



Interior Design

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Almost since its inception, the career of interior decoration and design has been strongly stereotyped, even caricatured, as "gay." Male interior decorators are often assumed to be gay, and the field of interior design itself is so closely associated with gay men as to encourage homophobic straight men and closeted gay men alike to avoid association with it.

Although this stereotype often invites ridicule, and may even arise from prejudice, it also stems from a cultural perception that gay men have special skills in the area of artistic design and fashion trends. As with other such careers, fashion design and hairdressing, for example, there may be some truth to the stereotype, though gay men hardly have a monopoly on "pink collar" professions.

Less encumbered by the need to prove masculinity, gay men may be more likely to demonstrate interest and talent in the area of interior design than insecure straight men. Interior decoration may also be attractive to queers because it is one of a handful of occupations that were welcoming to recognizably gay men even during the most repressive eras.

Emergence as an Independent Discipline

Although interior design did not become an independent discipline until the nineteenth century, people's lives have always been lived inside the houses, religious centers, and other buildings that make up their communities, and the design of those interiors has reflected the ways their lives were lived. Throughout the centuries, changes in the design of the interiors of human structures have echoed the changes in daily life in different time periods and cultures.

Interior design emerged as a decorative art form during the late 1800s, when families made newly rich by the Industrial Revolution wanted to design lavish homes without the generations of upper-class training to do it. They began hiring decorators to tell them what was fashionable and pleasing in home décor. Many of these first decorators were members of the social set who had stylish taste but needed to supplement their incomes.

By the end of the nineteenth century, home décor became a regular subject in magazines, especially those aimed at women. But despite the target audience, many of the articles prescribing good taste were written by homosexual men.

Among the shocking affectations of (male) dandies and aesthetes was their unabashed interest in interior decoration and objets d'art. On his tour to North America, for example, Oscar Wilde (1854-1900) lectured on "The House Beautiful" and "The Decorative Arts." While a college student, he is reported to have said "I find it harder and harder every day to live up to my blue china." He later became editor of *The Woman's World*, which included discussions of interior decoration as well as fashion, arts, politics, culture, and parenting.



Nate Berkus, interior designer and host of *The Nate Berkus Show*. Photograph by Greg Hernandez. Image appears under the Creative Commons Attribution-Share Alike 2.0 Generic license.

This concern with an aesthetic ideal that included decorative arts and beautiful surroundings was influenced by the writing of Walter Pater (1839-1894) and came to characterize both the aesthetic and decadent movements. It also helped shape the popular notion of homosexual consciousness as it emerged in the crucial final decades of the nineteenth century.

Relationship to Other Disciplines

Even after interior design emerged as an independent discipline, it remained closely allied with other professions, such as architecture, cabinetry, and furniture making. Hence, it is no accident that some of the earliest individuals who identified as interior designers or decorators were also architects and furniture designers, such as the eighteenth-century French design team and life partners Charles Percier (1764-1838) and Pierre Fontaine (1762-1853).

In fact, many leading architects have been accomplished interior designers, as in the cases of twentieth-century architects Frank Lloyd Wright and Philip Johnson (1906-2005), both of whom designed and decorated many of their signature buildings, envisioning their projects as not merely external structures but also as organic wholes, their interest often extending to the smallest elements of decoration.

Julia Morgan (1872-1957), the architect of William Randolph Hearst's San Simeon, was similarly involved in all aspects of the massive project she oversaw, collaborating with a small army of artisans and decorators. She even purchased art and antiques for the complex.

Conversely, Eileen Gray (1878-1976), Irish-born lesbian, earned fame as a furniture and rug designer before turning to architecture. In 1922, she opened a London furniture gallery, *Jean Désert*, that also offered decorating services. In 1924, she began designing houses and by 1930 was devoting most of her time to architecture. Her houses are mostly spare and elegant residences in France; they are admired by architectural historians for their purity of design and attention to detail, including their interior decoration.

Even when they are not themselves architects, interior designers frequently work closely with members of the allied building trades, often participating in construction or renovation projects.

Interior designers also often adhere to the tenets of particular historical styles. Hence, they are necessarily influenced by artistic and aesthetic movements, such as Art Nouveau, Art Deco, and the Arts and Crafts movement, which have also had enormous influence on other forms of design. Many of these movements were themselves shaped by the participation of gay and bisexual men and women.

British artist Duncan Grant (1885-1978), though now best known for his homoerotic nudes, contributed greatly to interior decoration. In 1913, with art critic and fellow Bloomsbury figure Roger Fry, Grant founded the Omega Workshops, which changed the course of applied art and design in Britain. Although Grant was commissioned to decorate the ocean liner, the *Queen Mary*, his designs were rejected as too *avant garde*.

In addition to art, fashion and theatrical design are also allied professions, with interior design both influencing fashion and theater design and being influenced by them, and with interior decorators often also participating in the fashion and theatrical arts.

