



# THE PLAIN DEALER

## FULL HOUSE

### Good design shouldn't be more of the same

Thursday, March 13, 2008

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Antiques aficionados Mitchell Sotka and Kim Smith are on a mission to change designing mind-sets: Clevelanders, they believe, are afraid to mix dramatically different styles of furnishings and accessories.

Antiques, new stuff, traditional, Asian, eclectic . . . all those can work together if you remember a few basic rules of design.

"Think about proportion," said Sotka, owner of Mitchell Sotka Ltd., an antiques and decor store, at 19071 Old Detroit Road, Rocky River.

"Color, scale and symmetry," said Smith, the store's interior designer. "Balance asymmetrical and symmetrical design."

Smith and Sotka were having this philosophical discussion while standing inside Sotka's comfortable yet filled-to-the-brim antiques store. Sotka opened the store about 2½ years ago, moving from a storefront on Lorain Avenue in Cleveland to the quaint stretch of small shops in Rocky River.

With the move came a new mission: Spread the word that not all antiques stores are dark, dusty and musty, and not all decor has to be from one era or one color palette.

The store is the embodiment of his philosophy. At first glance, it doesn't even seem like an antiques store; it appears to have new items. A closer look reveals antique Asian items, vintage artwork, even an Early American hutch cupboard in yellow maple.

A Votivo candle spreads a spicy scent throughout the store. Soft music envelops visitors.

"It's an eclectic store," said Sotka, relaxing on a recent Friday morning with Smith and Lisa Pastor, who also works at Mitchell Sotka. There were no customers at the moment, so the three had a chance to reflect on how regular homeowners can achieve unique looks without breaking the bank.

"Mix and match," said Sotka. "It's really very simple."

Unfortunately, people get "so wrapped up in the love of an object," Smith said. "They don't really consider whether it works or doesn't work" in a home.

And if you've inherited the beloved items -- knickknacks or furniture -- it's even more of a design dilemma.

The best way to start if you want to make a change is to "completely empty a room, just like you were going to paint it," said Smith.

Once it's empty, bring things back in slowly, she said. This approach "eliminates clutter and you look at a room filling up gradually."

If you like the furniture arrangement and the organization of the decor items but it still doesn't seem to

work, think about fabric, said Smith.

"Fabric can really bring a room together," she said. For example, if you love a painting, pick out a color in the work and find pillows with that hue in the fabric. Throw a couple of the pillows on a chair or couch.

Suddenly the room's design seems more cohesive, she said.

Other changes can bring about huge -- yet subtle -- changes in the feel of a space.

Look at your artwork again, said Sotka. Is it hanging too high above eye level? What about the mirror? Do you have to stand on tiptoe to see more than your forehead? Move everything down. Make it accessible for viewing.

Another way to achieve visual sophistication is to "always have an element of surprise," said Smith. If you have very traditional, antique furnishings, throw in an African tribal mask or chair into the mix. Or, how about an Asian touch?

The idea, she said, is to work your way out of linear thinking: "This has to go with this and this. Certainly not that."

It doesn't take much money to change a room, said Sotka, walking to the front of his store to a display of Haviland china. Love antique china but can't afford a full set? Buy a beautiful china bowl, he said, and place it on an inexpensive charger plate from Target. Suddenly, there's sophistication on the cheap, he said.

Smith, standing near the center of the store, nodded in agreement.

Once you've relaxed in your design approach, rooms become more of a reflection of you, rather than a mirror to magazine trends. The space becomes a place to escape the world.

"I love going home," said Sotka. "It's because I'm surrounded by everything I love. That's how everybody should feel."

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