

ICONIC

*Luxury Designer Joan Behnke
Carved a Celebrity-Filled Path from
Childhood*

by NANCY ERDMA



photo by Bruce Damon

The internationally-acclaimed interior
designer talks humble beginnings and
traveling the globe.

California-based interior designer [Joan Behnke](#) is a jet setter for sure. Rarely does a week go by when the 65-year-old dynamo is not hopping on a plane to meet with her elite clientele. Sometimes she's off to nearby Thousand Oaks or Montecito, other times it's Washington, D.C. or New York City. Then there are those trips to Europe and the Middle East.



photo by Karyn Millet

Behnke, who is known for her exquisite taste and sophisticated palette, has been designing homes for some of the world's wealthiest people since her 20s. Her reputation for taking clients to such inspiring locales as Morocco, Japan, Paris and Italy for inspiration is legendary. Although her work is regularly featured in *Architectural Digest*, *Forbes*, *California Homes* and now this magazine, some of her best projects go sight unseen, as her refined clientele often prefer privacy. But Behnke, whose down-to-earth demeanor and gracious approach is so appreciated by her clients, is happy to share a few names.



photo by Karyn Millet

“I have done multiple homes for quarterback Tom Brady and supermodel Giselle Bundchen, and have also worked with actor Sly Stallone and his wife, Jennifer Flavin,”



photo by Jon Coulthard

Behnke says she was always designing as a child and jokes that her Barbie dolls had the best-looking houses. “Design just came easy to me and because of that, I didn’t value it. I thought I had to work hard at something for it to count, and so I pushed it aside.” It took a nudge from her parents who encouraged her to head back to college after studying art history and dance to pursue a design degree at a post-graduate level.

“I was a little bit older and ready to listen,” she recalls. “The courses weren’t designed for housewife-type decorating. They were geared toward interior architecture and were on a much more professional level. I just loved it.”



photo by Karyn Millet

By the time Behnke graduated, she was a single mother of two. To support her young children, she jumped into designing on her own. Realizing she needed to make more money, she applied for a position with an established firm. “I folded my resume into an origami to grab their attention,” she says. “I guess they liked it because I got the job!”

As luck would have it, Behnke’s first major project was designing for Saudi Arabia’s royal family, and it also was the start of her international travels. “It was a very educational experience. I learned how to have pieces custom made all over the world and saw the innumerable possibilities.”



photo by Karyn Millet

Today, she travels everywhere with her clients to source everything from art and antiques to furniture and finishes. For her, it’s all about the details, and the more luxurious the better. Whether it’s a hand-loomed chair, a carpet infused with silk or cashmere-clad walls, Behnke says you can feel the sense of quality that goes into a high-end, tailor-made product. “Joan has a very unique design style,” says Jerry Meek, president of [Desert Star Construction](#), who is currently working with Behnke on a Scottsdale residence. “Because of her talent and expertise, she attracts great people and brings a high level of quality, elegance and refinement to her work.”



photo by Karyn Millet

In 1999, she went on to found her own firm, Joan Behnke & Associates Inc. in Los Angeles, and recently moved her flourishing practice to Beverly Hills. Since then, she and her dedicated staff of 22 have worked on projects all over the world. “I work a million hours, but I love it,” she says.

Amazingly, Behnke finds time to attend dance class four times a week, preferring contemporary and modern styles, as well as hip hop. “It fills my soul and provides me with energy,” she remarks. “If I wasn’t a designer, I’d be a choreographer, without a doubt. I look at choreography the same way I look at space planning and am amazed at how the two correlate.”

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Behnke, who works on 10 to 12 projects at a time, says she has no plans to retire, but now sees her role as one of mentoring younger designers. “I see so much narcissism in the younger generation, having to post everything about themselves online. There’s a real isolation in that. I want to teach the next generation how to design for others, rather than themselves.”
