

SIBYL COLEFAX

HER STORY

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Celebrated for her timeless style, Sibyl Colefax is one of the great influences on classic English interior design.

Sibyl Colefax can correctly be judged as one of the first designers who developed the quintessential English Country House Style. Her spirit and influence live on in the highly successful company she founded almost 90 years ago, originally as Sibyl Colefax Limited, and from 1939 in partnership with John Fowler as Colefax & Fowler Limited.

Sibyl was also one of the most celebrated society hostesses of the 1920s and 1930s, with an enviable address book and an equally enviable client list.

A Florentine Education

Born in Wimbledon in 1874, Sibyl Halsey might well have stepped from the pages of an Edwardian novel. The Halseys were well known and well connected – the great journalist and political thinker Walter Bagehot was Sibyl's uncle. Sibyl spent her formative years in Cawnpore, India, a member of the British Raj. Her parents' marriage was unhappy and Sibyl was often sent to stay with one or more of her formidable aunts. Her

education was, at best, rudimentary and when her parents eventually separated, Sibyl had to adjust to a life of slender means. With limited funds at their disposal, Sibyl and her mother would spend their days moving from one out-of-season European resort to another.

All this changed, however, when Mrs and Miss Halsey arrived in Florence in 1894. Sibyl, who was not yet 20, discovered a whole new world when she was taken up by the leading lights of the city's British community of intellectuals - writers, artists and aesthetes - including Roger Fry and Bernard Berenson.

The time Sibyl spent with them provided a shy young woman with an education, self-confidence, and an appreciation of the importance of friendship, all of which would provide a strong foundation and blueprint for her future life.

Marriage, Chelsea and Friendship

A new century marked a new beginning when, in 1901, Sibyl Halsey married barrister Arthur Colefax, and the couple moved into their first home in Onslow Square, South Kensington. It was here and at the Colefaxes' country house, Old Buckhurst, in Sussex, that Sibyl and Arthur would create a happy family life for themselves and their sons, Peter and Michael. And it was here that Sibyl began to develop her own ideas about interior design and decoration fuelled in part by her passion for entertaining.

Like so many, however, the Colefaxes were adversely affected by WWI. Although Arthur was knighted for his services to the war effort, the couples' finances were considerably diminished; Old Buckhurst and the Onslow Square house had to be sold. The proceeds were used to buy Argyll House on Chelsea's Kings Road. Despite what might have seemed a setback, the

18th century house and its location offered the ideal setting in which Sibyl could build her reputation as a society hostess par excellence.

Sibyl went to work with gusto on the 18th century house, transforming the interior with an eclectic choice of furniture, furnishings, and architectural salvage. Old mirrors were hung on the ivory painted walls; the floors were covered in brightly coloured rugs, and there was a plethora of matched pairs – chairs and vases, for example – and a great deal of chintz. The elegant rooms were lit by chandeliers and wall sconces, and the furniture arranged so that guests could relax and enjoy each other's company and conversation.

It was at Argyll House that Sibyl Colefax created her distinctive style - the perfect English country house blend of comfort and luxury.

The fifteen years that Sibyl spent at Argyll House were the happiest of her life. Her guest list was legendary and her circle included literary giants such as Aldous Huxley, Virginia Woolf (with whom, Wikipedia reports, she had an affair) and Evelyn Waugh. Argyll House was where the leading artists and actors of the day rubbed shoulders with politicians and aristocrats and it was where Sibyl forged lifelong friendships.

Interior designer, Syrie Maugham, was her next-door neighbour and friend although Sibyl is known to have kept a tight grip on her address book and guest list.

The Prince of Wales was a regular visitor together with Wallis Simpson. Sibyl remained loyal to the couple to the end of her life.



'Sibyl Colefax and Syrie Maugham - The Argyll House Hall - A Summer's Day' by Sir John Lavery

Changes of Fortune and New Ventures

All this entertaining came at a price for the Colefaxes, and the Wall Street Crash also hit them hard.

In 1933, Sibyl decided to capitalise on her talent for interior design and purchased the decorating division of the antique dealers Stair and Andrew of Bruton Street, Mayfair, establishing Sibyl Colefax Ltd in partnership with Peggy Ward, the Countess Munster, an established fashion designer and interior decorator.

Just three years later Sir Arthur died. Sibyl had to sell Argyll House and its contents and moved to a much smaller house in Lord North Street, Westminster. Despite this Sibyl's enviable combination of talent, connections and strong work ethic stood the firm in good stead; its reputation grew rapidly and friends remained as loyal to her in business as they were socially.



Lord North Street, Westminster

Peggy Ward retired from the partnership in 1938 and, on her recommendation, Sibyl then went into partnership with the highly regarded decorator John Fowler.

As Sibyl Colefax & John Fowler Limited, the firm rose to the challenges of the Second World War, becoming adept at sourcing surplus government textiles to transform interiors. Sibyl, ever indomitable, organised and ran a soup kitchen. She also continued to entertain - often at small lunch parties held at The Dorchester known as 'Ordinaries' after which the guest would receive a small bill.[]

By 1944, Sibyl's health had deteriorated and she took the hard decision to sell her share of Colefax & Fowler to Nancy Lancaster (then Nancy Tree).

Sibyl died at her home in Lord North Street in 1950.



Plas Newydd, Anglesey

© National Trust / James Dobson

Few examples remain of Sibyl's work. One exception is *Plas Newydd* in Anglesey, now in the care of the National Trust. There, in the 1930s, the then owners, Sibyl's friends, the 6th Marquess and Marchioness of Anglesey, commissioned her to design new interiors for the house.

