

The 'house' according to Barefoot: Keeping Barbara Sansoni's values

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Barefoot Gallery has always spun its distinctive version of creativity for years, unifying the island's legacy of the decorative and fine arts to reimagine its unique oeuvre of masterpieces for people and spaces in the daring installation of colors. Celebrating sixty years of Barefoot, its directors, and designers are taking Barbara Sansoni's legacy forward with an exhibition titled 'house' which runs till September 29, 2024 at the Barefoot Gallery from Monday to Saturday from 10 am to 6 pm.

Words Jennifer Paldano Goonewardane.

As a designer, Barbara Sansoni's woven textiles have always exuded a sense of energy and vibrancy wrought from her color palette inspired by natural elements. Her aesthetics were remarkably bold, colorful, and stylish. Transformation was at the heart of the style evolution she brought to her corpus, which Barefoot has been known for since 1964. It impacted the design world by pushing the boundaries of creativity that balance beauty and functionality. Yes, Barbara Sansoni was an icon of design, introducing a fresh design ethos to how we dressed and decorated our houses. So, the 'house' exhibition is an ode to her beginnings, from two spaces from whence she embarked on her decorative journey, her home and two shops in Colombo Fort, one called the House and the other Barefoot until she set up her flagship store on Galle Road.

For the 'house' exhibition, the Barefoot Gallery will be transformed into a veritable living space showcasing the four color themes it works with, festival, elegance, natural, and village, a cornucopia of the island's fauna, flora, and people spun into an array of furniture furnishings and pieces that adorn the bedroom, dining room, the living room, the conservatory, and the study. Each space adopts a color theme that resonates with its function but stylishly.

A team of designers at Barefoot, some of whom have worked with Barbara, carefully curated the 'house' collection based on the four styles in Barbara's original notes and sketchbooks, with every exhibit taking on a color theme. The styles incorporate an inspiring repertoire of people's attires and places that define their boundaries of color and patterns. What stands out about this exhibition is that one cannot call it another home décor installation because the color themes have been meticulously selected to represent people and words. They are extensive, demonstrating the extent to which the designers have dabbled to create products that are one of a kind. Their dedication to a well-curated exhibition is the best tribute to sixty years of Barefoot and Barbara Sansoni.

The village theme for the bedroom is inspired by its abundance of ideas, such as rural, simple, unsophisticated, agriculture, nets, fishermen's huts, boats, fields, baskets, clay pots, grinding stones, brooms, wooden benches, toddy, puritan, convent parlor, kitchen to achieve the desired space of a peaceful bedroom designed with soft pastel colors like white, blue, and pink to create a calm and relaxing atmosphere. The designers visualize the style from country women in cloth and jackets, farm workers and fishermen in checked sarongs and aprons, men in overalls, Far Eastern women in sunhats, babies, all working men's shirts, working women in blue cotton sarees, men in jeans, schoolboys in navy shorts, and broderie anglaise on white petticoats. The look is minimalist with white walls and simple wooden furniture, complemented by a bed featuring a headboard reminiscent of an old corrugated roofing sheet, polka dot pastel bedding, and handmade patchwork rugs by Aruni Thabrew, a pine cupboard for linen that elicit the desired soft, cozy, and simplistic character. The designers throw in some idiosyncrasy as they invoke Japanese artist, the princess of polka dots - Yayoi Kusama, in the soft cotton duster coat and dress, blending modern design with artistry.

The designers achieve a welcoming and classy dining room, dressing it with an archaic elegance defined in a profusion of words such as aesthetic, simplicity, restrained, refined, and fastidious, quiet colors, monochrome, cool, less is more, good breeding, patrician, Brahmin, Greek temples, classical architecture, Luxor in ancient Egypt, Gal Vihare, Polonnaruwa, and Viking ships. The elegant dining space combines warm, earthy colors like deep browns, reds, and oranges in its furnishings, borrowing from the works of Dutch visual artist Rembrandt in creating triangular pendant lights in a gold finish, drawing out the warm tones found in his masterpieces. The brass candle holders reflect the richness of the period. The table setting includes woven mats, runners, and napkins in warm, complementary colors, mirroring the rich palette seen in Rembrandt's works, an aesthetic achieved by weaving plain, monochrome colors - grey, black, white, ochre, coffee brown - in non-textured smooth cotton, the same in silk and especially in wool. The immensity of their inspiration is reflected in the corpus of people drawn from across many careers, cultures, and even vocations, whose everyday attires and unique costumes provide the visual repertoire to unleash the elegance in the dining room from old men in buns, sarong, coat, and comb, Sinhala schoolgirls, and brown-robed Buddhist monks, to classical ballet dancers, bowler-hatted Englishmen, medieval nuns, army and navy on parade, Japanese nuns, Chinese in grey or blue, horsewomen in riding habits, Trappist monks, fencers and some Arab racehorses.

