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JOAN COWEN OF INTERIORS BY J. C.

ROMANTIC WINDOWS

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Every day is "Designers Showcase Day" for Joan Cowen and her staff when they install the window treatments her clients have been eagerly awaiting. Cowen designs in all styles but she is especially known for her luxurious, romantic, and sometimes vaguely Victorian window treatments. Such designs imply

luxurious homes, abundant in the Fox River Valley area forty miles west of Chicago where new million dollar homes are now commonplace.

Tom and Gail Scholten are president and vice-president respectively of Ashley Custom Homes, Inc. They not only build custom homes, but they have built a reputation as a client-centered builder. Their new home, nestled into one of the wooded hills just west of St. Charles, Illinois, is a welcome retreat where they can enjoy their five young children. It is also a place where they meet clients to plan their next building project.

They needed a designer who could translate their nebulous visions into the reality of specific fabrics and design - and someone who would not take six months to do it. Enter Joan Cowen.

Cowen was excited about the chance to design window treatments to complement the detailed architectural features that typify each Ashley home. Gail Scholten spend hours with the company architect achieving their inimitable designs. She has designed the tray ceilings featured in many of their homes. She supervises each step of construction. If she sees something being built that does not seem perfect to her, she has the

authority to stop the workmen at any point and have the work redone to her satisfaction.

Ashley homes are a designer's delight, according to Cowen - and the Scholtens are delighted with Cowen's window designs which are detailed on these pages.

Cowen has been in business in the area for fifteen years, but her love of beautiful fabrics started when she was a child and begged for gifts of material so that she could make doll clothes. Paradoxically, however, she became a registered nurse and worked in public health after graduation. Her career as an interior decorator began in 1970 when she bought a radial saw so she could build her own recreation room. Other self-taught skills quickly followed as friends and neighbors saw her work and retained her to help them with their decorating problems. This gradually led her into her career as an interior designer.

Cowen has no formal training in art and interior design. She taught herself by trial and error, research, and the helpful advice of other professionals. Her business has grown only by word of mouth and she has never had to advertise.

It is also a family business. As the business has grown, her husband Gerald, a recently retired businessman, has taken on

the onerous (to her) chores of accounting, payroll, and taxes.

Her daughter Kathleen, also a business graduate, is responsible for management but is moving into design, discovering within herself those same creative talents that her mother possesses.

Cowen attributes their success to the service they give their clients. "Some business people are totally irresponsible. They don't keep their word. They don't come or even call when they say they will. Your clients must be able to depend on you. We are absolutely rigid about keeping our word. We promise delivery four to six weeks from the time we receive the materials. That is much less than the norm for the industry, which is three to four months."

"When I first went into business I read someplace that you will never become successful by taking people's money and promising them things you can't deliver. When we start working with a client, we tell them what we are going to do and we live up to it. If we can't meet their scheduling needs, we tell them immediately so that they can go someplace else."

Cowen can make promises because all of her work is done in-house. She even has her own carpenters and upholsterers which allows her to use construction procedures unusual for the industry. Since she has moved into expanded workrooms she can

now accept requests to do fabrications for other designers.

Cowen keeps creative control of every project. She has a rule that two designers - and she is always one of them - go on location for a new client. "You can bounce ideas off of each other, and bring two different perspectives to each challenge.

Kathleen has a youthful flair that I don't have. She is especially good with fabrics and wall covering selections while my forte is window treatments and accessories. Together we are much more than each one of us is alone."

Cowen likes the challenge of sometimes working within a limited budget. "You don't need to be rich to have a beautiful home. We seek to establish such an open relationship with our clients that they feel free to discuss possible changes they want made instead of saying nothing and going elsewhere. If they are worried about costs, we can change the material or design, or use different fabrication methods. You may think that someone who can afford a \$500,000 house can afford the decorating, but that is not always true."

Cowen takes a relaxed view toward fabrication errors that might make some workroom supervisors frantic. "If we make a mistake, we try to figure out how to incorporate it into the

design so no harm is done. Tension and stress only reduce creativity and productivity. I try to laugh about any error and say - let's redesign this so we will have something more beautiful than the way we first planned it. As a result, we create a new and novel window design.

"For instance, Lucy, my workroom supervisor, accidentally cut the bishop sleeves on the bedroom windows for the Scholten house the wrong way. We knew that we had received the last bolt of the fabric in stock, so we just redesigned the bishop sleeves to run a row of shirred fabric through the two wrong cuts. The result is that we have a style now that has never been made before and it is absolutely gorgeous. When I look back over these last fifteen years, I find that every new design I have had to develop because of a error has brought us more orders than my original design."

Cowen thinks that everyone deserves a beautiful home. "You home should be a place of refuge, the place you love to be, so that you can find the peace and tranquility you need to go out again into our troubled world."

Love your work and perservere, advises Cowen. "Once we were flooded out. Another time an employee stole all of my tools and disappeared. But we never gave up. Our only goal is to

please our clients. We love what we do. We actually LOVE what we do. I am thankful every day that I can help other people find happiness through my own creative talents."

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**BEDROOM:** A new elegant look in Victorian is the Robert Allen 100% cotton black background chintz against the soft rose Robert Allen 58% cotton and 42% acetate fabric and the Robert Allen blue 50% cotton and 50% polyester moire. The lace is a Victorian cabbage rose pattern in B. Berger 100% polyester. The two wingback chairs, pillow, and dust ruffle are done in the blue moire. The black chintz fabric is also used as the wall covering.

We wanted to tie in the black fabric so we used it for a ruffle at the bottom of the fluff. Then we decided that the contrast of the lace and the black was too harsh so we added another ruffle of the rose fabric between them to soften it. A inserted row of Shirred rose fabric runs up the bishop sleeves.

**MASTER BATH:** Repeats the black chintz fabric used in the master bedroom as the wall covering and drapes. The pleated balloon is pulled into bows at the bottom of each pleat.

**LIVING ROOM:** The body of the drape is a hammered Robert Allen 80% cotton 20% acetate satin. The same Waverly print that is on the sofa is used for the inner pleat of the pleated balloon. The lace is the calla lily pattern, B. Berger, 100% polyester.

Palladium windows are the design of the day, but there is no palladium window on this living room wall. To achieve the elegant palladium look, we cut plywood to form the arch over the window. The hammered satin was pleated around the arch and a two inch ruffle finishes off the edge. A ten inch diameter rosette out of the Waverly print fills the center of the arch where the pleats come together and ties in the Wqverly print as well as picking up the deep burgundy accent used elsewhere in this room.

**DINING ROOM:** A 100% cotton Seabrook fabric matching the coordinating wall covering is used as the face of the balloon. the inner pleat is a 100% rose fabric by B. Berger. Lace is also



B. Berger 100% polyester. Two shades of rose are used to swag around the windows. The swags are held in place by rosettes in Williamsburg blue. A brass sconce to the left and right of the windows holds the ends of the fabric swag in place.

We have developed our own fabrication method, which I call Galveston shirring, for the beautiful French lace. So that the delicate patterns of the lace can be fully appreciated, no tapes are used on the lace. We sew rings on a special tab right on the lace, and instead of shirring it as full widthwise as is customary, the fullness is achieved through additional fabric in the length. If you want to appreciate the beauty of the lace by looking through the light of the window, you lower it. If you want it to appear to be a second balloon valance, you raise it all the way and it puffs and fluffs extremely well.

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