

Amazing Energy

Posted on



Barbara Sansoni Lewcock revolutionized the concept of colour and design in Sri Lanka. She unwittingly created a cottage industry that would represent the vibrant personality of the country. Barefoot products are instantly recognized for their uniqueness in design and colour. The name is associated with quality that reflects the Sri Lankan identity. Never mass produced, Barefoot continues to adhere to the values and innovative spirit of its Founder and Chairperson. She is from a generation that had amazing energy, persevered and achieved greatness while being true to their roots. Barbara Sansoni Lewcock is extraordinary.

Dominic Sansoni speaks about his mother's journey.

By Udeshi Amarasinghe

Can you tell us how Ms Barbara Sansoni Lewcock started her adventure in colour and design?

My mother, Barbara Sansoni started Barefoot in 1964, upon her return to Sri Lanka from the UK, after completing her degree in Fine Arts from the Chelsea School of Art. Her friend, Mother of Good Counsel, Provincial of the Good Shepherd nuns requested her to assist the women at the weaving centres they ran with design and colour.

The first showroom in the 1960s was at her home, which then moved to a store, named 'House' in Colombo 1 and eventually, in the early 1980s to the store on the Galle Road.

Inspired by the colour of Sri Lanka, the designs were never accidental. Barbara kept very precise and clear notebooks to record what inspired her. The inspiration for colour could be a Buddhist monk walking across a paddy field, a Siamese cat, a jungle fowl or a painted stork.

Each fabric design had a name that referred to something very specific.

She is very clear that she is not a weaver but a designer, passionate about colour. Designing for simply woven cotton cloth, the warp and weft became her canvas and dyed yarn her mixed box of colours.

When she started, especially at that time, there would have been many challenges, but she persevered. Your thoughts?

I do not think my mother ever dreamt that something she began would ever become a business.

I remember her energy; my mother was the driver, the peon, the accountant, (except she could never read figures), and the designer. She would get in her car, a Volkswagen Beetle, and drive to Hanwella, cross the Kelaniya river on the ferry and then on to a small village called Tarala close to Dompe. She took with her, yarn collected from the Government Yarn Depot in Colombo and brought back woven rolls of cloth.

Your mother supported and encouraged traditional arts and crafts of Sri Lanka and these artisans look up to her. Can you elaborate on this?

We continue to work with Sri Lankan craftsmen and women. Many of them have been with us for two generations.

We started working with carpenters, painters, lacemakers, basket weavers, silversmiths, weavers, book binders and more. The number of traditional artisans that work with us still grows.

Many ask us what is the secret of Barefoot? We think the answer might be common sense. We just try and do what is right. If you are working with someone, give them responsibility, make them accountable for what they do and celebrate their success.

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Barefoot continues to maintain its identity. How was this achieved?

Barbara never compromised. She always did what she believed in. Firstly, we try and make things, which must work. Your travel bag or pencil case must function well.

The senior designers at Barefoot were trained by my mother and understand her approach to design. They, along with the younger designers, and the team that manage five weaving centres, a dye plant and a water treatment plant are crucial to all that we do.

Barefoot and exports...

Our first exports were to Scandinavia and we always worked with other family businesses similar to ours.

We now export to many countries around the world, always with businesses that value brand 'BAREFOOT'. The relationship with these customers is very personal and we often create a special line of design for a particular country or customer preference.

Barbara Sansoni has contributed to the field of architecture through her drawings. Can you elaborate on this?

I would like to recall Mr S Mutthiah, who in the 1960s, was the editor of the Daily Mirror. He asked my mother if she could do a weekly column in his paper. She did two features: one was children's stories and cartoons which were about two real cats that lived in our home, the other was documenting architecture. Her interest in architecture, was encouraged by her friends and contemporaries, Geoffrey Bawa, Ulrik Plesner, Laki Senanayake, Ismeth Raheem and Anura Ratnavibhushana. That time in the 1960's when she travelled all over the island recording buildings in pen and ink, produced her first book, Viharas and Verandas, and some years later, The Architecture of an Island. Sadly, many of the buildings recorded in those two volumes no longer exist.

Concluding remarks?

An enormous thank you to the people of Sri Lanka who have been our customers

and supported us through the years. None of what we do would be possible without a fantastic team who manage, design, dye, weave, and sew for us. Thank You.

