

MICHAEL INCHBALD

OBITUARIES

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Michael Inchbald, who has died aged 92, was in the first rank of interior designers; he worked at the Savoy and Berkeley hotels, on the main first-class saloon in the QE2, and was consulted about the redecoration of Buckingham Palace.

Thoroughly English in manner but cosmopolitan in taste, Inchbald was among the earliest designers to use synthetic materials successfully. His flair for combining the best of ancient and modern was seen to advantage in his own house, one of the grandest private homes in London.

In 1960 his first wife, Jacqueline (née Bromley), whom he had married in 1955, began offering a concentrated course in all aspects of design and decoration. This evolved into the renowned Inchbald School of Design, initially located at Stanley House in Chelsea, which Inchbald had inherited from his uncle in 1955. The school is now based at Eaton Gate in Belgravia, and also offers courses in garden design.

The Chelsea house was built in the mid-Victorian period, but Inchbald lengthened its windows to make it appear Georgian, installed 18th-century front doors — bought for £12 at Christies's — and lined the porch with mirrors and black obelisks. The exterior was painted a flamboyant Neapolitan yellow and white to balance the unusual width of the street. He also restructured the interior as a series of airily elegant rooms in which to display his sumptuous collection of objets d'art, which ranged from Egyptian sculptures through Indian marbles to French furniture. He took particular pride in the

drawing room floor, made to his design in the 1950s from the cheapest grade of linoleum (it remains in place half a century later). His willingness to use synthetic products, prompted by post-war shortages of traditional materials, was typical of his flexibility and vision as a designer.

Michael John Chantrey Inchbald was born on March 8 1920. His mother's family was descended from the Courtenay Earls of Devon. His great-uncle, Sir Courtenay Ilbert (1841-1924), was acting Viceroy of India and as Clerk of the House of Commons had a bathroom in Big Ben in which the infant Michael was sometimes bathed.

Michael Inchbald spent much of his childhood at Stanley House, the home of his uncle (also Courtenay Ilbert), who had formed the world's finest horological collection. On discovering a dusty clock bearing the initial "N", the young Michael exclaimed that it must have belonged to Napoleon. "It's still a good clock," replied his uncle.

A precocious talent for drawing led to Michael's being sent to Sherborne, where there was a housemaster said to be good with "difficult" boys. He devoted much of his time at school to making a model railway, candle-smoking the trucks and painting grimy industrial scenery for added realism. Afterwards he visited France and Italy, a "Grand Tour" that prompted him to enrol at the Architectural Association's school in Bedford Square.

The necessary study of engineering bored him, however, and he thought of going to America, but on discovering that he had only £5 in his account he decided to remain in London. He soon began to forge a reputation as a designer, and his designs for oil heaters and a safety ashtray won the national Shapes of Things to Come competition in 1946.

He also took first prize in the 1955 National Chair Design competition with “Mambo”, a long wicker seat slung over a low iron frame. It was shown at the Milan Triennale in 1957. Inchbald won all four national design competitions that he entered.

Once, Queen Mary (who rarely visited shops) came to see an exhibition of his designs at the Peter Jones department store in Sloane Square. As Inchbald was showing her round, she paused to admire some of the store’s own trays, keenly priced at 11s 6d. When she picked one up, its side came away in her hand. Stiffly replacing it, she observed: “Not quite such good value after all.”

In the 1950s Inchbald began to design for companies, creating headquarters for Plessey and Bank of America and revitalising Dunhill’s Jermyn Street store. “Form and structure” was his maxim for sound design. “As I would say to a woman, first get the bone structure right, then put the flesh into position. After that you can go on changing the eyeshadow — the colour scheme — for ever.”

His versatility was severely tested in the interior design of the QE2 in 1969. His assignment was the main first-class saloon, The Queen’s Room, which was exceptionally low and gloomy. Inchbald’s solution was to install a latticed ceiling, lit from above, to give the impression of sunlight. Apparent height was added by giving the room’s columns an upsweeping trumpet shape.

Characteristically, Inchbald designed everything from ashtrays to carpet to chairs for the room. Many thought it the most successful project on any liner.

He was often used by hotels, and designed the penthouse at Claridge's, the River Room and American Bar at the Savoy, and the interiors for the Berkeley. He raised the height of the washbasins by four inches to accommodate the Savoy Group chairman Sir Hugh Wontner's bad back.

Inchbald was as comfortable with traditional looks as with modern, and restored the Crown Estate Commissioners' office in Carlton House Terrace. He was also consulted about changes to the decor of Buckingham Palace. Commissions came, too, from the Duc de la Rochefoucauld, the 13th Duke of St Albans, the 6th Marquess of Bristol and many other owners of stately homes.

Inchbald was an urbane host and an accomplished raconteur. Energetic and refined, he had firm ideas on taste, but never strayed into pedantry.

His marriage to Jacqueline, with whom he had a son and a daughter, was dissolved in 1964. She remains Principal of the Inchbald School. He married secondly, in 1964 (dissolved 1970), Eunice Haymes.

Michael Inchbald, born March 8 1920, died February 23 2013

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Inventive interior designer whose quirky Chelsea home was the springboard for designs for luxury hotels, aircraft cabins and the QE2

Michael Inchbald was an original, inventive designer who cut across the familiar categories of serious "architectural" design and smart interior decoration. Stanley House in Chelsea was his calling-card: his home, design laboratory and showroom.