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A window to Barefoot Gallery's design ethos - the fabric pencil holder fits into one of the spaces of the 'house'.

The 'house' transforms the conservatory into a place of warmth and tranquility that one falls in love with the idea of a space decorated with tropical foliage and the calming colors of beige, white, and brown in the wooden floors and windows, converting it to a light-filled area of relaxation and good cheer that seamlessly blends with the rest of the house. It's a comingling of nature and art, aptly drawing inspiration from the 'painter of light,' William Turner, whose landscapes and seascapes represent natural elements and light, characters the conservatory's designers use generously in achieving a 'primitive natural' style in woven jute and cotton, bone-white rough fabric, heavy unbleached tribal blanket designs, the old jungle rug in Dry Zone colors, earth and jungle colors, clear vegetable stains, bright feathers, and fish. Inspired by the Veddha, the bushman of the Kalahari desert, the New Guinea headhunter, the Naga tribe of India, migrating fishermen, tank fishermen, reptiles, birds (large storks and waders), buffaloes, sambur, leopard, wild elephant, aborigine, Trappist monks, hermits, the Bedouin, the range of products include curtains and upholstery, cotton rugs, jute fabric, cloths for tables and camp beds, banners and soft furniture for jungle living, stone elephants, minimal primitive clothes, short white sarongs, hospital jackets, prison sarongs. Barbara Sansoni's "natural style" is also reflected with the added elements of sand, rocks, shells, sun-bleached wood, and earth.

The backdrop of a living room can ignite some sweet moments and cozy conversations, meaning that it should evoke sentiments of relaxation and socializing, just what the 'house' living room design tries to achieve. Invoking the Dutch abstract artist Piet Mondrian, the designers achieve comfort and style by incorporating his recurring palette of red, blue, and yellow, contrasted with a combination of clean, straight lines in black and white hewn onto colorful patchwork, bespoke furniture and the eye-catching Boogie Woogie dress influenced by Mondrian's last painting named Broadway Boogie Woogie, reminiscent of the island's weaving culture, a yellow band and connecting bands of different color. The festival theme that churns out the living room space summons a gamut of words and people to visualize the style. Thus, the Grand Opera, Perahera, festival, excess, richness, Vesak decorations, strong contrasts, large scale, royal, Picasso, Matisse, Rubens, Klee, Velázquez, silk route countries, jewels, Persian carpets, rainforest, flowers, and birds and Maharajas, tall women in silk sarees, army officers in regimental mess dress, Highland regiments, Pathan regiments, and Thai ladies in national dress, tea pluckers, Cossacks, and Samarkand dancers wearing Bokhara silks transferring those influences onto yarn dyed in brilliant clear colors and weaving it skillfully to produce jewel-like contrasts and complementary hues.

the four style themes of the exhibition while adopting the Natural color palette's soft, raw colors, influenced by the style ethos of the maestro of minimalism - Axel Vervoordt's organic approach to design, whose earthy hues and soft-toned interiors are sparse spaces with great

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character. Barbara's creative journey also exemplifies genius and outstanding character as she established a new style quotient to how we dressed and decorated our spaces. The Study brings in a breath of fresh air by incorporating mediums from raw, natural objects to more refined, soft ones, a space that turns away nothing but gives everything a home, just like Barbara, who loved every piece of art, whether mundane or precious antique, she would get the best out of every one of them. In honoring Barbara's memory in The Study, one sees an homage to her contemporaries and friends in the replica of Ulrik Plesner's work table, and an Ena de Silva-designed cloth. The Reddha Hatte also known as a cloth and jacket, was the garment that Barbara loved to wear 60 years ago. During that time it was considered controversial or "lower class" yet she still wore it with pride, making the reddha/cloth a more fashionable dress.

The jacket is a design by Barbara, called the moratuwa jacket- inspired by Portuguese-burgher women who made it fashionable in the Moratuwa area, the lace also holding components of beeralu. Not to be missed is the floor rug tiled with geometric shapes found in one of Barbara's old square-ruled notebooks sketched in her nineties. In The Study, a granddaughter remembers and gives glimpses of Barbara's life at home.

The 'house' is happening at a critical juncture for Barefoot Gallery, which continues the legacy of its founder. It is a witness to the great brand she birthed and an impactful journey that captivated and created a legion of faithful followers. The exhibition unearths the versatility and depth of the decorative and fine arts cosmos, just like Barbara would have wanted.

Date: Till September 29, 2024. Venue: Barefoot Gallery from Monday to Saturday, Time: 10 am to 6 pm, +94 11250 5559

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The divan represents pieces of furniture incorporating primary colors and geometric shapes with elements of colorful patchwork