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Robin Levien

The acclaimed ceramicist's space-saving and innovative bathroom designs have become top-selling classics and are loved by interior designers but, like his understated products, Robin Levien prefers to keep a low profile

WORDS BARBARA CHANDLER

At 57, Robin Levien is the largely unsung hero of bathroom design and the Royal Designer for Industry is unusually modest and unassuming. He has co-designed an estimated 15 per cent of all ceramic bathroom ranges on the market in the UK today. He invented such blessed space-savers as the corner basin, corner cistern and the shower-bath. Yet Levien does not have the celebrity status of, say, Philippe Stark or Zaha Hadid (both of whom have designed bathroom fittings). But that is deliberate on his part — he determinedly avoids celebrity. 'I want to be judged for my work, not my name,' he says. 'And, at the worst, celebrity designers give short change by not designing completely what is credited to them.'

Nevertheless, Levien's achievements over 30 years in design are definitely of star status. He has been a Royal Designer for Industry since 1995 and there can be only 200 of these at any one time. These designers are elected by their peers and next year Levien will take up a two-year mastership of the whole faculty. He is the designer of the acclaimed Concept bathroom collection, launched by Ideal Standard at 100% Design last year. Comprising an impressive 100 items, it is the largest range the company has ever produced. In fact, his Studio range for Ideal Standard, with its quintessentially simple shapes, has stayed in production for 20 years, winning numerous awards and selling more than 10 million pieces.

The unflashy nature of Levien's work appeals widely to interior designers. 'I am always happy for my designs to fade into the background as an integral part of a scheme,' he says. For Concept, in particular, Levien had interior designers in mind. 'I wanted lots of well thought out, simple, practical and affordable

solutions for the bathroom,' Levien explains. The pieces are interchangeable, based on three distinctive soft-edged basin shapes. Clever details include five widths of glass panel for splashbacks, which can be combined with matching mirrors for a clean, integrated look.

Levien's Space range for Ideal Standard has attracted design plaudits since its launch in 1996. The designer often remarks that the average bathroom is not much bigger than a king-size bed. Interior designers may not know who created Space but they love the way its basin and the triangular cistern squeeze into corners. Another brainwave is a WC seat fixed at a 45-degree angle so that it can be positioned closer to the wall. The shower-bath was another innovation and these ideas have all been copied widely. 'Designs that become classics,' says Levien, 'have an enduring quality that continues to connect with people over a

long period. Whether the designer is a celebrity or not, either the design has it or it doesn't.'

Levien's Trend porcelain for Rosenthal Thomas has been in production even longer than his Studio bathroom fittings and is one of the most successful modern tableware ranges ever, selling £20m of products a year. New from Villeroy & Boch is a range of tableware called New Cottage, with soft rounded shapes that Levien describes as 'expressive leaves'.

Levien was born in 1952 and brought up in the suburbs of west London. Today his home is a 16th-century Somerset farmhouse set amid 40 acres of its own nature reserve, where Levien enjoys driving a 1952 grey Ferguson tractor.

In 1999 he launched Studio Levien with his wife, designer Tricia Stainton, who has worked with him on many projects. They have no children — 'it just didn't work out that way' — but Levien is strongly committed to students at

many colleges of art and design. He is a visiting professor at the Central School of Art and Design, a member of the Council of the Royal College of Art and an honorary doctor at Staffordshire University.

Essentially, Levien is a ceramics designer, hence the link between bathrooms and tableware. Seven years of art-school training culminated in three years of ceramics at the Royal College of Art, from which he graduated in 1976. Within two years, he went to work for David Queensberry, the distinguished ceramicist who had been his professor. Later he became a partner in Queensberry Hunt Levien.

'I am simply trying to make the world a better place,' Levien confides. 'I get great fulfilment from designing products that fit into the lives of hundreds of thousands of people every day.' His motto is FAB ('I am a child of the Sixties'), which stands for Functional, Affordable and Beautiful. 'A design has to look good, work well and sell at a good price. A design has to perform because you can't keep it going for 20-odd years if word gets out.'

A particular bathroom bugbear is products that waste energy and water and Levien would like all interior designers to specify thermostatically controlled bath fillers. The Concept water-saving bath only uses 118 litres of water (compared with the usual 225) and meets the requirements of a sustainable home.

Levien sees a definite divide between art and design. 'Art is about solving your own problems, design is about solving other people's,' he says. Ever scrupulous, he credits this aphorism to the graphic artist Alan Fletcher, who died in 2006. Then he adds a typically Levien maxim of his own: 'What is important is that a person falls in love with a design. It's this emotional relationship that makes them choose one design over another.' Behind the smokescreen of form and function is a powerfully poetic sensibility. *idf*



CONCEPTUAL ART
Levien's Concept bathroom collection for Ideal Standard and Isola tableware for Costa Verde

