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PROFILE: Marian McEvoy

Taking the Elle Train

* East meets West Coast in the pages of Elle Decor, which its sassy editor calls 'a fashion magazine for the home.'

By MARNELL JAMESON, SPECIAL TO THE TIMES

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NEW YORK--Her raven hair, porcelain white skin and red, red lips are your first clues that Elle Decor editor Marian McEvoy is a study in contrasts. She's a California girl with a New York veneer, a hip 50-year-old with more trend sense than most women half her age, a lover of contemporary art and antiques, preferably together. And she's also the visionary behind one of the fastest-growing publications in the competitive shelter magazine niche.

Holding court in her corner office on the 41st floor of a Manhattan high-rise, McEvoy is a long way from her Hancock Park roots. Although her look is tres New York, she insists that the California girl inside her is alive and strongly influences the pages of Elle Decor.

McEvoy, who came to New York after 15 years as a fashion editor in Paris, filters her West Coast and European sensibilities through an East Coast lens and has created a distinctive imprint in the world of home design.

The photo of handbag designer Lulu Guinness with her daughters is on the October cover because "that's glamour with a capital 'G,'" McEvoy explained. "See, glamour could be family."

And if glamour sounds like more a fashion statement than a home design theme, that's no accident. McEvoy's mix of high-fashion and home design has interior designers and readers buzzing about a magazine many adore even if they can't take it seriously.

"We put Elle Decor in our top 10 list [of magazines] this year because of its fast growth and because the magazine has made a name for itself besides just being Elle's little shelter sister," said Steven Cohn, editor of MIN magazine, a media industry trade publication. "It's definitely a magazine to watch." He added, however, that all shelter

magazines are doing well because a healthy economy makes people comfortable about spending for home decorating.

But while many praise McEvoy's fresh point of view, some feel her fickle-fashion approach to home design lacks staying power.

"Not everyone wants to make his or her home a fashion statement," said one industry insider, who asked not to be named. "Her magazine is terribly fun to read. It's an extremely trendy fashion magazine for the design industry. The downside is people don't change their homes that often and home design needs to last. If you want longevity of home design, look elsewhere."

The magazine strikes him as "the Enquirer of the industry," he said. "Everybody reads it, but it's easy to knock." Even the department names have a gossipy flavor: Star Track, Trend Alert, Dean's Dirt (gardening), Daniel's Dish (food).

An Office Sign Says 'Hip and Humble'

"Charming, charming, charming. We'll run it in spring." McEvoy gushed over scouting shots of a book-lined cottage in Beaver Kill, N.Y. "And look, the owner is wearing hot pants and looks fabulous," she said to five editors at the meeting convened in her office. The group was trading story ideas and transparencies between sips of caffe lattes.

Surrounding them were McEvoy's current fashion beacons, signs reading "fancy rustic, go exotic, sweet chic, hip and humble, almost bare," papered the office walls. "We are a fashion magazine for the home," she said. Her voice is sultry, rife with cultured tones and rounded vowels. As she gestured, the clusters of black beads around her neck and wrists clattered like a maraca.

Like other New York fashion types, she wears all black, but with attitude: A silk dress with a ruffled hem and black pointy-toed heels laced up her ankles with black ribbons. A black grosgrain bow on the side of her blunt schoolgirl haircut can only be taken as ironic. Her hip, sassy and eclectic style defines Elle Decor.

After the staff meeting, she pulled out a small mirror to refresh her (trademark red) lipstick. "It's cinnamon by Revlon. I've been wearing it for 10 years. I'm sure I've put at least a guest house in Mr. Perelman's home," she jokes, referring to Revlon President Ronald Perelman.

Grew Up in L.A., Worked in Paris

McEvoy, who's divorced with no children, is the eldest daughter of a surgeon and a housewife. She attended Immaculate Heart High School in Los Feliz and USC, where she studied art and journalism and joined a sorority, serving as its social chairwoman.

After a summer internship at the Los Angeles Herald Examiner, she was hired by the newspaper's fashion section and never finished college. The next year, Paris called, where she worked as European fashion editor for Woman's Wear Daily and W magazine. In 1982, she spent eight months as assistant style editor for the New York Times Magazine, then returned to France. She came back to New York to stay in 1989, first as co-editor of Elle, the U.S. version of the French fashion magazine owned by Paris-based Hachette Filipacchi Magazines. Two years later she became editor in chief of the then-2-year-old Elle Decor.

As ad pages and readership grew, McEvoy went from four to six to eight issues a year by 1997. Now she is shooting for 10 by next year. The magazine leads its category in readership growth, rising 48.5% in 1998 to 732,000 from 493,000, according to MIN. Ad pages jumped from 269 in 1992 to 994 pages in 1998. Ad revenue went from \$5.1 million in 1992 to \$35.7 million in 1998.

McEvoy attributes her success to good times: "It's cool right now to decorate." But she also believes her fashion slant makes her distinctly different from all the other shelter magazines (Architectural Digest, House Beautiful, Martha Stewart Living, Metropolitan Home, to name a few of the bigger ones in the category).

