

AROUND THE WORLD

ON A TABLE TOP

BY THOMPSON LANGE

Tchotchkes, gee gaws, dust collectors. The bits and pieces littering my bookshelves and table tops may look like clutter to some people and I would find that insulting if it weren't true. But it's the clutter of my life, tangible objects linking me to the people, places and times that I can never get back.

I'm not a 'collector' though, or a hoarder. I don't have a thousand beanie babies or stacks of newspapers on every surface. (Not that there's anything wrong with that, Mom.) The items I choose to decorate with have only one test to pass: Do they mean something to me when my eye falls on them? Do they trigger a memory?

Now, of course form plus function would be the ideal. I don't live in a museum after all. The things I bring home have to share limited space with the gadgets that go along with daily life. I may not like the look of the remote(s) but if I hide them from view I'll never remember where I put them and I'll get hopelessly frustrated, angry, desperate and then finally determined to buy a new TV. A little of that kind of crazy goes a long way so the remotes stay put.

But sometimes an object is completely useless to the world at large and absolutely necessary to me as a memory trigger of the passages and events of my life. As I've traveled I've always tried to choose items as keepsakes that will stand the test of time. Clearly the dorm room/first-college-apartment decor of street-corner finds and hand-me-downs couldn't be ruined with a Balinese carved tusk or a Viennese coal jug, but as time went by and my travels increased I had to focus. What spoke to me? What seemed like it had a spirit? Luckily, only so much can fit in a student's back-pack, so early on I learned to hone in on the one thing that would be most evocative.

Sure a rug from Turkey was an obvious choice when I was in Turkey, but the silver letter opener from Bermuda? Yet every time I use that thing I think of Hamilton. Of course, the fact that it's an 18" dagger that was confiscated at check-in but given back when I disembarked in New York makes it a precious object. And half the fun of collecting on the road is the stories that attach themselves and stick.

The only constant is the filter of one's own taste. As I've moved from house to house, city to city, I've always looked for homes with an architectural style that seems suited to the place. In L.A. it was a 1930's Spanish-Style bungalow in the Hollywood Hills, San Francisco a vine-covered cottage on Lombard Street, New York a pre-war flat.

OPPOSITE TOP: A carved Indonesian window frame has a new identity as a headboard while a Moroccan lamp brings in a bit of the souk. OPPOSITE LEFT: A souvenir teddy bear from the 1904 St. Louis World's Fair and silver "dagger" letter opener from Bermuda lie atop a Dutch Colonial merchant's chest from Malang. OPPOSITE RIGHT: Pre-revolution Russian icons from a St. Petersburg thrift shop mix with an inherited deco-cloisonné vase and a discarded steel head from Manila.



Every house was different so the decoration was different too. Furniture, wall colors, all the impactful stuff was chosen to make each house unique unto itself and to me. But one constant in the design schemes was the core "baggage" of my life. My souvenirs, my family heirlooms, the gifts from people I love. Those are the items that I decorate with that make me feel at home wherever I may live.

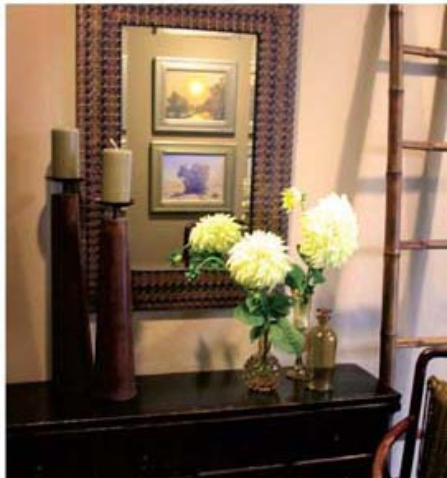
Take for example 'Old Pete.' Pete's not even my souvenir; my grandfather got his stuffed bear at the 1904 World's Fair in St. Louis. But Pete's been sitting his raggedy behind on my bedside table since I was a kid and whenever I see him I think of my grandfather. Pete, I think, just wonders what ever happened to his other ear.

Taking a moment to get esoteric, there's a Japanese aesthetic called wabi sabi of which I'm particularly fond. We've all heard of the Chinese concept of feng shui and its design precepts for a spiritually harmonious lifestyle. Well wabi sabi boils down to finding beauty in everything, warts, cracks and all. Being prone to warts and cracks myself, I find wabi sabi a comforting and achievable design style. And I've spent a lifetime filling my home with examples.

On my last trip to Indonesia after spending a fortune for a sea-container full of furniture, lamps and accessories for my store, the item I chose for myself was something I found in the mud on a riverbank in Ubud, Bali. It's stone and was covered in moss and might have been a column base or a balustrade at one time, I'm not sure. But it's a candle-stick on my hearth now.

As they say: One man's junk is another man's treasure. Δ

Thompson Lange co-owns Homescapes, Carmel in Carmel-by-the-Sea and scours the world's souks, markets and junkyards "so you don't have to."



TOP: Santa Fe Indian pottery sits on a coffee table made from the reclaimed teak of a demolished Javanese building. BOTTOM: A mirror frame constructed from used radiator copper exemplifies wabi sabi, the Japanese aesthetic that celebrates the beauty in the imperfect.