

Graham Simmonds

The Sydney interior designer and retailer shares insights collected along his unconventional creative journey.

PHOTOGRAPHY *Jem Cresswell*



“I am still a fan of collecting pieces that can travel with me when I move. I am a true believer that interiors should evolve over time.”

My love for interiors started at a young age. My father was in the Australian Army and we would move almost yearly as we were posted to different locations around the world. I loved to move our furniture around with my mum every time we relocated somewhere new. There was something so exciting about how different we made every house look as we collected furniture and homewares from our travels. **I am still a fan of collecting pieces that can travel with me** when I move, especially things that can be reinvented in some way to look fresh yet familiar in a new setting. I am a true believer that interiors should evolve over time.

I have always enjoyed being creative. I was an average student at school and, like most kids, I had no idea what I was going to do when I left school. My parents were fully supportive of my creativity and enrolled me in an interior design short course when I was 15. I hated it! And it left me even more clueless. I went and got a haircut the week before I was supposed to start year 11 and my hairdresser, a family friend, suggested I try hairdressing. I had three days' work experience in his salon, then went and enrolled in a hairdressing apprenticeship. worked as a hairdresser for about 10 years – in a salon, for TV, editorial shoots and for fashion week. But I never stopped loving interiors. When I decided I was finally mature enough to start my interior design career, I began studying colour theory and interior styling at the International School of Colour and Design (ISCD). Once I completed that, I went on to study a diploma of interior design at Sydney Design School.

Getting my first client wasn't easy. So many people make it sound easy but it really isn't. The other challenging aspect of being a sole trader is learning how to charge for your services.

My advice for novice designers? Perfect your documentation skills and you will never be out of work. Be hungry, be patient, be willing to continue to learn once you leave school. There is so much power in saying you don't know something. People are always more inclined to help those who ask. **To me, the concept stage is the most exciting part of the design process.** No two projects are the same. I love problem-solving and

getting to know clients and developing great friendships with them. My partner would probably say I just like playing with all the fabric swatches.

Opening my own store, Gray & Co, was a significant achievement. It's my happy place. It's something I was afraid of doing for so many years but I'm so glad I went for it. **Strategies for a good work-life balance? I need someone to tell me!** I check my emails all the time – even at the gym – and I'm always available to my clients. Design is a total obsession for me, I live and breathe it. As I'm getting older, I realise I need to work on that...

If I need to nourish my creativity, I can always find something to inspire me in travel or books. *Wabi Sabi: Japanese Wisdom for a Perfect Imperfect Life* by Beth Kempton is on my reading list at the moment.

When I can, I like to enjoy a night out at The Shell House in Sydney's CBD, or at Fortuna Eat and Drink, Pina, or Buffalo Dining Club – all close to my home in Sydney's east.

I love to travel, but I can't say that one particular destination inspires me more than another. It's more the architecture of a place that captures my heart – I love all the details that tell the story of a place. Palaces in India, colonial buildings in Singapore, the Cape Dutch homes in Cape Town, the 1920s Spanish Mission architecture in Los Angeles, and iron-front buildings in Soho, New York, have all inspired me in different ways.

There's so much creative talent around. I am particularly drawn to the work of US interior designers Jeremiah Brent and Nate Berkus, Cash Van Buskirk, Jake Arnold, Amber Lewis, Disc Interiors, Katie Hodges Design, Clements Design, Waldo Fernandez, Jenni Kayne, Siriano Interiors, M. Elle Design, Alyssa Kapito, OZ Architects, Christina Cole, and Wimmel. I also love British designer Rose Uniacke.

If I could choose some iconic design pieces for my own home, I'd go for a Cloud pendant light by Apparatus Studio. Anything by French designers Jean Royère or Jean-Michel Frank would be fabulous too.

My dream project? If I had no budget, it would be to renovate/restore an Italian villa – one where I could live for the duration of the project. Dream big right? **H&G Gray & Co;** www.grayandco.com.au.



GRAHAM'S FAVOURITE THINGS
 From top Cloud 37 pendant light by Apparatus Studio, POA, Criteria. Lotus marble bowl, \$155, Gray & Co. Stitched armchair, POA, Rose Uniacke. Shell House dining room and terrace. For Where to Buy, see page 190.

OPPOSITE Interior designer and retailer Graham Simmonds in his Sydney concept store, Gray & Co. The paintings are by Tracy Strange.