
Second acts



>>Gentinetta among some of her restored pieces. She discovered her talent for furniture design after Hurricane Katrina destroyed her home.

and furniture restorer, she sells her work on the high-end retail website 1stdibs.com (karinagentinetta.1stdibs.com), at the 1stdibs Manhattan showroom and in a by-appointment space in New Orleans. Gentinetta, 44, also helps interior designers and decorators source one-of-a-kind pieces: an ancient stone basin, a Murano glass chandelier, a draper's table. While you might call those talents impressive, you wouldn't call them surprising—unless you knew that for 13 years,

Designing a new life

Karina Gentinetta spent 13 years as a lawyer, but antiques were her true love. Now she's turned her eye for quality into a business

BY MARGOT DOUGHERTY



Karina Gentinetta points to a chandelier hanging in the master bath of her New Orleans cottage. “I got it for \$40 on eBay,” she says cheerfully. The early-19th-century Empire daybed in her living room? A broken discard until she restored its old-world elegance. The pair of Louis XIV chairs—with their dainty curved cabriole legs and white Belgian-linen upholstery—were cast-offs, too, before Gentinetta reimagined them with new fabrics and carefully applied layers of paint, gesso and wax. Beautifying old furniture, she says, “is like dressing Cinderella for the ball.”

Gentinetta, who was born in Buenos Aires and came to the U.S. with her family at 12, is a graceful combination of sophistication and Southern charm. A self-schooled antiques dealer

Gentinetta was a lawyer. As a partner in a respected New Orleans law firm, she handled product-liability cases and made close to \$200,000 a year.

But then came Hurricane Katrina. On August 28, 2005, the day before the storm hit, Gentinetta and her husband, A.J. McAlear, evacuated their leafy Lakeview home with four dogs, their toddler son and infant daughter and McAlear's eight-year-old daughter from a prior marriage. Their destination was Covington, a small town across Lake Pontchartrain, where McAlear's father had a getaway cottage.

Three weeks later, returning to assess the damage, the couple came upon an eerie landscape. Their three-bedroom house, less than a mile from the 17th Street Canal's ruptured levee, had been destroyed. "It was as if a bomb had exploded," says Gentinetta. "I remember screaming for my mother in Spanish and then just thinking, Where do you begin? We left there pretty numb."

The process of picking up the pieces went slowly. McAlear, who'd sold real estate before the storm, enrolled in accounting school and waited tables. Gentinetta's round-trip commute from the cottage to her office took three hours. She made the trip when she could but spent most of the time juggling child care and wrestling with FEMA. After receiving \$250,000 in flood insurance, she says, she "felt rich for about five minutes." But their mortgage agreement stipulated that if they didn't rebuild the house within 90 days of its destruction, the bank could call in the loan—about \$320,000—in one lump sum. So she handed the check to her mortgage company along with \$70,000 from her savings. She was left with \$1,250 in her checking account.

Gentinetta and McAlear immediately started saving to rebuild their property. After a year, they qualified for Louisiana's Road Home grant and a Small Business Administration loan, and Gentinetta hired a contractor to build a new place. But the grant money hadn't yet arrived, and the couple was stretched to the limit. McAlear, in school by day and at the restaurant by night, "was around

only briefly," says Gentinetta. "It was me and the kids living in the country on a dead-end road in the middle of nowhere. I was very lonely. A.J. and I were going through a rough patch."

To buoy her spirits, she pored over design magazines, imagining how she'd furnish her new home. On weekends she hit thrift shops and flea markets looking for pieces she could afford on her shoestring budget. "It was the only way I could keep the hope and faith that I would be able to come back to New Orleans," she says. The owner of her favorite consignment store showed her how to use paint, wax and glaze to refresh a piece while respecting its history. Initially, Gentinetta's interest was merely aesthetic. "I thought, How can I make something look like a million dollars?" she says.

At night, while the children slept, she spread her paints and project pieces on the kitchen floor, experimenting with coats of the milky blues and soft whites and grays that would become her trademark, sanding here and there to achieve a look of distressed elegance. The hobby was therapeutic, symbolic even, as Gentinetta breathed new life into the dilapidated castoffs. She stored her finds in the garage of the Covington cottage until it was packed so tightly, nothing more would fit.

Family issues continued to distract her from the practice of law, absorbing her time as well as her energy. Life with McAlear had become increasingly tense (he would later be diagnosed with ADHD and successfully treated with medication). Her father had gone blind, and Gentinetta was helping to take care of him. The cumulative demands took a toll, and Gentinetta lost her biggest client. "I had my moments when I'd just cry," she says. "But on the outside, I had to be OK for A.J. and the kids."

Meanwhile, the couple suffered a series of construction disasters. The first contractor Gentinetta hired for the new house ended up way over budget. The second ran off with a \$95,000 down payment from their grant money. With

Running the numbers

▶ **\$700**

Retail price of a yard of Gentinetta's favorite Fortuny silk in the Vivaldi 5687 pattern

▶ **\$450**

Cost of shipping a sofa from New Orleans to New York

▶ **975**

Number of Murano glass crystals on a Gentinetta-designed custom-made Italian chandelier

▶ **16**

Yards of Italian Dedar fabric (Dedalus pattern) required to upholster a midcentury sofa

▶ **\$1,500**

Price paid by a customer for a piece of abstract art Gentinetta painted to liven up her Istdibs display in New York. A shopper insisted on buying it

each defeat, Gentinetta readjusted her design. "There were times when selling the lot and moving somewhere else seemed like the easiest and fastest way to get back on my feet," she says. "But I stuck it out."

