

# By Her Own DESIGN

TEXTILE DESIGNER, AUTHOR,  
AND MAVEN OF DIY, **DENA FISHBEIN** IS THE EAST  
BAY'S OWN MARTHA STEWART.

BY LEEANNE JONES

**SITTING ON A ZEBRA-PRINT OTTOMAN**, clutching an oversized mug of coffee, 53-year-old Dena Fishbein laughs easily, begins most stories with an enthusiastic “Oh, my God,” and describes elements of her home in such loving detail, it’s like they are members of the family. It’s no wonder her textile and product designs—and her home—are so bright and cheerful. Fishbein’s work—from floral bedding and ribbon-embellished pillows, to nursery decor featuring cute woodland creatures, to illustrated Sunrise Greetings cards—is sold under the brand Dena Designs, in stores such as Neiman Marcus, Dillard’s, Bed Bath and Beyond, and Barnes and Noble. She has created more than 1,000 fabric designs, hosted the craft series *Embellish This* on the DIY cable channel, and written 17 books. Her base of operations is her Lafayette hills home, set on a gorgeously landscaped five-and-a-half acres. Fishbein works out of her studio with three assistants; a showroom of samples is set up above the garage; and her husband, Danny, handles the business side. Dubbed Seven Oaks Ranch, the property is also the subject of her latest book, *The Painted Home by Dena*. The photo-packed coffee-table tome offers a room-by-room home tour sprinkled with personal stories, decorating tips, and DIY projects, from painted lampshades to velvet rose curtain tiebacks in Fishbein’s cozy, eclectic personal style. We chat with her about the book, her DIY successes and failures, and the unlikely start of her design career.

**Q: Do you come from a creative family?**

**A:** Growing up, no one in my family was artistic, but they appreciated the arts, and we were always going to museums. We lived in this very modern house in Marin County, and I never liked it; it just wasn’t my taste. When we moved to England—I was about 12—I had never seen an English cottage before, and I was so excited that there was an aesthetic out there for me. I thought everything was modern, but there I discovered chintzes and fireplaces and little pillows and footstools. It was very influential.

**Q: Tell me about some of your earliest creative endeavors.**

**A:** My mother never let me have Barbie dolls; she thought they

were too mature. But I always had miniature trolls, and I built whole towns for them. I’d use rolls and rolls of Scotch tape, and cut out pieces of cardboard to make furniture. I learned how to sew, so I could make their clothing, bedding, and curtains. That was my big creative outlet: I never drew or painted before I graduated from college. I always thought I’d do something in industrial design or architecture.

**Q: You don’t have any formal training?**

**A:** I am self-taught in doing what I do now. I really needed a job, and I bought a paintbrush and some paints, and started painting what I thought were textile designs—little

flowers and things. I showed them to an agent, and it just kind of happened. People were interested in them because they looked different from what other textile designers were doing—because I didn’t know what I was doing! I even made up my own flowers.

**Q: Your home is the subject of your new book, *The Painted Home by Dena*. What year was it built and what was the original style?**

**A:** I think it’s about 85 years old, and it was a ranch house. When we first moved in, it felt a lot like a railroad train; when you walked in the front door, you could see all the way through the house, from end to end. We’ve changed the configuration. We’ve renovated every room, window, door, and floor.

**Q: With decorating, your motto is “surround yourself with the things you love.” Has this always been your philosophy?**

**A:** I’ve always been very aware of what attracts me visually. I have a painting that I love, and every time I look at it, it makes me feel happy. And I have certain fabrics in my house, and I love the way they play off each other, and looking at them



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makes me feel good. So I'm just very aware of the emotional connection you can have with your surroundings. It's really important to me.

**Q: How much of your home's style is you? How did you incorporate what your husband and children like?**

**A:** I think because my husband and I have known each other since we were so young, our aesthetic has developed together. We have an unspoken rule that we don't buy anything that we both don't love. There is so much beautiful product out there, we can find something else, or we can compromise, but we don't usually have to. We design a lot of things ourselves and repurpose things. We love going to the flea market together—and the kids do, too. It's weird: The whole family likes the same things.

**Q: What are some of your best flea market finds?**

**A:** Oh, God, I have so many. We go to the Alameda Pointe Antiques Faire every month, and we visit flea

markets when we travel. But my favorite is the palm tree painting I talk about in the book, because it has such a fun, silly story behind it. [After spotting the painting, Fishbein spent more than a half hour waiting for another interested customer to put it down, and at one point, she tripped and fell trying to rush over to grab it.] But I'm excited every time I find something really cool or different. You never know what to expect; it's a treasure hunt. It's the surprise. Something pops up, and you didn't even know you wanted it, but you say, "Ooh, I want that!" And you find a place for it because you love it.

