

Alfred University alumni, founders of renowned design firm, to deliver commencement address

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Richard and Victoria
MacKenzie-Childs

Victoria and Richard MacKenzie-Childs, founders of an eponymous luxury home goods firm that is one of the most enduring brands in what can be a mercurial field, will deliver the address at Alfred University's 181st commencement, to be held at 10 a.m. May 13 in the Galanis Family Arena at McLane Center on the Alfred University campus.

As part of the commencement ceremonies, the University will award Victoria and Richard MacKenzie-Childs, Doctor of Fine Arts degrees, *honoris causa*.

Both are graduates of Alfred University's top-ranked Master of Fine Arts program in ceramic art. Victoria received her MFA in 1977 and Richard, who received his BFA degree from Alfred in 1975, earned his MFA a year later.

In 1983, while Richard was teaching ceramic art at Wells College in Aurora, NY, the young couple started selling what they called "sketch pad" platters, designed by Victoria and created by Richard, and the firm MacKenzie-Childs, Ltd., was launched.

"In choosing Richard and Victoria MacKenzie-Childs as our commencement speakers and recipients of honorary degrees from Alfred University, we are paying tribute to their creativity and their vision," said Mark Zupan, president of Alfred University. "Their vision launched a company that over the years has produced thousands of designs, created hundreds of thousands of objects, and established their company as a force in the luxury home goods market."

Since stepping away from their company more than 10 years ago, the two have been immersing themselves in their latest undertaking: restoring and transforming the Yankee Ferry, the last remaining Ellis Island ferryboat, which has been their home, their studio, and now what Victoria calls the armature for their latest work.

Transforming the Yankee Ferry has been a mission for them, Victoria said. The boat "changed the world," carrying immigrants to and from Ellis Island as they entered the country. She was a troop-carrier in both world wars and an excursion boat that cruised New York harbor to allow the wealthy to "catch the breeze" in the days before air conditioning.

The metaphor does not escape Victoria and Richard. Just as the Yankee Ferry has adapted and changed, so, too, have the MacKenzie-Childses during the course of their lifetimes. They are thinking now of selling the ferry, and moving on

to their “next adventure...perhaps a tree fort on an island” that would welcome guests from all over the world, Victoria mused.

Victoria earned her baccalaureate degree from Indiana University and was taking graduate courses at Harvard-Radcliffe when she made the decision she wanted to study with Wayne Higby. Richard was a student at the Massachusetts College of Art & Design prior to entering Alfred University's School of Art & Design.

Higby, long-time professor of ceramic art at Alfred and now director of the Alfred Ceramic Art Museum, has known Victoria and Richard since before they were graduate students. He met Victoria when he was a young faculty member, teaching at the Rhode Island School of Design in the early 1970s. “I was in my studio working, and Victoria showed up, saying ‘I want to study with you,&’” Higby said. “She told me she had ridden her bicycle from Boston to Providence, RI, to meet me.” He told her he would be leaving RISD for Alfred University, and “her name showed up the applicant pool at Alfred the next year. She had an interesting portfolio of work and I figured anyone who wanted an MFA badly enough to ride a bicycle from Boston to Providence in pursuit of a dream should be seriously considered.”

Together, Victoria and Richard have what Higby calls “an amazing vision,” along with “the skill and ability to make unexpected things... they reinvented the home décor landscape,” with objects that were not just hand-made, but had “an artist's magic touch.” Their work convinced people not to just buy a functional platter or cup, a footstool or an armoire, but something that went beyond the simply decorative. “They brought to home décor a highly unique, expressive style.”

Their work call it whimsical, fanciful, unexpected or eclectic built a brand that gave the viewer “moments of astonishment,” said Higby. Victoria and Richard were able to create such an enduring brand by combining “their knowledge of technique with a singular sense of design that was very smart and timely.”

And their success was “embedded in the education they received from Alfred University,” said Higby. The faculty in the MFA program impart technical knowledge, certainly, but they also encourage students to find their own way in their work. “The faculty is rigorous in their teaching, but open to new ideas,” said Higby. “They challenge students to tap into the depth of their artistic potential” but “anything goes” in terms of finished work. “They tell students ‘Let's see what you can do,& and ‘How can we help you do it?&’”

For Victoria and Richard, the work of fellow graduate student Andrea Gill &76, now a member of Alfred University's Division of Ceramic Art faculty, proved seminal, according to Higby. Interested in a 15th century technique from Spain and Italy called majolica, Gill did a great deal of research and testing to develop it into a contemporary process. Essentially, majolica involves introducing a tin-based glaze onto earthenware resulting in a luxurious white surface. This surface is then painted with colored pigments to produce figurative images and finely detailed patterns.

Victoria and Richard learned the technique from Andrea's research and incorporated it into their own ceramic work when they launched MacKenzie-Childs. They also learned a great deal from David “Freddy” Fredrickson, who just retired after more than 30 years as the kiln specialist in the School of Art & Design. He taught them about kilns and how to trouble-shoot problems that arose during production.

“The Alfred University family of technicians and artists empowered” Victoria and Richard, said Higby. “Their AU education was at the heart” of what they were able to do by “combining their education, great imagination, skill and a powerful determination to create.”

Victoria and Richard have a daughter, Heather, who is married to Nils Chaplet, and two grandchildren, Wittika and Felix MacKenzie-Chaplet.