

ELITE MONDE: You have a distinctive sense of style in which you often adopt tone-on-tone palettes that build toward a sense of inevitability and harmony. I notice that you still find unexpected opportunities in the design to delight and surprise people who get to experience them. Can you explain how you do this and where we can find this reflected in your design work?

BEN JOHNSTON: I think design, like good art and photography, relies on skillfully framing elements that grab your attention and attract your eye. There needs to be a careful balance and tension between these layers. For me, tone-on-tone material palettes allow me to create a beautifully layered backdrop, without stealing focus from the elements that are to meant be the magical, unexpected ones. I try to find these opportunities in multiple ways: through a juxtaposition of form, scale, color, styles, cultures and time periods. For instance, mixing a Classical column with a modern acrylic table, grabs your attention because you know that this space doesn't exist in just one period of time—effectually, it's timeless and makes you question their juxtaposition to one another. Perhaps there is a design element that is more than just a functional one... something like a beautiful chandelier that is also a dramatic sculptural addition to space. If you have provided a backdrop to support them, these types of elements command your attention in a beautiful way.

ELITE MONDE: We noticed that you studied design philosophy and classical painting in Italy, worked in Japan for Cesar Pelli & Associates, and traveled extensively throughout the world. How did these experiences influence your interior design style?

BEN JOHNSTON: My educational background is rooted in architecture, which is a wonderful field of study for anyone considering a career in the design world. It provided me with a rigorous process of creating and editing that I rely on when approaching all design solutions. I have been extremely blessed to have the opportunity to travel and experience a lot of the world, which only further builds upon that foundation. The cultures I have experienced throughout my life have given me a deep appreciation for the colors, textures, and motifs from around the world. As a result, I try to combine these elements in a very curated way: a careful mix that supports not only the functional needs of a space, but the emotional ones as well. I want my spaces to affect mood and to create an experience.

ELITE MONDE: You served as a professor of Interior Design at a well-regarded design school in Houston. What is the most important advice you gave your students in order to become good designers?

BEN JOHNSTON: I constantly told my students that I was not there to teach them style, but rather critical-thinking skills. Style is something very subjective and cannot be taught. What can be taught is a process of analyzing design problems to understand them more three-dimensionally, and the skills necessary to communicate design solutions to others. As we all know, education is extremely important. Knowing the history of art, architecture, furnishings, and decorative arts is absolutely essential; so are the principles of design composition. Once a young designer fully understands the history of design and the rules that govern it, they can begin to break those rules effectively when necessary to create a desired effect.

ELITE MONDE: How do you balance the requests of your clients with your vision as the designer?

BEN JOHNSTON: This is the million-dollar question, of course! Every designer has a different approach to this dilemma. For me, I begin by really listening to my clients and asking them many questions. I pay attention to what they ask for, but also anticipate their needs going into the future. Communication is absolutely key in this process, because at the end of the day, I am creating a home for them—not for myself. I make them part of the design process with regards to how the space functions as well as honoring any broad stylistic requests they have made, but I do not involve them in every decision. When we finally install the project and the clients get to experience it for the first time, it is simultaneously everything they asked for and more than they could have ever dreamed.

ELITE MONDE: I notice that you tend to use many textural materials in your designs. Tell me why you find this characteristic to be so important.

BEN JOHNSTON: I believe in appealing to all of the senses. Textural materials respond to our need for tactile stimulation. I have vivid memories from my childhood of being taken to clothing stores by my mother. I would spend the entire time there touching all of the different materials and enjoying the sensations. To this day, textures are extremely important to my designs. Spaces that I create have layers of textures—some smooth and silky, some rough and textural. I want my clients to enjoy the experience of the spaces beyond just their ability to see them.

ELITE MONDE: You are recognized as a 'Leader In Design' and a 'Rising Star of Design' by your colleagues in Houston and have won numerous design awards. How has winning these distinctions affected your role in the industry?

BEN JOHNSTON: It has significantly impacted me! I feel a great sense of responsibility to our industry: the lives it touches, and the countless people around the world that rely on the success of our industry to provide for themselves and their families. As a former professor, I constantly worked to give students the knowledge necessary to be productive members of our society. Just like my own employees today, I want young designers to go on to serve their employers and their clients well. Design is a powerful creative force and a beautiful legacy to leave behind. I want others to appreciate it as much as I do. Being recognized as a design leader, I get asked to speak at design events to educate and motivate others in the industry. I enjoy the opportunities to share some of my wisdom and give back to a community that has been so supportive of me in my career. Winning these distinctions has also meant that I have been asked to partner with various furniture and textile manufacturers to create new designs and advise them to help them grow their business. For me, I see the design industry as a huge global village made up of clients, designers, sales people, manufacturers, and craftsmen from around the world. I want them all to be successful and will do whatever I can to help.