

Domain LIVING BY DESIGN JENNY BROWN

Objects of affection

John and Barbara Hermon are proof that good taste never goes out of style.

EVEN if you don't know her personally or by repute, the ripple effect of Barbara Hermon's stylistic personality in all things to do with home decor makes her one of Australia's experts in the realm of domestic aesthetics.

Even the most confident interior designer regularly flies in to check out what she and husband John are displaying in their Richmond store.

Hermon & Hermon — the Swan Street warehouse of things made of leather, glass, silk, stone, wood, cotton, rattan, paper, wax, mirror, metal or whatever else is hand-wrought, natural, beautifully crafted or textured — celebrates 21 years of operation in June.

With 15 employees, it is an emporium that remains perennially relevant by staying at the leading edge of the taste agenda. That is no mean feat in an industry second only to fashion in commercial competition and mortality.

The Hermons' guiding philosophy is change. "We're always putting something different into our lines," Mrs Hermon says. "We believe in change."

If there's a coming trend,

Mrs Hermon has probably already imported and sold her version of it. If there is a colour, texture or new material on the horizon, she's inevitably adjudged it and either has decided to pass — or has it in manufacture, probably in the Philippines, which has "an incredible industry of making quality products".

Mrs Hermon doesn't do frippery. If any of their products is copied — "and there are lots of copyists" — they will probably drop it from H&H's stock. "We move on," Mrs Hermon says.

She has definitive taste. She knows what she likes, yet can't articulate that skill, other than to suggest that what she likes has a tangible quality of "soul" — usually found in home-made products of natural fibres, things that incorporate modern design and real quality. "You can always feel a product with soul," she says.

It's probably an inborn recognition but it also comes from the long education of 44 years in the homewares industry. At age 19, she opened her first shop, in Geelong: "the first to sell Swedish glassware".



John and Barbara Hermon in their homewares store at Swan Street, Richmond.

PICTURE: LUIS ENRIQUE ASCUI

At 24, she was head buyer for a Community Aid Abroad initiative, Handcrafts of Asia, which sent her to villages in China, India, Turkey, Pakistan, Iran, Ethiopia and other places beyond the 1970s hippie trail to find the makers and set up the trade, manufacture and supply links to the Armadale store.

Travelling solo, the object of these expeditions "was to source beautiful things. They had to be handmade." This is where her passionate feeling for soul in an object was born. "Those trips set the foundation," she says.

In the 1980s, her taste radar led to her being headhunted by David Jones to convert their soft furnishing and floor rugs department into the decorator department.

In 1990, starting small as a decorator industry direct supplier, the Hermons began their own business, which has, subsequently, built a retail niche. Relocating from Armadale to a larger Swan Street premises, H&H in essence led the charge of the high-end design mob into Richmond, which is now nationally known as a decorator hot spot.

Reaching 70 and with no interest in retirement, Mr Hermon is confident H&H could still be going as an enterprise "in 100 years".

"We keep evolving," he says. "You have to. You can never say, 'This is it.' We're always changing the feeling of the store ... but never the style."

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