



ARTIST IN RESIDENCE

Maria and Michael Fenlon's house is one full of art, colour and warmth, says **Mary O'Sullivan**, and it also showcases Maria's flair for interior design. Photography by **Tony Gavin**

Friedrich Nietzsche, the great thinker and philosopher, had something to say about most of life's dilemmas, including the popular themes of love and marriage. "It's not a lack of love but a lack of friendship that makes unhappy marriages," he proclaimed.

It's a good theory and one, no doubt, with which award-winning interior designer Maria Fenlon would heartily agree — after all, she and husband Michael were friends before they fell in love. "We were friends for a long time — our relationship moved very slowly," she reveals. "We went out together for five years before we got married in June 1995."

The couple met through friends in Canton Casey's bar in Market Square, Mullingar, Co Westmeath, "the scene of many a new romance", according to Maria. While she won't say what moved the friendship onto the true-love plane, she does reveal that Michael proposed on a romantic weekend away in Westport, Co Mayo.

In those days, Maria was an art teacher. As a small girl in Waterford, where her dad Jimmy O'Brien, the well-known Wexford hurler of the Sixties era, had his own motor business, Maria had always wanted to study art. The eldest of eight children — six girls and two boys — she did fine art and sculpture at the Limerick School of Art

and Design, before transferring to the Crawford College of Art and Design in Cork, where she finished her degree by doing a teaching year. Thereafter, she landed a job at St Joseph's Secondary School in Mullingar.

Teachers, despite playing a crucial role in society, get a really bad press. A phrase used in relation to them is the rather snide, "those who can, do; those who can't, teach". It is, of course, a spurious adage; many teachers are multi-talented. And not only was Maria a successful teacher during her 15 years in the profession, she's always been a talented artist too.

And these days, she can also add successful interior designer to her CV. Interior designing "started when we moved to Naas in 2000; people commented on the colours I used to decorate our house," she explains. "A friend of mine was friendly with a builder, and he was looking for a designer, so she mentioned my name."

That one contact resulted in Maria being asked to fit out the interiors of several showhouses. Commissions to design some furniture shops followed, and by then Maria was hooked. "Michael was doing an MBA, so while he was at his lectures I did an Open University course from home — an introduction to interior design," Maria says. "I followed that up with a two-year course in interior architecture and design in Griffith



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College, which gave me a lot of confidence with the computers."

Maria set up her company, Maria Fenlon Interior Design, in 2002. She has been kept busy ever since with fit-outs, extensions and entire house-interior revamps. "I spend a lot of time standing in people's houses; I need to get the feel for a house and what the client wants," she explains. "I think a lot of people are scared of the process of renovating and decorating. They get confused with all the choice, so I simplify things, and help them to decide on a style. Once a client gives me an idea of the budget, it's up to me to get the best product to fit the budget."

Her interior-design service includes sourcing all furniture, mirrors, lighting, fabrics, blinds and curtains. Maria even sources artworks. And when she can't get her hands on something, she'll design it — she has designed TV units, armchairs and, of course, kitchens.

"I get local craftsmen to translate my designs. I have a team of really good people," she says. Maria is very feminine and softly spoken, yet it's obvious she is highly disciplined and efficient — legacies of her teaching days.

Michael, originally from Edenderry, Co Offaly, was a mechanical engineer by profession. He used to work at Tegral in Athy, Co Kildare, but was recently promoted to the Brussels head office of its parent company, Etex Group. As a consequence, he commutes during the week. This leaves Maria to combine looking after their three girls — Aoife, 13, Eadaoin, 11, and Amy, 9 — with running her business.

What's also obvious is her love of art and her creativity. The family's home, one of 15 houses in a quiet country estate, was, Maria says, a newly built, anonymous, 2,700sq ft single-storey shell in 2003, when the family moved in. It's now a warm, inviting home, full of colour and contrast, and, despite its newness, character.

The house consists of a spacious hall, three reception rooms, the kitchen, four bedrooms and three bathrooms, two of which are en suites. The spacious kitchen is at the centre of the home. Michael loves cooking, so Maria made