Some Designers

Interestingly, in a field that would become known as the domain of gay men, the first person to use the

term "interior decorator" to describe her work was a lesbian, Elsie de Wolfe (1858-1950). De Wolfe was a New York socialite and actress who had a long romantic relationship with controversial theatrical impresaria Bessy Marbury.

DeWolfe began her design career by advising friends and acquaintances on matters of home décor. Her first large commission, designing the interior of the elite women's Colony Club in 1905, led to a long successful career as a decorator whose airy, natural style is respected even today. DeWolfe's decorating principles reached the masses through her newspaper columns, which were collected into an influential book, *The House in Good Taste* (1913).

Another gay pioneer of interior design was British decorator John Beresford Fowler (1906-1977). Fowler began his career in the 1930s as a painter of wallpaper before opening his own design firm to instruct the wealthy in making their homes both beautiful and welcoming. Like de Wolfe's designs, Fowler's country estate elegance still survives as a modern decorative style.

The career of William Haines (1900-1973) provides a clear example of the way that interior design could be a refuge for the gay artist. During the late 1920s and early 1930s, Haines had a successful film career playing cocky but appealing leading men, becoming a major star of the silent era. However, as Hollywood became more conservative, and Haines refused to conceal his homosexuality and his long-term relationship with Jimmie Shields, acting jobs dried up.

Undaunted, the actor who once said, "I would rather have taste than either love or money," shifted to a successful career in interior design, decorating the homes of a number of the stars who had been his Hollywood friends as well as renovating famous nightclubs and restaurants, and even creating his own furniture. He pioneered the style that has become known as "Hollywood Regency."

The open gayness that had killed Haines' movie career was no obstacle to success in the design business. Even after its founder's death, William Haines Designs continues to be a mainstay of the "Hollywood glamour" style.

Celebrity Designers

As the late twentieth and early twenty-first centuries saw queerness become a more accepted part of popular culture, gay interior designers became much more than a whispered joke or comic stereotype.

In 2003, for example, the Bravo cable network introduced a program called *Queer Eye for the Straight Guy* in which gay fashion designers, chefs, and interior decorators performed make-overs on the persons and homes of straight volunteers.

The show parlayed the notion that gays have special design skills into an instant popular success. It ran until 2007, winning an Emmy for Outstanding Reality Program in 2004, and spawning a number of spinoffs from *Queer Eye for the Straight Girl* to an Australian version.

Two gay male married couples have become celebrity interior designers, thanks to their television appearances in the United Kingdom and Canada, respectively.

Colin McAllister (b. 1968) and Justin Ryan (b. 1967), longtime partners who entered into a civil partnership in 2008, are mainstays of design shows on the BBC and other British television channels. The couple, who impart sensible design advice in a humorous manner, are known for their banter and comic bickering. Although their main residence is in Glasgow, they also own homes in London and Toronto, where their series *Colin and Justin's Home Heist* is broadcast on HGTV.

Steven Sabados and Chris Hyndman, who married in Canada in 2008 after being together for many years,

also inject humor and bickering into their shows. The couple joined forces in 1992 to form the Sabados Group, a company that did public relations as well as interior decoration. In 2001, they launched their first television show, *Designer Guys*, on HGTV, which was followed by such other shows as *Design Rivals* (2003) and *So Chic* (2005). In 2008, their talk show *Steven and Chris* debuted on CBC. Featuring design advice, celebrity guests, and tips on health and beauty, entertaining and food preparation, all spiced by campy wit, the show ran for three seasons on CBC and is now syndicated in the U. S. and other countries.

Sabados and Hyndman have also published books on design and launched their own line of furniture, textiles, rugs, and other decorative accessories, and even a wine label. They also own a retail store in St. John's, Newfoundland. As Mark Pupo observed of the couple in a profile in *Toronto Life*, Sabados and Hyndman are as famous in Canada as movie stars, "But their fame is built on something quite different from acting—they're brands unto themselves, and they teach us the secrets to the good life."

Although they are not television stars, Mitchell Gold (b.1952) and Bill Williams (b. 1963) of the furniture and home accessories company Mitchell Gold + Bill Williams qualify as celebrity designers by virtue of their high profile in the glbtq community and their books on design, such as *The Comfortable Home: How to Invest in Your Nest and Live Well for Less* (2009) and *Let's Get Comfortable: How to Furnish and Decorate a Welcoming Home* (2007). The style they embrace they call "soft modern," an aesthetic that is strong on practicality and comfort.

Gold and Williams, who were a couple for 14 years, but amicably split up in 2002, began their company in 1989, with Gold as CEO and Williams as Art Director. By 2011, their annual sales had come to exceed \$100,000,000, with their furniture and accessories being sold in several national chains as well as more than 60 independent retailers and more than a dozen signature stores across the country. Their designs have won numerous awards.

Mitchell Gold + Bill Williams is well known for its progressive employment practices and benefits at its North Carolina factory and retail stores, as well as for its advocacy on behalf of gay rights. Gold has been especially prominent in the campaign to educate about the religious bigotry directed toward gay people. The partners established Faith in America in 2005 to counter the misinformation and hostility toward homosexuals spread by religious organizations. In 2008, Gold published *Crisis: 40 Stories Revealing the Personal, Social, and Religious Pain and Trauma of Growing up Gay in America*, a volume that includes his own account of growing up as a Reform Jew in Trenton, N. J.