With McAlear still in accounting school and waiting tables, "we were so frugal," she says. "It was, Don't spend, don't spend." All along, though, she continued to dabble in furniture rehab: "I'd look at a piece and imagine, If I sat on this chair every day for 100 years, what part would get rubbed off? I wanted to get better and better."

Finally, on New Year's Day 2009, after more than three years in Covington, the family moved into the four-bedroom cottage they now call home. That week, McAlear landed an accounting job that paid \$45,000 with

benefits. The following month, Gentinetta's father passed away. His death was a blow, but it delivered a revelation: Life is too short to spend it doing something that drags you down. In April 2009, Gentinetta gave up her law-firm partnership to work on an hourly basis. A month later, they parted ways. "It got to a point where I couldn't stand what I was doing," she says. "I wasn't afraid of losing anything, because I'd already lost everything." She spent the summer devoting herself to her kids. "It was unbelievable, the quality of life I got back," she says. "My sisters were saying, 'You're really good at this furniture stuff.' But what was I supposed to do? Put the pieces outside and say, 'Here! They're for sale!?' That's when I started doing my research."

She heard about a nearby antiques mall and rented space there to sell her pieces. She had posted them on Etsy.com

as well, and it wasn't long before two side tables were snapped up. Gentinetta was ecstatic. "They were beautiful, with cabriole legs that I'd painted a sage green," she says. "I'd bought the pair for about \$50 and sold them for \$650. I couldn't believe I could make so much money doing something I adore!" She was more ecstatic when, during the payment process, she realized the buyer was Courtney Love Cobain: "I thought, I'm on to something!"

Love Cobain also bought a \$700 pair of antique chairs inlaid with mother-of-pearl. The sales inspired Gentinetta to set a new goal: to be accepted as a dealer on 1stdibs.com, where she could command top dollar. "The process was like getting into a small club," she says. One requirement was that she have a storefront. She gave up her space in the mall and opened a shop on Magazine Street. Then she badgered 1stdibs nonstop.

"One thing I am," she says, "is persistent."

It paid off. Gentinetta was accepted on the site in February 2010, and when 1stdibs opened its New York showroom, she was one of only 56 dealers (out of the 1,200 who work with the site) asked to set up a display. Since then her business, Disegno Karina Gentinetta, has grown exponentially, and she has amassed a team of local and overseas artisans. There's the Russian sculptor who repaired a rabbit marionette that Courteney Cox then bought from Gentinetta, and two artists in Italy who make Murano glass fixtures. In New Orleans, there's a woodworker, an upholsterer and a metal fabricator who constructs iron chandeliers from Gentinetta's designs. (She then gilds them in her kitchen, applying paper-thin gold leaf and layers of glaze.) "I ask a lot of questions," Gentinetta says. "I guess it's the lawyer in me—I used to depose

people. If a guy comes to hang a chandelier, I'll ask him, 'What's the best crystal?' I learned how to splice the wires so I can repair them. I want to learn things."

Chandeliers have become a specialty, as Gentinetta's client Mindy Schapiro will attest. Schapiro wanted one for her Georgian-style home in Baltimore. Her requirements were so precise that Gentinetta had the chandelier custom made in Italy. "She keeps her sources secret," Schapiro says. "Karina knows her antiques, and she also knows how to find pieces that look old, not like reproductions. She just has this eye."

Gentinetta is still earning considerably less than her lawyer salary, and she admits she finds it hard to set prices. "I get carried away, and I feel guilty about charging when I'm having this much fun," she says. "I hate asking for money!" Early in her new career, Gentinetta spent hours

calling sources and searching online for a wood refectory table. "It's like looking for a needle in a haystack," she says. "I was so good at it in law. Sure enough, I found this gorgeous 18th-century walnut table for \$18,000." Gentinetta sent photographs to the client, who said she wanted the piece but asked if Gentinetta could get the price down. She did: As a designer, she got a \$5,000 trade discount. Furthermore, the shipping fee would be minimal. Final cost for the client: \$13,000. Deal! "I'm happy, happy, happy," Gentinetta remembers. "The dealer's happy—she made a sale in 20 minutes. It's not until I go to bed that the lightbulb goes off: My client got my trade price. And what did I get?" She had forgotten to add a commission. "I wasn't used to people having that kind of money to spend on a table," she says. "It was my first time seeing what someone was willing

to pay for a one-of-a-kind antique."

Starting her own business has brought its share of self-doubt. But for Gentinetta, reinventing her career was a soul-saving move that allowed her more time with her children and a chance to express her creativity.

McAlear lost his accounting job in July 2010 but found work as a sommelier and waiter. He has always supported Gentinetta's career change, and she's hoping to return the favor. "He'd love to be in the restaurant business. That's where his heart is," she says. "One day I hope I'm successful enough that we can focus on him. I'm seizing moments more than I ever have—I jumped off the cliff, and everything started falling into place." *

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