

China Seas' founder makes it sound easy

By CORINNE ABATT

Eight years ago, photo-journalist Inger McCabe Elliott opened a business in New York City, China Seas. The first showroom was 12 feet square.

Anybody willing to lay odds on a former photographer, history teacher, mother and step-mother to eight young people being successful in a completely new field in a highly competitive marketplace would have been at least surprised.

Mrs. Elliott now employs 22 people in her New York office, has 24 outlets around the world, develops many lines for manufacturers and manages to stay about two years ahead of most of her competitors.

Batik prints, which China Seas was one of the first to introduce, now represent about 25 percent of the business. Since there is considerable waste in batik prints, Mrs. Elliott quickly came out with a line of batik umbrellas, neckties,

napkins and other small, attractive items.

Noting that colors and types of prints follow a seven- to eight-year popularity cycle, like many other things, she said, "Batik is coming back as a new look."

Another way Mrs. Elliott led the market was grouping by color.

"We integrate everything," she said. HER FABRICS, AVAILABLE at Campbell Lewis showroom in the Troy Design Center, are grouped so a customer (interior designers and trade only) may ask to see all fabric or wall covering patterns with sienna in them or all with plum or jade green or red.

"I had the idea first to hang by color," Mrs. Elliott said, adding that her staff thought she was crazy when she did it. Now it's a common approach in clothing as well as fabric displays.

While China Seas may be best known for batiks, it also produces screen prints on six ground cloths, woolen weaves, cotton weaves, cotton jac-

quards and ultrasuedes. Along with fabrics and fabric products, the company has a line of wall coverings, cookware/dinnerware called "The Perfect Setting," and through the New York showroom sells antique textiles, porcelain and art objects.

China Seas design studio developed sheet and towel collections for Martex and has done patterns for furniture manufacturers. China Seas rolls along smoothly, Mrs. Elliott said, "Because we have terrific people working for us. We have a good bookkeeper, a good lawyer and a good banker."

She said she was never afraid, especially in the firm's early days, to ask

for advice and after she asked, she was willing to listen.

THE BUSINESS SKILLS that she used constantly as a photo-journalist were quickly applied to the new venture — organizing, setting priorities, selling, invoicing, ordering materials and keeping track of an inventory.

As she spoke about the ideas for the future of China Seas, her plans for new products and new designs, she said, "It really interests me how we see the world."

Shades of the photo-journalist — her skills in perception were automatically transferred to the new business. Certainly one of the reasons for Mrs.

Elliott's success is her enthusiasm for her work and her staff. She's so proud of the delightful mix of people who work for her, a broad cross section of ages, career interests, linguistic skills and ethnic backgrounds.

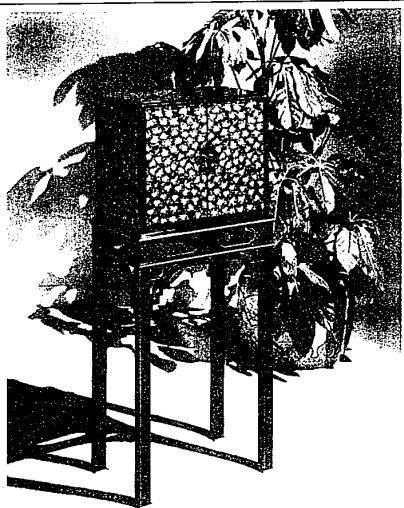
She likes to cook for them and gathers them around a big table like a family for a meal, using "The Perfect Setting" cookware/dinnerware, what else?

But on top of all the plus factors which Mrs. Elliott built into her company, go two ordinary words, hard work.

That's really what puts the wind in the sails and keeps China Seas moving forward.



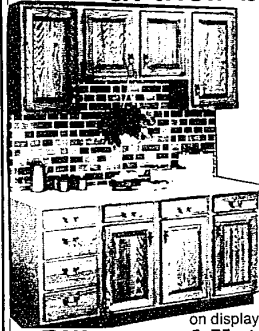
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