inherited about 20 years ago.

"My grandfather came over from England, through Canada, and ended up running the Kalispell Mercantile in the '20s. He and my mother would go around Flathead Lake, which is where my house is now, when there was nothing but Indians and tepees."

As much a Californian as a Montanan, London has her offices in Los Angeles. When she's not there, her partner, Mark Boone, is. Boone worked for London for 10 years before the partnership was formed. He is now president of London Boone and the furniture and showroom businesses. "Mark does the day-to-day," says London. "He runs everything. We're in a new period of mutual creativity, which gives me the time to do what I want and to work on my things in Montana. He's very kind about it."

As a teenager in San Francisco, London was sent to the Katherine Delmar Burke School to be processed into a young lady, which, she says, "worked for a while." In due course, she relates, "I went back East to college because I was in love with a boy at Yale. I stayed there for one year and found out that the grass turns brown there in the winter and was so depressed that I broke up with the guy, left and never looked back." It didn't help that she had been at another of those "lady places," Connecticut College for Women. "I hated it," she says. "I'd been so accustomed to being independent in San Francisco,

and then to live in a college dorm with another person and not be able to come and go as I pleased made me nervous."

The escape from Connecticut College took some contriving: "I tried to pretend that I was having a nervous breakdown and went to Palm Springs, where my parents were, and ended up in San Francisco." She then worked for Saks Fifth Avenue, where she answered the phones, saying, "Intimate apparel, Miss London speaking," which is next to unimaginable for anyone who has met Mimi London. It was a situation that could not last. The boss, she says, "called me Mimi, so I called him Jim, and this was not acceptable behavior apparently. I worked there for about a year, had a funny apartment in San Francisco and got married."

That was as temporary as her stint at Saks. "It lasted until my first anniversary, and then we went to New York, and I moved into The Waldorf Towers. I said, Hello, I'm leaving,' and went to the Waldorf." But how did an impecunious young woman pay for such fancy digs? "I didn't," she explains, "the fellow who ran the Waldorf was a very good friend of my family, and he let me stay there for as long as I needed to."

In those days, before the laws were changed, getting a divorce was not like picking low-hanging fruit. If you wanted a quick one, you had to go some place like Reno, Nevada, where she "sold tickets for United Airlines in the Riverside Hotel." Then, she says, "somebody told me I could make \$25 an hour as a model in San Francisco. I went to see an agent, and he said, Just go buy a bunch of makeup.' I did, and within two weeks I was modeling."

In short order London was in New York modeling for the Ford agency. "I was very much a high-fashion model, working with great photographers and doing stuff for Vogue and Bazaar, Diana Vreeland and Grace Mirabella and all those people. Modeling in New York in that era was glamorous and exciting and not decadent. People would

be telling you how wonderful and pretty you were and paying you a dollar a minute to put lipstick on. I had a wonderful time."

If it wasn't Breakfast at Tiffany's, it might have been. London recalls, "I walked down the street near Bloomingdale's one day and ended up with a dachshund. I'd had four as a child at the St. Francis, and I just had to have another dachshund, who, of course, was named Eloise. I took her with me to Paris. She modeled things and made enough money to pay her own way. They would give her a filet mignon on a silver dish, while I had my sandwich."

Before London knew it, her modeling days were over. "Twenty-six years old and over the hill! It was ridiculous." And she went on to the next career back in San Francisco. "I was a reporter at KQED Public Television. There we were: all these crusty, old, drunken, wonderful newsmen and silly stupid me. Once we did a wrap-up of what had happened in the world over the past year. They came to me, and I was supposed to cover fashion, so I said, Absolutely nothing.' But I'd go to a riot and do a what-do-you-wear-to-a-riot kind of thing."

Mimi London's last incarnation began as a friendship with the late, influential designer Michael Taylor. "I had fallen in love with a trader on the floor of the stock exchange. I'd met Michael Taylor about a year before, and we became great pals. Bob and I moved out with him to a newly purchased house—I guess it was our idea of a commune."

What happened next she credits to Taylor: "Michael was the only decorator I knew and the only thing I knew about decorating. I learned my sense of scale from him. I never worked for him, although I supplied a lot of furniture to him. We were such intensely good friends and around each other so much that what he did rubbed off on me."

Her first commissions in what became her chosen field came to her and Dixie Marquis, an unemployed friend. "We were hired by some of Dixie's actor friends, who wanted this, that and the other done for their houses, so we started doing these two-bit decorating jobs."

Invention and the entrepreneurial spirit soon arose: "I'd designed a mirrored bed done from lumberyard material. Dixie was down and out, and I was down and out, but her actor friends thought having a mirrored bed would be quite swell, so it was very popular in Hollywood. Being broke, we decided we would get a \$16 drill and make these things in the backyard."

But be not misled. There are no empty bubbles, no Holly Golightly in Mimi London. As with many other professional women, her work life and her personal life intertwine. "I value my independence more than anything. And that's why, after one marriage, I never looked to get married again. I thought it would cost me too much to marry a rich man. The way it works, the woman has to be on call for her CEO husband. I couldn't live that way."

After doing a job for a Hollywood agent who was, says London, "so odious that I escaped to Montana," she decided to do more furniture. "So I talked some poor forester into helping me harvest some pine—actually I stole it. I started peeling it and ended up having chairs and beds and sofas and things made out of it."

The new designs took off. "Michael immediately decided he thought that they were pretty interesting. It was the era of 'there goes the last pelican,' the beginning of environmental concern, so dealing with raw products was exotic and appealed to a lot of people. Also, it was the very end of the Italian glass-and-steel furniture style, and there was nothing new going on in design. Here comes Michael, who was brilliant and whose work was so photographable. He started using my things, and the magazines just loved it, because it felt really current. There was no way you could get a better introduction to the public." In that same period a magazine spread of London's work had a thrilling result: "I got a fan letter from Billy Baldwin!" she remembers. The former fashion model and TV reporter was now fully accredited in her new profession.

When one thinks of Mimi London and her work, one thinks of earth tones, untreated wood, craggy, waxed stone and slab floors. There are also animals: "This charming cowboy appeared on my doorstep one day wanting to do furniture for me. He took me off into the wilderness on a pack trip and reintroduced me to horses. It was as if he gave me the okay to get my first horse and actually bought my first horse for me—whom I still have and who's 32 years old." Now Mimi London has a dozen of them as well as an old border collie, who, she observes, is her best pal.