Los Angeles-based designer Kenneth Brown (b. 1971) gained recognition via television shows, including multiple appearances on HGTV's *Designer Challenge* in the early years of the twenty-first century. In 2004, he was offered his own show, *re-Design*, which ran for several years on HGTV. In 2008, he debuted a show for TLC, *Over Design*. Laidback and charming, Brown specializes in designs that are both aesthetically pleasing and comfortable.

Actor Bryan Batt (b. 1963), best known for his roles in Broadway musicals and his stint in the television series *Mad Men*, is also a designer. In 2003, he and his partner Tom Cianfichi opened Hazelnut, a gift and accessories store featuring designs by Batt, on Magazine Street in the actor's native New Orleans. After Hurricane Katrina devastated New Orleans in 2005, Batt utilized his decorating talents to promote the city's recovery, frequently appearing on television design shows and participating in a program called "Pimp My [FEMA] Trailer" in which he decorated the temporary home of a woman displaced by Katrina. He continues to appear on such shows as *The Martha Stewart Show*.

In 2006, an out gay and conspicuously hunky designer from Miami named David Bromstad (b. 1973) won the first season of the HGTV reality competition *Design Star*, earning his own program on the network. On *Color Splash* and *Color Splash Miami*, the energetic decorator employs his signature brash style to transform and brighten interior spaces.

A former Disney illustrator, Bromstad considers himself as primarily an artist; consequently, his interior designs frequently include his own art work. A recipient of the Human Rights Campaign's Visibility Award for being out and proud in the public eye, Bromstad has been active in the fight against AIDS, lending his talent to the 2011 "Know Yourself: Get HIV Tested" initiative by creating a mural to bring to life the importance of HIV testing.

Another television designer is Turkish-born John Gidding (b. 1977), a former model who is both an architect and an interior designer. A graduate of Yale and the Harvard Graduate School of Design, Gidding worked his way through school by modeling for such clients as Armani, Gucci, and Hugo Boss, and posing for the covers of romance novels.

He first earned recognition as a landscape architect before opening John Gidding Design, Inc. in New York City.

He has appeared on several television shows, including ABC Family's *Knock First* and HGTV's *Designed to Sell*, but is best known as the architect/designer on HGTV's Atlanta-based *Curb Appeal: The Block*, where he and his team improve the exteriors of chosen homes, usually doing major improvements for one homeowner and less expensive touch-ups for two or three others in an attempt to improve the neighborhood itself.

In true gay style, designer Nate Berkus (b. 1971) acquired the decorating bug very early: his first project was re-doing his own bedroom when he was eight years old. After studying design in Chicago and Paris, he founded his own design firm in 1995, but achieved national attention in 2002 when he made his first appearance on Oprah Winfrey's talk show. He became a regular on the show in 2004, giving audience members advice on interior décor.

In December 2004 Berkus and his partner, photographer Fernando Bengoechea, were vacationing at a beach resort in Sri Lanka when the Indian Ocean tsunami struck. They were both swept out to sea. Berkus managed to survive, but Bengoechea apparently drowned. Berkus appeared on *The Oprah Winfrey Show* on January 17, 2005, to talk about his ordeal and the loss of his partner.

Of the response to this appearance, Berkus told *The Advocate's* Matthew Breen, "I didn't realize how much goodwill there was out there in middle America. I got letters from people of all different walks of life--gay, straight, rich, poor, black, white, Asian. It was a moment where everybody just felt all the same pain--that this guy is going through something enormously painful, and we've gotten to know him over the years, so this is something we feel for him."

In 2010, Berkus became a television personality in his own right, and the first out gay male daytime talk show host in the United States, with the syndicated program *The Nate Berkus Show*. Viewers of the popular show seem willing to accept Berkus's expertise not only on matters of design, but on a wide range of social topics as well.

When First Lady of the United States Michelle Obama chose Michael Smith (b. 1964) to be the official White House designer the surprise was less that he was openly gay than that he was based in Santa Monica, California, rather than in Chicago or the east coast. Smith, who is known for designs that are sophisticated but comfortable and classic yet modern, was named among *Architectural Digest's* top 100 Designers in 2002 and 2004 and *Elle Décor's* Designer of the Year in 2003.

Smith's redecoration of the Oval Office was revealed to mostly positive reviews in August 2010. The design features taupe patterned drapes, pale striped wallpaper, a mixture of traditional and contemporary furniture, and a taupe rug, accented with yellow, cream and blue, with five inspiring inscriptions woven into its border.

Smith has also, to less fanfare, decorated the White House's private quarters, including the bedrooms of the President and First Lady and their two daughters. It is perhaps indicative of the changing social view of gayness that Smith was chosen because of his family-friendly approach to interior design.

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