**Q: What has been your biggest DIY or restoration triumph?**

**A:** On the television show, we did 104 projects—all of them taking things you already have in your home or you've bought inexpensively, and turning them into something you love. One was my grandmother's chair. The upholstery was stained and not looking good, and I didn't want to go to the expense to reupholster it. But by slip covering and sewing things onto it, I still have her

chair, but it's fresh and new, and has my personality in it. Things get old; they get dowdy; they get chipped; they get stained—but you love them. It's about taking those things that have meaning and making them fresh again.

**Q: I think a lot of people don't know what to do with sentimental items that don't fit the style of their home.**

**A:** Yeah, I think so, too. You just need to close your eyes and think, "What can I do with this? Can I paint it? Would that look good? And if I painted it, what color?" Run through different scenarios. If you paint it, you can always change it.

**Q: Have you had any DIY "oopses"?**

**A:** God, all the time. In the entryway to our house, I painted these really intricate diamonds on the walls, in different shades of glaze. It looked nice, but my husband said, "You know, I think it will look even better

if we put a coat of sheer wax on it." So we did, and it ruined the whole wall. It made the colors muddy. You have to experiment, and you have to know that by experimenting, there are going to be some mistakes. You can't help it; it's part of the process. Just think of the next idea and try that.

**Q: What was your first product design to hit shelves? And what was that experience like?**

**A:** Right out of college, I did a line of bedding, and it ended up on the cover of a Bloomingdale's catalog. I know; I know; it was ridiculous! I don't know if that's happened again—although we've had a lot of great coverage since. I was so young, I just figured, "Oh yeah, that happens to everyone all the time."

**Q: What are some of your upcoming product launches?**

**A:** We have a lot of bedding, bath, and kitchen collections coming into Neiman Marcus, Dillard's, and Bed Bath and Beyond, and we're also coming out with a line of baby clothing. And we're getting into the tween market right now, with clothing and everything else. I'm doing that with

my daughter, Rachel. She's a shoe designer, and she had this concept for a product line. This is the first collaboration I've done, and it's being really well received. It should be out in about a year. We're doing a new pet line. We're going to be getting into food decor, so you can decorate your own cakes and cupcakes. And potentially a whole craft line. And we have a lot of new fabric collections coming up. There's a ton; we're always working on like 12 projects at a time. That's our normal.

**Q: You travel often for trade shows and market research. What are some of your most memorable stops?**

**A:** Definitely China and Japan—because of the food. I'm kind of a picky eater, so I felt like *I Love Lucy* in every restaurant, trying to think of ways to not eat crazy things. At first, I tried to tell them I was a vegetarian,

but I guess they [didn't understand] because the chef came out with this special platter for me—and all 16 people at this big table are watching—and it was raw chicken. Everyone was so delighted. There was no way. So I said, through my interpreter, "Oh, this is my husband's favorite dish!" He ate it and said it was good, although he eats anything. We had lots of experiences like that: a crow with its beak and claws, a box of live frogs. Basically, I lived on Starbucks. And rice. But we love going overseas and seeing things we've never seen before, like fresh approaches to design. That's really exciting.

**Q: How about a few quick favorites. Favorite color?**

**A:** Aqua. It's been my favorite for years.

**Q: Flower?**

**A:** I like peonies.

**Q: Famous artist?**

**A:** Matisse.

**Q: Medium?**

**A:** Gouache—because that's the only thing I know how to paint in.

**Q: Since you're a picky eater, what's your favorite kind of food?**

**A:** Macaroni and cheese. ■

JOHN ELLIS

## Decorating Tips From Dena Fishbein

» Surround yourself with colors and objects that inspire you—from a favorite painting to fresh-cut flowers—and every room in your home will be a haven.

» Don't be afraid to layer pattern on pattern. Combining florals and geometrics is a good thing.

» Plenty of pillows soften a sofa or chair, and provide accent colors. Change pillows, and you'll update the look of your room in no time flat.

» Think of your walls as a backdrop. Whether clean or simple or richly patterned, they set the stage for family photographs, a beloved collection of vintage plates, or other treasures.

» Just because the kitchen is a practical space doesn't mean it can't be beautiful and inspiring. Combine the functional elements with more personal, unexpected ones.

» Use your most cherished dishware, silverware, and crystal, no matter the occasion. It will make even the simplest gathering feel special.

For weekly inspiration and DIY projects, visit Fishbein's blog at [denadesigns.com](http://denadesigns.com).