This extraordinary house was a large mid-Victorian Italianate villa with the doors and windows remade to “Georgian” proportions and its columned portico lined in mirror glass, reflecting a theatrical line of obelisks. The exterior stucco was painted orange, rather like a film set front. The interiors were a time capsule of inspired late-1950s design, subtly reworked decade after decade; they were some of the most photographed of their time and live on in design books such as James Stourton’s *The Great Houses of London* (2012).

Michael John Chantrey Inchbald was born in 1920, the son of a successful City solicitor and an upper-class arty indulgent mother from the Courtenay family, the Earls of Devon. He was educated at Sherborne School in Dorset, which was considered a good choice for an unsporting, art and design obsessed boy who had won a national drawing competition at the age of 9. He went on to study architecture at the Architectural Association in London, which in the late 1930s was at the heart of the Modernist orthodoxy. There he proved notoriously difficult, refusing to observe the faith which held that “ornament is crime” (Adolf Loos, 1910). He mocked his peers and — worse still — produced satirical drawings of Modernist elevators and interiors.

He never qualified as an architect, partly from fear of the mandatory engineering examination and partly because he was offered work as a film set designer. The film work never materialised. Instead Inchbald — based in Stanley House (which had belonged to his uncle Courtenay Ilbert, one of the world’s leading horologists, who kept a famous collection of old clocks there) — began a 50-year career as a designer of interiors, furniture and objects. He worked for clients ranging from Savoy Group Hotels (The Savoy, Berkeley and Claridge’s) to ocean liners (the Windsor Castle and the QE2) to smart shops (Alfred Dunhill’s “flagship” in Jermyn Street) and offices.

All this was in parallel with the more predictable “toff circuit” — designing interiors for aristocrats’ and plutocrats’ London houses.

Unlike his slightly younger competitor David Hicks, Inchbald did not have an instantly recognisable style which could be “branded” and licensed around the world. He produced both “modern” interiors such as those in the QE2 (1969) and ostensibly more traditional work using antique furniture and Old Masters. He produced total design schemes for very large spaces and single prize-winning designs for objects from chairs to ashtrays. His traditional schemes always had a modern architectural quality in the way the spaces were reorganised, and old and new designs and materials were combined (what would now be self-consciously described as eclectic or even PostModern). His modern interiors always reflected his knowledge of earlier archetypes. They had a glamorous film-set quality — in another life he might have been his contemporary Sir Ken Adam, the designer of the Bond films.

His early work as a jobbing designer produced two designs — for an oil heater and a safety ashtray — which won the Shapes of Things to Come competition in 1946. Nine years later he won the National Chair Design competition with a chair which combined classic “mid-century modern” elements with the more whimsical British post-Festival of Britain “contemporary” look and a modish 1950s name, “Mambo”.

In the 1950s Inchbald started, with minimum support, to design the sort of large commercial interiors now associated with big multi-partnered 1970s environmental design practices such as Fitch or Michael Peters. He reworked the obstinately unglamorous 1920s head offices of the electrical company Plessey to give large “showroom” windows, a modern

statement reception area and offices on the ground floor, and a telephone exchange above. He made the top-floor directors' offices of the Bank of America building in London look sleek and luxurious. And he made Dunhill's Jermyn Street shop into a cross between a library and the interior of a humidor, with a dark-wood panelled and columned scheme that looked like expensive timber but was largely achieved with "graining" paint effects. Inchbald often achieved grand extravagant illusions with frugal means, using modern synthetic materials wherever they worked. The floor of his famous drawing room in Stanley House, for example, was carefully cut linoleum posing as Italian marble.

His work for Savoy Group Hotels — only fragments survive their programmes of redecoration — included important familiar spaces such as the River Room and The American Bar at the Savoy, Claridge's penthouse and a range of interiors at the rebuilt Berkeley Hotel (1972; the Tattersall Room and the lifts remain). Sir Hugh Wontner, the famously autocratic Savoy Group chairman, told Inchbald that he would never employ him again if he worked for a hotel competitor.

Inchbald's most famous commercial interior is the QE2's Queen Room, the main first-class saloon of 1969. The space was extremely wide — about 100ft — but had a very low ceiling. Inchbald's trumpet-shaped columns blended smoothly into the ceiling, concealing the obviously short structural columns inside them, and he installed a lattice concealing hundreds of uplights to give the ceiling even illumination, which created the impression of open space above. This lighting detail was soon adopted by aircraft cabin designers, who still use the technique today. The furnishings — Saarinen-like chairs, dramatic screens and pale carpets — gave the room a Bond-ish High Sixties look. In 1960 Inchbald helped his first wife, Jacqueline, to start courses in interior design from Stanley House. This became the Inchbald School of Design, whose alumni include

Nina Campbell and Henrietta Spencer-Churchill. Inchbald and Jacqueline were divorced in 1964 but she continues to run the school on the sites on Eaton Gate and Eccleston Square.

By the 1990s, Inchbald had reworked the heavy Mid-Victorian interiors at Stanley House that he had inherited from his uncle in 1955 with lower ceilings and lighter cornices, extending the drawing room to the rear with a cantilevered conservatory affair. He had replaced the Victorian chimneypiece with an earlier, more elegant, French one, pulling together serious antiques and bodged ones, elaborate designs and bright plain wall colours to make an immensely sophisticated luxurious camera-ready “set” which went well beyond “English Decorating pastiche”. It looks as crisp and original in the most recent photographs as when it was first on the cover of House and Garden magazine in 1960.

Inchbald married Eunice Haymes in 1964; this marriage was also dissolved, in 1970. He is survived by a son and a daughter from his first marriage.