

Annapolis HOME

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Anne Arundel | Eastern Shore

The Awards Issue

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Grand International
Residence, Breakfast Room

Right: Grand International
Residence, Library



LIFETIME ACHIEVEMENT WINNER ARLENE CRITZOS BALANCES THE FORCES OF DESIGN

Arlene Critzos, ASID, has been devoted to interior design since she was sixteen. Today, she is founder and president of Interior Concepts in Annapolis.

AHM awards Arlene Critzos, ASID (American Society of Interior Designers), its Lifetime Achievement Award for many reasons. We admire her ability to balance the many forces of design to create remarkable interiors. Also, we celebrate her generosity: She has hired and trained many young designers, often starting them out in the model home division of her company, Interior Concepts, Inc. Now, many run successful businesses of their own. We applaud something more: her belief in design to offer its inhabitants whatever they need—a useful energy, a calm energy, a caring, primal energy. She puts this simply: “I love creating the most valuable aspect for a human being, our environment.”

To enter her headquarters, Interior Concepts, Inc., is to enter a separate world, a world in perpetual creation, illuminated by blueprints, architectural drawings, antique mirrors, and statuary. In warehouses, she stores the tools of her trade: a vast inventory culled during markets, auctions, and her world travels. Fireplace mantles, Gothic church benches, period furnishings, and tapestries are but a few items salvaged from ruined castles and medieval churches of Europe, the palaces of Jordan, the dynasties of China.

This tangible empire was almost an empty dream. Pierced by doubt when attending Mount Vernon College in Washington, D.C., she chose to major in art history rather than interior design. This made sense. Though born in New York City, Arlene's father was in the Air Force and, as a child, Arlene lived throughout Europe, roaming intimate galleries and great museums. Far from the Puritan shadow of the United States, she developed a special love for art history and the decorative arts.

Immediately after college, she studied the decorative arts at their source: spending four months each in London, Rome, Holland, and France. “That gave me the real fill, it helped me to understand antiques in a way that many of the young girls today don't,” she recalls.

Like many of her new trainees, she paid her dues. When she was 24, she worked for a design professional

for no salary, living at home out of necessity. “I was an assistant on her jobs and did whatever she asked me to do,” she recalls. Then, a life-changing event occurred. “A client said to me ‘Arlene, you should be doing this on your own.’ I was 24, going on 25, and had no clue, no money, no nothing. But, I had confidence and I had skill,” says Arlene.

The encouraging client became an investor and, at the age of 24, she found herself with her own interior design business with access to an ideal milieu: the ever-shifting political circles of Washington, D.C. When she was introduced to the Ambassador of Jordan, her career took flight, literally. She designed the Ambassador's residence and embassy in Washington, D.C., and his home in Jordan. She continued with the homes of many other international dignitaries, commercial spaces, and residences in other Middle Eastern countries. This work led to projects in Malaysia, Ibiza, and China.

In three years, she had carved an elite niche for herself, criss-crossing continents so often that she developed an ease, a sense of familiarity with diverse locales and cultures. “Once you get in that world, you find out that the globe is a small neighborhood,” she says.

Still single and exhausted, she needed a break from traveling “the neighborhood” and was ready to stay in one place, build a life, and expand her business. She asked her furniture vendors to suggest a location. They said Annapolis or Gaithersburg, two places where competition would be slim. She had never been to either place, so explored. “I drove to Gaithersburg one day and to Annapolis another. Guess which one I picked,” she says, and opened for business in 1979.

She remains in Annapolis to this day, running her company and residing in a much-published European Norman style home, along with husband John and sons Alexandros and Constantinos. At the very height of her career, we pause to celebrate her gifts. We are lucky to have her in Annapolis with her refined sensibility to shape functional spaces that are receptive to the yearnings of the human body, the turns of the heart.