

## DESIGNING WOMAN



Photos by Dennis Vanden Berge / Berkshire Eagle Staff

Annie Selke sits for a portrait in her Pittsfield home. In 13 years, she has built a multimillion dollar home furnishings business based in the Berkshires

### From sewing bedding at home, Annie Selke has built a design empire

By Maryjane Fromm  
Special to The Eagle

PITTSFIELD

Annie Selke's office is brimming with textiles, lined on shelves, spilling from baskets, piled on tables. Bulletin boards host colorful pages, many torn from catalogs and magazines advertising her creative designs.

But Selke herself is a calm island amidst all the visual stimulus, though she, too, is brimming with ideas, projects and plans for her eponymous company.

Annie Selke Co. is the umbrella for three separate companies — Pine Cone Hill (bedding and sleep items in 1994), Dash & Albert (rugs in 2003) and Potluck Studios (tableware in 2002) — she has put together since she started sewing orders at home 13 years ago.

Now a multimillion-dollar business, all the companies are being located in

Selke credits her mother, Mary Jane Emmet, with 'instilling an appreciation of antiques, a sense of historical perspective and a lifelong love of flea markets, estate sales and antiques excursions.'

May to the former Interprint plant on Peck's Road in Pittsfield.

This, says Selke, "will be its final home." With 250,000 square feet, she says, they will plenty of room to expand. She expects the total building investment will be about \$3.7 million.

How does anyone make the leap from

sewing on a dining table at home to heading a multimillion-dollar business?

Selke says she built on a solid foundation of academics, work experience and enthusiasm for decorative arts.

Though she grew up in the Berkshires, she lived for a time in New York City after her studies at the University of Massachusetts and the Fashion Institute of Technology, from which she graduated with dual majors in textile science, fashion buying and merchandising.

Stints in a training program at Saks Fifth Avenue, copy writing for Conran's, and doing product-development for clients such as the Museum of American Folk Art stood her in good stead when she returned to the Berkshires.

She came back after her engagement to Whitney Selke (they were married in 1989) and shortly thereafter began managing the Painted Angels decorative-arts

store on North Street in Pittsfield for Jane and Jack Fitzpatrick.

Painted Angels gave her an opportunity to do innovative retailing, to learn how to manage a staff and to teach others how to develop a design aesthetic, she said.

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A sense of humor, an appreciation for color, a love of children, dogs, quirky tchotchkes, and a tolerance for chaos have also contributed to her success, she said.

The Home Store, as Selke refers to it, and the Outlet Store (also located at Aspinwell) are the only two retail venues she operates. Her main business is wholesale.

# Building a design business

SELKE from E1

Selke partners with established shops to sell her products, though she also designs and produces goods for companies like Neiman Marcus and for the Sundance catalog, to sell under their private label.

She knew she had "grown up" in the business, she said, when Neiman Marcus began crediting Pine Cone Hill in their catalogs as its own recognizable label.

Growing such a huge business has not been without its problems, she says. Moving seven times in seven years as the enterprise outgrew previous spaces was not easy. One year she traveled 21 weeks out of 52 to shows, retailers and factories. That was stressful for the whole family.

## Trusts her eye

She had to learn to trust her own eye and design philosophy and to learn to "focus" on lines rather than individual products, she said.

Her home-furnishing collections have won design awards three times from Home Magazine.

She also had to find capable staff. The family-owned business now employs over 100 people in Pittsfield.

Selke's husband, Whit, a former vice president of communications at Shearson Lehman Hutton in New York, oversees operations and sourcing for all three companies. He has also been overseeing the conversion of the former Interprint mill into the company's headquarters as well as integrating a new software system for operations there.

The main brick mill is being restored with new windows, open interiors, a fitness center for employees, a dining facility, expansive offices, and spaces for product displays and photography.

The property will also serve as a warehouse and shipping and

receiving facility.

Annie Selke Co. imports from 10 countries with India and China being their biggest producers. To ensure quality-control and to manage the politics of doing business in India, they have their own office there with a staff of 40 agents.

Whit Selke travels to India four or five times a year to oversee production, but Annie Selke says she now makes only an annual visit.

She finds the "visual stimulus almost overwhelming" and "needs to limit her exposure otherwise she would never be able to concentrate on specific designs."

As it is, in any given year she develops more than 200 products among the three companies. She says she strives for matchability. Her products have to work together. She thinks of them as having "friends" or as starting a "new colony."

Selke is a hands-on designer. One, deciding that the color of a prototype quilt being showcased at the New York Gift Show was too light, she ran to a nearby Dunkin' Donuts for coffee to stain the fabric a deeper hue. This was in between helping to set up the showroom and entertaining customers over a five-day period. Afterwards everything was dismantled and returned to Pittsfield, until the next show. The mill in India was instructed to produce darker quilts for the retailers who'd ordered them.

