

DETROIT DESIGN

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DESIGN AWARDS



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It's finally time to unveil this year's winning designs!

Our Inaugural Design Icon

DESIGN ICON



CREATIVE PASSION

An avid art collector, Lucy Earl began at the age of 18 and “has never stopped.” She encourages her clients to purchase pieces that resonate with them — not their interiors.

Interior designer Lucy Earl’s rise in the industry is as iconic as she is.

TEXT BY
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I first met Lucy Earl, the principal and co-founder of Jones-Keena & Co., on a tour of the Michigan Design Center a few years back. Recently, I was fortunate to get a more in-depth glimpse into the esteemed designer whose work so many people (myself included) have admired for years. She’s impeccably chic, generously kind, and has a contagious passion for art. She’s an inspiring leader, devoted to nurturing the next generation of designers, and a visionary whose deeply personal approach to design has left an indelible mark on the industry and the clients who trust her to help elevate their homes and lives. She is a true Design Icon.

This year, Earl is celebrating the 35th anniversary of her beloved firm. While the anniversary is definitely cause for celebration, her career began years before the firm’s founding, in what she describes as a lucky “accident.”

Creativity was very much a part of Earl’s upbringing. Her father worked at Hudson’s (he began in the design department and eventually became the store’s designer and buyer for all bedding) and her mother was a potter at Cranbrook. They lived in Rochester, in a white, classic Michigan farmhouse furnished with furniture from Florence Knoll, Eero Saarinen, and Dunbar. “I grew up in an environment where design was timeless,” she says. “The art gene was everywhere.”

Interior design, however, wasn’t a career Earl initially desired. “I was hoping to become a fashion designer, but it just happened that my father-in-law had been a contractor. He started teaching me how to lay and set tile for my house (in Lapeer),” she shares. “By the end (of my project), my friends were asking me to help them in their homes. That began a journey I couldn’t step away from.”

She was just 20 at the time. “I would love to say I went to design school, but I did not. I learned on the shoulders of a lot of my contemporaries.” In 1976, she purchased the historic Sign of the Mermaid boutique in downtown Grosse Pointe, where she sold furniture, China, and crystal. It was there that she began working with Sis Chapin, the wife of Roy Chapin Jr., the chairman and chief executive officer of American Motors Corp., first styling some floral arrangements serendipitously for a dinner party and eventually designing the interiors of Chapin’s home in Sonoma County, Calif., with architect Louis Bischofberger — a home that she says helped to launch her career. “If people say luck isn’t involved, I guess they just haven’t had real luck. I’ve been standing in the right place at the right time my whole adult life,” Earl laughs.

After working for years with the Ilitch family on both commercial and personal projects, Earl established Jones-Keena & Co. with friend and designer Rosemary Cotter. Since its founding, Earl has operated her business from “a place of integrity” — one of the most important rules in design, she says.

Earl explains: “Do what you say you’re going to do. Be of service to your client, to their project, and to their lifestyle. How do you help elevate somebody’s lifestyle? How are you in service to that? I remind my staff all the time that we’re here to serve.”

“I think the worst mistake designers can make is thinking their idea is the only idea,” she adds. “My best projects are where somebody pushes back and challenges me to think about something in a different way. They become part of the collaborative force that results in something looking more like them and less like me.”

She describes her style as “eclectic, timeless, and always client-centered,” and says that core approach has never changed. “It’s less about following trends and more about creating spaces that reflect the people who live in them.”

“We work hard to pull out of each client some sense of their own style. I think that’s the reason we have so much repeat (and generational) business. Our clients feel so comfortable and connected to their interiors.”

She says that philosophy is her firm’s secret weapon. “Great design begins with a strong understanding of color and scale but a great designer is defined by their ability to listen—truly hearing what a client is saying and translating that into a thoughtful, well-resolved space.”

Earl’s award-winning firm recently opened a new studio in Troy—a gorgeous, 12,388-square-foot retail and office space that inspires, much like her designs, at every turn. Her team has grown to comprise more than 26 people, including her daughter and principal designer, Nicole Withers, and her granddaughter, Olivia Skoler, who joined in 2025 as managing director.

“I think that’s been the most rewarding moment—to have my daughter join me, and to now have my granddaughter come run the business side,” Earl says.

It’s a sentiment Skoler and Withers share, as well. “Working alongside my grandmother feels incredibly special because it has truly been a lifelong dream. All throughout my life, my Gigi taught me that beautiful design is about so much more than interiors: it’s about creating a beautiful lifestyle,” Skoler says. “We’ve always shared a love of fashion, travel, and gathering around a delicious meal with our family. What inspires me most about my Gigi is that her creativity carries through everything she does. She has a unique way of making everyday moments feel like a special occasion.”

Withers adds, “My mom has always been an inspiration to me. Even as a little girl, I would watch her get ready for a party, putting on a beautiful dress and doing her makeup, and I was always struck by her incredible attention to detail. She puts so much love and care into



DESIGN PRINCIPLE

“Rugs and art have been (my daughter) Nicole’s and my passion forever,” Earl says. She advises choosing rugs first when designing, as they should be the “anchor.”



everything she does, making every experience truly memorable. I am so proud of all she has accomplished. As a designer, she has always been innovative and endlessly generous with her ideas, her time, and her dedication to mentoring others in our community. I feel incredibly blessed to have spent so much of my life by her side.”

When she’s not designing, Earl enjoys fly-fishing and shooting sporting clays with her husband, Ben. “I also love to cook and entertain, and I have a particular passion for pastry,” she reveals. And what does the future hold for our Design Icon? An office in Florida, she says, and hopefully, at some point, one in Paris, too. ♦

MORE INFORMATION: jones-keena.com

GET TO KNOW OUR ICON

Lucy Earl’s responses to 15 rapid-fire questions

FAVORITE COLOR

Pink

FAVORITE ARTIST

Marc Chagall

FAVORITE SONG

“Nessun Dorma” from Turandot by Giacomo Puccini

SIGNATURE SCENT

Opium, by Yves Saint Laurent

BEST INTERIORS IN A FILM

As Good as It Gets
(a frequent client reference)

CITY YOU’RE MOST INSPIRED BY

Paris

GO-TO DINNER PARTY MEAL

A Moroccan feast

CURRENT BOOK YOU’RE READING

“Theo of Golden,” by Allen Levi

HIDDEN TALENT

Watercolor painting

DREAM DESIGN PROJECT

A hunting camp

FAVORITE DESIGN DECADE

The 1920s

FAVORITE ROOM TO DESIGN

The living room

BEST DESIGN TIP

There are three great things that make up the soul of a house: great rugs, great art, and great antiques.

BEST ADVICE YOU’VE BEEN GIVEN

Work *on* the business, not just *in* it.

DESIGN ICON:

Sister Parish