The move from fashion to interior design was more of an evolution than a stretch.

"Interior decor is better than fashion, because it's deeper. It affects your family and friends and how you live much more than a suit," she said.

For McEvoy the magazine is her family. Married for seven years to Dutch fashion designer Dik Brandsma, the couple struggled with infertility and despite medical intervention never conceived. Her husband didn't want to adopt and the marriage ended.

She views her readers as her children. "I'm trying to help them live better."

Growing older is also something McEvoy views through her glamour lens. Whether it's a piece of furniture or a person, the results can be very good.

"So often people think that when things look worn, they need to retire them," she said. "Remember, Europeans worship at the altar of wear and tear. When furniture is nicked, it's not replaced--it's revered."

The same holds for people.

"Growing older is glamorous when you incorporate all the elements appropriate to your time in life: culture-oriented travel, growing things, feeding people, entertaining," she said. "It's not being young and piling into a car and going out and buying 14 bikinis."

Does that mean McEvoy celebrates every birthday?

"No. I stopped marking birthdays at age 26. I'd rather celebrate hitting 200 ad pages."

'People Are Finally Over Beige and White'

Back in her office, she pulls out the lipstick, this time with a pack of Marlboro lights. Backed by views of Central Park and the East River, she reminisces about the light in Southern California.

"People in the West appreciate color because they grow up with a different kind of light" that's clearer and brighter than in New York.

"Color, especially red, is making a comeback," she said excitedly. "People are finally over beige and white." The credit, she said, goes to people from warm climates, who also understand comfort. The idea of having a house that looks right but that doesn't feel right is passe.

"We used to define glamour as satin dresses, polished marble floors and cigarette holders, but not now. Today glamour is comfort. We never would have said that four years ago, and that's definitely a California thing."

So is our Bohemian architecture. "In California, you find the hacienda house next to the Tudor, next to the Queen Anne, beside an IHOP. The California statement is 'I am different head to toe.' " Other locales may be more homogenous in spirit, but diversity is what the next century promises to be about. "The world is getting more global; narrow visions don't work anymore," she said.

Other design trends she sees: Minimalism is on the way out, a Baroque revival is surfacing and using rooms and furniture in more versatile ways. For example, a dining room may double as a meeting room or a game

room.

Chatting Up Designers Is a Serious Business

At Fressen's restaurant, one of New York's new hot spots, McEvoy is dining with three of New York's hot interior designers: Bill Sofield of Tom Ford's Gucci stores; Kitty Hawks, daughter of model Slim Keith and movie director Howard Hawks; and Alexa Hampton, daughter of Mark Hampton, the late designer to the White House.

Although the conversation is filled with pure wit and banter, the gathering is serious business.

"If I show an interest in them, they'll show an interest in me," McEvoy said later in the back of her chauffeured car. "A lot of my job is jollying people up." And in a competitive magazine environment when several editors often compete to get first crack at a fabulous newly designed property, it's often who's in best with the designer who gets first dibs.

Fortunately, McEvoy also has more than just a knack for schmoozing. Los Angeles designer Jack Lowrance, who has worked with McEvoy on several charity events, said, "She's just alive and going. She's with it and fun."

Typically, she's out six nights a week scouting houses or attending charity events. On weekends, she escapes to a place she rents on the Hudson River.

And is there room for romance? A flash in her dark eyes and a circumspect smile give her away, but all she says is: "I like silver foxes, gentlemen who've been around and who aren't threatened by what I do."

The lipstick is out, and the chauffeur is heading to her apartment near Park Avenue and East 60th.

The flat is not an introvert's home. At the far end--beyond assorted antiques from many countries--is a baby grand piano, a reminder of the 14 years of lessons she took as a girl.

"It's there to torture me," she said. And on the yellow-painted walls hangs her extensive art collection, mostly contemporary pieces.

But most notable are the shells. Hundreds, no thousands, of small uniform seashells she's imported from a Huntington Beach vendor and has

personally glued in neat rows up and down pillars, framing fireplaces and windows, forming crown moldings and ceiling medallions.

"I love shells. They're so finished," she said. The shells remind her of grottoes in Paris that a few centuries ago people used to cover in shells. But they also, of course, remind her of California.

The apartment is like the magazine, which is like McEvoy, an eclectic mix of East Coast chic, West Coast comfort, European venerability, and exotic accents from countries you need shots to visit. It's signature McEvoy: dramatic and colorful. And then there's the light. Through her drapeless windows, as much light as one can get in a New York flat pours in.

PHOTO: Marian McEvoy, 50, runs a story idea meeting in the Manhattan office of Elle Decor, the little sister magazine that grew up reflecting McEvoy's fashion style.

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PHOTOGRAPHER: JOE TABACA / For The Times

PHOTO: (4 Photos), Booming economic times have fueled success of magazines like 10-year-old Elle Decor.

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