

## INTERIORS BY J. C.

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Photographed by Jim Ream

You deserve a beautiful home, according to Joan Cowen of INTERIORS BY J. C., of St. Charles, Illinois. "Your home should be a place of refuge, the place you love to be, so that you can find the peace and tranquillity you need to go out again into our troubled world."

Peace and tranquillity abound in the Fox River valley forty miles west of Chicago. One hundred years ago the Pottawattomie Indians fished in the river and the early settlers raised corn in the adjoining fields. Now the river banks, oak groves, and

rolling hills shelter luxurious brick mansions built by the corporate officers and professionals moving into the area. These are the homes that Cowen decorates in the elegant and eclectic fashion for which she is famous.

"An interior designer is a special person who is allowed to enter a family's most private world - their home. My responsibility is to listen to them so that I can find out what they love and then guide them in putting things together," explains Cowen.

"I try to find out the little things. What colors speak to them? Do butterflies remind them of something special? Will the home look like it has been put together with love and care? Children, especially, remember their homes. You want to give them happy memories to follow them all of their lives. You should not feel guilty if you spend money on your home."

Popular colors now are mauve, rose, teal, gray, accented with dark colors such as hunter green or burgundy, according to Cowen. Complicated window treatments with Victorian touches such as swags and rosettes carry romance and whimsy throughout the home. "We have all been rushing so much that we haven't taken the time to feel elegant anymore. That is why we welcome the

return of luxury."

Cowen will design the entire home as requested by her many corporate clients moving into their new custom-built homes. Other clients doing their own decorating may just need a little guidance to help them accomplish their goals.

"You don't need to be rich to have a beautiful home," Cowen says. In fact, she likes the challenge of working with a limited budget. She loves garage sales, flea markets, and estate sales. She rescues discarded painted furniture pieces and strips them down to the original wood finishes. She saves the frames from old upholstered furniture for her upholsterer, an Italian craftsman, to rejuvenate. These treasures are stored for the day when she will find their perfect permanent home.

Cowen's love of beautiful fabrics started early. She grew up as a typical southern belle in a middle-class family in Montgomery, Alabama. Atypically, however, when her mother asked her what she wanted for a present, she didn't ask for candy or a toy or a doll. She asked for a "piece of pretty material" out of which she made doll dresses and, later, all of her own clothes.

Those were the days when a girl had to decide whether she wanted to be a teacher or a nurse. Cowen chose nursing and worked as a public health nurse for several years. "I don't

regret my nursing experience," Cowen says. "I think it made me more sensitive and understanding of people and their problems."

She married the new business school graduate who lived across the street from the nurses' dormitory and who gallantly fixed her car's flat tire. They raised four daughters. Cowen lived the life typical of a suburban wife and mother.

The purchase of a radial saw led to her subsequent career in interior design. "I wanted to turn our basement into a recreation room. When I found out it would cost several thousand dollars, I decided to save money and do it myself. All I needed was the saw, but at first the hardware store salesman even refused to sell one to me. I had to teach myself how to use it."

Seeing her success, a friend - her first client - asked her to build a sewing table and cabinet. Soon more friends asked her to build cabinets for them. That led to requests for help in choosing colors and wallpaper. Furniture upholstery and floor tiling came next.

Cowen has no formal training in art and interior design. She taught herself each skill as she went along, learning by trial and error, historical research, and the advice of other

professionals. She has never had to advertise.

Gerald Cowen, her supportive husband, eventually tired of her home-based business. "You have couches all over our basement. You have wallpaper samples all over the house. Why don't you rent a little store so we can bring order back into our home?"

Many years and several stores later, INTERIORS BY J.C., has become a family business with eight full time employees. All work is done in-house with their own skilled crafts people.

"Because we have our own carpenter, we are able to use a lot of wood in our designs, expanding our design options - and making our designs harder for competitors to copy," says Cowen.

Kathleen, the third daughter and a business major, has both design and management responsibilities. Gerald Cowen, after early retirement from his own career, has assumed all of the accounting, payroll, and tax duties - which is just fine with Joan, because it gives her more time to be creative.

They still have goals - but retirement is not one of them. "We are incorporating ceramic tiles into our cornice designs. We want to branch out into furniture and toy design. We want to help our employees experience their own creative development. And we want to be able to donate more money for our favorite

missionary projects.

"Many people never find work that they truly love. I am thankful that I can help other people find happiness through my own creative talents."

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