

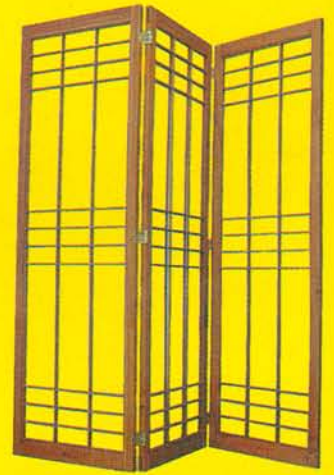
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A PASSION FOR PERFECTION

ELIZABETH EAPEN TALKS TO SUNITA KOHLI
ABOUT HER CONTINUING AFFAIR WITH CLASSICAL FURNITURE

ABOVE. South Drawing room of Rashtrapathi Bhavan. Sunita was entrusted the task of restoring the room. The sofa set and chairs were made by her and the entire layout of the room was reworked. In this picture are two Bergeres and two inlaid Hepplewhite occasional chairs. The console table to the far left is an old piece which was restored. The material for the upholstery and the drapes was woven by master weavers from Benares in a 'morpankhi' design.



‘Once the right pieces have been selected, interest should shift to artefacts and accessories, like acquiring beautiful paintings, and only classical furniture, with its understated elegance, allows one to do that.’

‘I believe a man’s reach should exceed his grasp, or what’s the heaven for?’ — unusual words from a veteran, surely! Over coffee on a sunlit terrace, surrounded by winter flowers and lush greens in a variety of huge metal urns, Sunita Kohli talks lucidly and animatedly on her design philosophy and the range of projects she has worked on for the last two decades. Not for her

the complacency that should have inevitably settled on one after twenty-odd years — and highly successful ones at that — in the business, and a portfolio that most can only aspire to. From suites in Rashtrapathi Bhavan, the Prime Minister’s office in South Block, the interiors of VVIP aircraft to hotel chains, corporate offices and luxury cruisers on the Nile, even including in this compass small apartments on a bud-

get, she can still say, ‘I strive towards perfection and if I fail, it’s not for lack of trying.’

Sunita’s interest in furniture was at first purely academic and an offshoot of her formal education in English Literature. Furniture styles closely follow periods in history, and she developed a fascination for 18th century and some 19th century English styles. Sheraton, Hepplewhite, furniture of the Queen Anne period —

ABOVE: *Corner of the South Drawing room of Rashtrapathi Bhavan.*



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laborious and often intricate in terms of craftsmanship and yet imbued with a timeless elegance. These are meticulously reproduced in her workshops (she has no showroom) and she oversees all the work herself. She works only from genuine pieces as far as period styles are concerned and fastidiously adheres to the purity of the original. In order to maintain quality, there is a ceiling on the amount of work she does a year, and a client has to come with a reference. She only takes

on projects that will add on to her learning curve, with the result that each one becomes a great experience. 'I consider it an honour that I was asked to work on many of our historic buildings,' she remarks. Sunita is a trained restorer as well, and has restored all the old furniture in Hyderabad House, New Delhi, which was considered condemned. 'But ideally I would like, in an interior, period pieces combined with a contemporary fully upholstered sofa — I would never encourage

someone to have only period pieces. Many see a house filled with period pieces as a status symbol — unfortunately it doesn't work that way!' At the end of the day, a small space, minimally furnished, can say a lot, and a large space, filled up with all manner of things, say nothing at all. Each item of furniture, if it is true to its own self, can quite happily co-exist with another completely different piece. Not for her the dabbling in a plethora of styles. 'Great furniture styles are for a

ABOVE: Corner of the North Drawing room of Rashtrapathi Bhavan. Fauteuils by Sunita Kohli.



lifetime,' she says, and feels that the current trend to redo one's furniture every few years is really a wasteful expending of effort and money. 'Once the right pieces have been selected, interest should shift to artefacts and accessories, like acquiring beautiful paintings, and only classical furniture, with its understated elegance, allows one to do that.'

Much of the world's design sensibility is sourced out of India. This is something that she has observed at various international exhibitions. 'One keeps seeing things, furnishing fabrics for instance, that could only have been inspired by Indian designs. These become hugely popular in the West, and then are picked up here and reinterpreted. Why is it

not possible for us to go back to our own sources directly?' For indeed, this is the only way we can keep the links of our great textile tradition intact.

The scenario today has cause for both celebration and concern. An upsurge in design trends, a result of exposure and awareness, has created a burgeoning market. And yet a kind of casualness has crept in, with the garnering of knowledge, a vital element in development, often taking the back burner and definitive terms being loosely used. Consumers need to educate themselves and only then can they be more demanding, which will 'keep designers on their toes,' says Sunita with a twinkle in her eye. There's no excuse for lack of knowledge, and

young designers need to be constantly studying, researching, innovating. Unfortunately good design schools in the country, which offer the right type of education, are too few. Education in design requires a rounding of design sensibilities; a learning of many different yet related disciplines. 'Striving is of the essence — it's better to do a little less, but to do it as well as can be done.' Twenty successful years down the line and after being awarded a Padma Shri in Interior Design and Restoration (the first award of its kind in this discipline), that's really saying something. **●**

ABOVE: *Cubbon House, Bangalore. This was restored by Sunita Kobli in 1986 as a retreat for visiting Heads of State attending the SAARC conference. Seen here are fully upholstered tuxedo sofas and Lazarus armchairs by Sunita.*