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Jena Hall's inspired idea: designing a collection of eclectic, coordinated home furnishings

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She doesn't do chintz. She leaves that to Mario Buatta. She prefers relaxed interiors to glamorous formal ones. She doesn't even stick to one style. She'll jump from Swedish to English to Italian and then, surprise! She'll sprinkle in a little Balinese. Jena Hall's inspirations can't be tied to a singular design style.

Her name may not command the instant recognition of Ralph Lauren, but in just five years, under the label "Inspirations," a "total designer look at affordable prices," the designer has more than 4,500 licensed products for the home, with retail sales in excess of \$20 million. That's an average of 800 new products a year. Jena Hall products are available at Bloomingdale's, J.C. Penney, Bed Bath and Beyond, the Home Depot and in Spiegel and Horchow catalogs.

"Jena's designs show great versatility," said Ellen Frankel, former editor of 1001 Home Ideas and currently a New York-based consultant on magazine-related projects. "She has a feel for what makes people comfortable in their homes -- mass appeal with a professional approach."

Add to that the impact of unattributed design ideas, which Ms. Hall quietly turned out as a consultant to various manufacturers. The ideas are still showing up in your wall colors, furnishings, fixtures, fabrics and decorative accessories. Clients have included Kohler, American Standard and Eljer (baths); Jenn-Aire (kitchens); Pennsylvania House and Ethan Allen (furniture); Lyon Shaw (outdoor furniture); American Olean (tile); Paul Hanson (lighting); and Sarreid (decorative accessories).

At the same time, Ms. Hall enjoyed a successful interior design practice. When she couldn't find what she needed in the marketplace, she designed it herself. And before she had a piece crafted, she studied the process so she could speak the technical language and practically do it herself.

Ms. Hall's jobs were published in House Beautiful, Better Homes & Gardens, Ladies' Home Journal, Redbook and Women's Day, and she was invited to write a question-and-answer column called "Designer-in-Residence" for New York Newsday. Eventually the column was nationally syndicated.

Readers wondered: How can you update a room without throwing everything out? What kind of coffee table can you team with a traditional love seat? Which styles go together? How can you mix patterns? What does eclectic mean?

When Ms. Hall left her lucrative design practice in 1988 to develop products for the home under her name, she took to heart the queries and began to design with those consumers in mind. The result was "Inspirations," a collection rooted in eclecticism.

"Inspirations is a mix rather than match collection that comes from a high-end interior design approach," said Ms. Hall, "working with color schemes that layer in patterns and textures to a room to give it variety."

Collections are themed, and color and pattern unite them. A particular pattern may cross over from one medium to another, only if the design reads well. One pattern, "Cafe Check," inspired by the mood of a French bistro, features a sprightly floral in bright pastels set off by a racing check. The pattern is every bit as playful and appropriate for a paper plate for Contempo as for a rug produced by Trans Ocean.

Patterns recur

Often collections carry over one design element to the next, even spanning a year or two. A lattice design, for example, was incorporated into Ms. Hall's first furniture collection for Broyhill in 1990. When Ms. Hall debuted her bedding collection for Revman two years later, one pattern, "Good Morning Glory," included a European garden-inspired theme composed again of lattice, through which morning glories and ivy are entwined. A companion pattern adorns pinstriped accessories punctuated with floral bouquets and sprigs of bayberry and forget-me-nots. A room setting featured other licensees: bed and ivy-bedecked desk (Broyhill); Country French chair with a wheat sheath back ++ splat (Casa Bique); terra-cotta lamp and iron chandelier (Paul Hanson).

In her "Bali Fret" iron candle holders for Capella, a division of Montague, the design is interpreted in a simple fret, a Chinese key pattern made up of parallel and intersecting lines (unlike the contiguous Greek key pattern). The design reads contemporary, spite of its rustic mottled finish.

Even though Ms. Hall's furnishings and accessories collections are designed to coordinate, it's unlikely that any one group will be showcased fully in one department store setting at a time. But that's OK. Purchasing the whole package is not necessary. "Decorating with accent pieces is an easy way to freshen a room without a big dollar commitment," the designer says.