

# BACKSTORY: CATHERINE STEWART



Catherine Stewart, director of design for Hamilton Furniture (NYDC, suite 601, 561.213.2487), clued us in about everything from her early days redecorating her childhood bedroom – and driving her mother crazy in the process – to her rise as a celebrated furniture designer. Here she answers our questions about her wide-ranging influences (from Gropius to her own in-house toddler test group), the fortuitous meeting with a design legend that helped launch her company and how she makes mastering such timeless designs look so easy.

## Where were you born and raised?

North Palm Beach, Florida.

## When did you know you wanted to become a designer?

My earliest memories of a design interest were the decorating and redecorating of my childhood bedroom. I was always reconfiguring the furniture and later painting the walls and borrowing furniture pieces from the rest of the house. I remember that this drove my mother crazy!

## Did you have any early influences that helped lead you to your career?

In college I was very interested in industrial design. Walter Gropius and his design theories fascinated me. The industrial revolution took his theories to practice and today I am amazed at how often I refer to early ideas of product development, design and marketing.

## What were your inspirations for your first collection?

I designed the first pieces of our collection, which debuted at the ICFF in 1992, as a reaction to post-Modernism and the opulence of the 1980s architecture and interiors. I longed for simplicity. The pieces were contemporary and sleek with historical proportions and without the post-

Modern cartoon aspect. I hope that my collections will be timeless in their elegance and that they continue to appeal to people for generations to come.

## Tell us about your meeting with Jack Lenor Larsen and how that may have helped launch Hamilton Furniture.

I met Jack Larsen's sales manager at the ICFF in 1992. She arranged a meeting with Jack Larsen at our showroom in Soho. I was very nervous, but that meeting turned out to be the beginning of a very successful relationship that lasted 6 years, until he sold his company to Cowtan & Tout and they closed the Larsen showrooms. The Larsen sales group represented us in all of their showrooms and really helped launch Hamilton Furniture as a national brand.

## How does your respect for historical elements play into your designs?

We do not make reproduction furniture. I design products to coordinate or work with antiques or heirlooms. I want my collections to seamlessly meld into an interior so that on first viewing it appears timeless and on close inspection you realize the beauty of each piece. I think the rich layering of objects is what gives an interior its uniqueness.

## Where do you do most of your work? Is it possible to describe your creative process?

At night in my studio. My days are so hectic that I rely on the quiet and solitude of the evenings.

## When did you start working with your husband Andrew?

We founded the company together in 1992. It seemed like a good idea at the time!

## Have your children influenced your approach to design in any way?

I have two wonderful children who do everything possible to keep me from getting any work done. At this moment I seem to have a little band kicking up behind my chair! I introduced some Lucite tables last year. The tables seem to be fairly indestructible – the children paint, climb and eat on the coffee tables. Not at the same time. They are a great test market for stability, scale and overall good looks. They are brutally honest! At 2 and 5, they are destined to either be designers themselves or musicians.

## When did you open your showroom at the New York Design Center?

We opened our showroom in April of 2002 in the New York Design Center. We have many wonderful clients in New York, New Jersey and Connecticut and we need a location that they are familiar with and that they can access easily. The New York Design Center is really considered the furniture building. We wanted to be in a building that had history (80 years!), stability and a loyal shopping crowd. I think it has been a perfect location for Hamilton Furniture.

Catherine Stewart's aesthetic of "simply, unadorned elegance" can be seen in all of her designs such as the Craig Dining Chair (below, right) and a suite of pieces (below, left) including the Louisa Sofa, Louis Ottoman, Park Avenue Tables, Memphis Cocktail Table, Bristol Lamps and Redondo Mirror.

