

Objects often take one back in time to recapture a moment of beauty or acquisition. They are shadow puppets of an evolutionary process and inanimate guardians of recall. Decorator Markham Roberts has recently staked new digs in Manhattan with his partner James Sansum, an antiques dealer. A visit at home reveals an engaged process of imagination with an underpinning thread of vivid investigation into disparate and unusual possessions.

The couple live on a tree-lined block in an Upper East Side brownstone duplex apartment whose impressive architectural bones are not apparent from the street. A former resident had used the soaring space as an artist's studio and, despite dilapidated conditions, the interior layout caught their fancy. As his own client, Markham refreshed paint-splashed surfaces to create order from the remnants of chaos. He painted existing paneling and moldings a shade of ivory, covered vast wall surfaces with a variety of treatments including felt, cork, bark, marbled book binding squares and William Morris geometric paper, and unified the floor plan with sisal rugs. Whereas late 19th century details of arched door surrounds, wainscoting and weighty fireplaces might be anathema to some, Markham's trained eye embraced the voluminous backdrop. "I liked integrating highly scaled paneling, tall mantelpieces and a surrounding expanse of wall with patterned Arts & Crafts paper. Delivering a different background on which to hang art creates fresh perception; the paneling is tall which presented a challenge."

Throughout two floors, a palette of earthen tones and textures create a backdrop for the furniture, objects, paintings and photographs that define each room. Singular in their variety, a concise rhythm of layered amalgamation prevails. "I have always bought something because I love it, and then I make it work," says Markham. For the most part, the furniture comes from previous living incarnations and from James's stored antiques, there is the occasional family heirloom too. Their credo is to repurpose through a sifting, changing, re-arranging process. Reveling in pattern, Markham enhances rooms through studies in contrast.

A few pieces of furniture were necessarily acquired with the grand scale of these rooms in mind. In the

living room, a marvelous mid-18th century mother-of-pearl inlaid breakfront bookcase landed on their doorstep, as if by fate, from a dear friend. Its fancifully crenellated top, cabinet doors and drawers are sinuously encrusted with luminous, pearly shells that shimmer with other-worldly elegance. There is a tender point to the distilled collage of personal specimens Markham has placed on its interior shelves. Architectural elements, plaster casts, gold leaf fragments, embossed leather objects, etched mirror plates, a miniature painting of a walnut ... Myriad objects arranged like precious finds, but in that casual way that a stone from a pebble beach can be a precious find too.

An aura of creativity prevails in other pieces acquired from artist-friends – a duo of oil portraits of Markham and James by Julia Condon, two photographs by Nelson Hancock, a watercolor by Mark Hampton, a mentor whom Markham credits with launching his career. In similar fashion, Markham also draws, paints and enjoys taking photographs which decorate several rooms. Demonstrating a playful manipulation of abstracted movement, two images of an apple tree shedding spring blossoms like confetti surround the dining room fireplace while, on the opposite wall, his magnified camera detail of a feather blurs boundaries as it echoes vibrant wallpaper patterns. And, spanning a tufted headboard in their upstairs bedroom, an image of a Connecticut River tidal cove, woody and mysterious in its soft focus, hangs like a captured memory.

Nearly every horizontal surface in the duplex is brimful with objects whose artful arrangement sets them in conversation. Grimacing Chinese ceramic foo dogs, African masks from the Ivory Coast, an Inuit stone polar bear, Japanese woven baskets, a lump of polished agate, an opium pipe, a gourd... Inanimate on their own, perhaps, they come alive as juxtaposed ingredients, an alchemy of souls.

And speaking of alchemy and conversation, a highlight of an evening chez Markham and James (full disclosure: steady invitation) is being greeted by the feisty yap of their furry schnoodle, Harriet, and a whimsical cocktail Markham has stirred. It's a trademark gesture, served with grinning countenance, as playfully balanced as their surroundings.

Objects in Conversation

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