

GOLDEN REIGN

On the fiftieth anniversary of the Inchbald School of Design, **Stephen Calloway** looks back at its beginnings, and meets its enthusiastic founder, Jacqueline Duncan, still its principal

PHOTOGRAPH RICHARD NICHOLSON

This year the Inchbald, internationally acclaimed as Europe's first school devoted to professional training for interior designers and decorators, celebrates its fiftieth academic year. Not bad for an enterprise begun by a young woman in her twenties, operating from a couple of converted rooms at home, and with no more serious business plan than to attract potential students through a few hastily placed advertisements in *Country Life*. But Jacqueline Inchbald (now Mrs Duncan) was no ordinary young woman. She was determined. She already had several years' experience of both the antiques trade and - through working with her then-husband, the brilliant designer Michael Inchbald - of the practicalities of domestic and commercial decoration projects. She also saw a clear opportunity: 'In England there was simply nowhere at that time that you could learn the trade,' she explains. 'I wanted to set up something on the lines of the famous New York interior-decoration school, Parsons.' She calculated that she would require a minimum of seven pupils to start with, in order to break even and to make things work. As it turned out, in that crucial first week in 1960, eight students signed up for the initial course, and the Inchbald was launched. Since then, thousands of students from a dozen or more countries have graduated from the school - a good many of them now famous names in the decoration world. Wonderfully, half a century on, Mrs Duncan, still elegant, vivacious and full of ideas, remains very much at the helm.

Recalling the school's early years, Jacqueline talks of the main influences that shaped her thinking. John Fowler was the doyen of grand decoration at that time, but there was already a feeling that the trade was changing, as the old craftsmen retired, and things were no longer done in the same way. Younger designers were beginning to make a splash. Of course, Jacqueline learnt a great deal from Michael Inchbald, who also worked in a grand and - at first sight - classical style, but in fact delighted in embracing new materials and technologies.

Another key figure, rapidly establishing himself as a tastemaker, was David Hicks: 'We were all fascinated by the exciting way in which he combined old and new pieces, and by his daring use of strong colours,' Jacqueline explains. 'We also saw intriguing rooms in the pages of *House & Garden*, edited in those days by Robert Harling, who championed new and innovative designers alongside the more traditional decorators. Interest in decoration was growing fast - they were exciting times.'

Since those heady days in the Sixties, the ideals and principles of the Inchbald have remained very much the same. Sound but imaginative teaching has been the key, with the balance struck carefully between inspiration and practicality. In her 1971 book *Decoration and Design*, Jacqueline set out

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her philosophy concerning the creation of successful interiors, stressing what she saw as the need for professionalism in the trade. 'The success of any decorator is based less upon his creativity,' she wrote, 'than upon his capacity for hard work and the practical application of his knowledge.' It is widely recognised that Inchbald graduates emerge with an essential grounding, not only in how to create schemes and manage projects, but also in how to present ideas and work with clients.

The list of well-known decorators who began their careers with an Inchbald course is quite extraordinary. A legendary, early star pupil was Nina Campbell, who went to work for John Fowler, at Colefax and Fowler, before establishing her own

practice; another was Stephen Ryan, who became chief designer at David Hicks before setting up on his own. Henrietta Spencer-Churchill, Christophe Gollut and Diana Yakeley are all celebrated names in the world of decoration, while the architect Zaha Hadid is also a graduate of the school. Among the more recent alumni, there are already a number of names to watch.

In 1972, 12 years after the opening of the main school, Jacqueline created the Inchbald garden-design school, another first of its kind. It too has its roll-call of successes: having graduated in 2004, Philip Nixon and Marcus Barnett won gold medals at the 2005 and 2006 Chelsea Flower Shows. This year, a third graduate, the garden school's 'Student of the Year' Luciano Giubbilei, also took a Chelsea gold medal for his Laurent-Perrier show garden.

A major factor in the success of the school and its ongoing pre-eminence has undoubtedly been Jacqueline's constant search for fresh new ways to teach her subject. Over the years, courses of varying lengths and differing emphasis have been introduced. Although many students take short or part-time courses, the jewel in the Inchbald crown remains the year-long diploma course in architectural interior design, accredited by the University of Wales, with three rigorous terms of study. Since 1993, through a collaboration with Saudi Arabian partners the Future Institute, in Jeddah, Inchbald courses, monitored and assessed by the parent school, have been available for students in the Middle East. Most recently, Jacqueline has brought to fruition her latest idea - 'online' interior-decoration and garden-design courses. 'I am very excited by the possibilities of making the Inchbald experience available so widely,' she says. It is surely this enthusiasm that has made Jacqueline's achievement, over a period of half a century's devotion to the world of decoration, so very remarkable □

Inchbald School of Design: 020-7730 5508 (interior design), or 020-7630 9011 (garden design); www.inchbald.co.uk

Jacqueline Duncan (foreground), founder and principal of the Inchbald, sits in the school's library. Behind her are former students (from left), interior designers Nina Campbell, Staffan Tollgard and Helen Green, garden designer and Chelsea-gold-medal winner Luciano Giubbilei, and Joanna Archer, a recent graduate of the full-time Inchbald diploma in garden design, and this year's school-prize winner, who won a competition to redesign the planting at the Guards Museum, London