"I have a good eye," Selke says, but I don't think of myself as a decorator. "Ideally, I want to encourage my customers to develop their own eye for what pleases them visually; to encourage customers to mix and match products, to play with color and to access their own creativity."

Though she is firmly committed to the Berkshires, Selke finds New Englanders are much less playful with color than her clients in Texas, California and the South,

For one magazine shoot, she spray painted a wicker set found in Brimfield a bright flamingo color and upholsters the furniture she designs for Lee Industries in hues such as fuchsia and citrus.

Hoping to appeal to both the adventurous and the somewhat less-so client, however, she "develops products in a variety of color ranges with lots of possibility for mixing and matching."

## Should have fun

She wants customers to have fun with home decorating. Her rug company is named after her dogs, Dash and Albert, and she recently developed a line of polypropylene outdoor rugs that can be bleached. All of the rugs, she reports, "have been tested on very lazy dogs and very messy children."

Selke looks to the past for her inspiration, poring over antique "documents" (remnants of fabric from previous centuries) for patterns, colors, repeats or motifs that might translate into textiles for the present. She also relies on visual memory and countless digital photos from her travels for ideas.

Having a sense of the past, also informs the future and a recent line of sleepwear, manufactured from bamboo, is one way the company has begun to move into areas of environmentally sensitive products.

Selke says she is full of "ideas and opinions."

"When I conceive of something, I see the finished product. I have that kind of imagination; I can finish the thought."

That is how she got involved in designing furniture. At first Lee Industries bought textiles from Pine Cone Hill to upholster their chairs. But Selke began making suggestions and ended up designing her own line for them.

On the Web: Visit [www.AnnieSelkie.com](http://www.AnnieSelkie.com)

# Band creates an antic image

ANTICS from E1

band's musical mastermind — the Edge to Wentz's Bono. But their celebrity bassist has resumed duties usually reserved for frontmen. He's been linked to Hollywood starlets like Lindsay Lohan and Ashlee Simpson, and even underwent a media maelstrom after naked photos he took of himself with his Sidekick were leaked on the Internet.

"The first 48 hours I just like quit my band and wouldn't talk to anybody," says Wentz of Sidekickgate. "It's like a footnote now, like how Michael Jackson set his hair on fire in a Pepsi commercial."

And though he's been accused of releasing the photos himself, Wentz shrugs it off, understanding why people might pin such an allegation on him.

"It's this bizarre thing where you can kind of control your own destiny," he says of the Internet age. "People are able to kind of guide their own press and create this wave behind it."

Stump says the attention on Wentz made the band more focused as a unit.

"It basically forced us to make an album quickly because I wanted to make sure people remembered that we're a band and not a sideshow," says Stump. "People always want to see Pete in this 'I'm-a-crazy-rock-star' light and it's a shame because they lose so much about him in the fine print.

And more than anything, they lose so much about the music. It's horribly frustrating."

"People only want to hear about drama and bad stuff," adds guitarist Joe Trohman. "No one wants to know that things are good."

And things are good for Fall Out Boy. Their new album's instant success came as a happy surprise to the band.

"It was strange," says Stump. "It's still one of those things where you're waiting to find out you're on 'Punk'd.'"

The album reunites the group with "Cork Tree" producer Neal Avron and, in an unexpected move for a young rock band, pop and R&B producer-extraordinaire Kenneth "Babyface" Edmonds on two tracks.

It also finds the band taking more chances, including a Coldplay-inspired "piano song," a nod to Jeff Buckley (and ultimately Leonard Cohen) with a chorus of "Hallelujah" within a song, a guest rap by their boss, Def Jam President Jay-Z on the opener, and whispers of bad reviews they've received on another track.

"It's easy to hide behind conventions you've used before, a certain chord progression or melody that you know is going to be safe," says Stump. He says he pushed himself not to fear the musically unknown when writing "Infinity On High" because of

the media misconception of his band.

"You don't get that much time in the public eye, and if that's what people expect ... all these sensationalized ideas about us ... if that's who you think we are, I'm going to make the best record I can possibly make to dispel that idea because I don't think that's who we are."

The result has been a critically acclaimed album, and a hit single, "This Ain't a Scene, It's an Arms Race," that both mainstream and indie radio stations are supporting.

"Fall Out Boy has done everything right on their climb to the top of the next wave of commercially successful punk bands," says Joe Escalante, morning show host of Indie 103.1 FM in Los Angeles. "They earned a following by performing well, not by hustling kids with hype. And they paid their punk rock dues."

Fall Out Boy makes no bones about their joy of creating anthems for the masses, they maintain that commercial success is not their end goal.

"We're not denying that we want to be the biggest band and want to sell records, but we're not about moving units," says Trohman.

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