

The Next Pompeii

BY PHILIP ALVARÉ

Hudson is a town whose relatively recent revitalization can be traced directly to the proliferation of the antiques and art galleries that peaked there before the dot com bubble burst in 2001. So when we in Hudson want to talk about trends, we look to the antiques business and the design trade.

In the years before the bubble burst, the demand for antiques of every period and style was unusually brisk. It was hard to keep a shop stocked. In my ten years in the antiques trade I saw so many fads and fashions come and go it was impossible to track them. When the market collapsed, the music stopped. The tragedy of 9/11 dealt the final blow and the whole thing went dark. Then slowly, almost imperceptibly, people began to buy again, but no one wanted antiques. Suddenly, mid-century modern was on the tip of everybody's tongue. Now, I'm not referring to the best examples of the period, architect designed, sold through Knoll, Herman Miller and the like. They will endure, as all classics endure and enter the canon of important design. I'm referring to the cheap knock-offs and junky reproductions that cluttered the 1960s and 70s. Suddenly this stuff was being foisted upon us again, actually reproduced and mass marketed. It's not that it hadn't been around before, but it was kind of a fringy-young-hipster thing that seemed campy, funky. No one took it seriously. But then there was a seemingly overnight shift that was more abrupt than the usual vagaries of the design trade.

Fads and fashions come and go and the only thing about them that's certain is change. It's a slippery business that involves many factors. At the very least it's a three pronged affair. The first prong seems to have something to do with taste makers and the power elite who seek change and novelty, for a variety of reasons, including boredom. The second prong pertains to historical influences of period and style such as, Napoleon's campaign to Egypt and the ensuing vogue for all things Egyptian, as well as the revival of those periods and styles. The third and final prong must represent the demands of the marketplace that reflect the churning and

changing of fashions and fads and peddling of products by the manufacturers to an increasingly docile consumer.

One day there was an interest in the sumptuous pleasures of foliate scrolls and flourishes of French Baroque furniture, the next, the hard restraint of furniture made from extruded orange plastic, chrome and other synthetic materials pervaded the marketplace. I dare say the broken-record mantra of "antiques are out, mid-century modernism is in." has become a cliché. I keep thinking about a designer friend of mine who insists that as soon as something is declared 'in' it's as good as 'out' and vice versa.

As sure as there's snow in winter and grass in summer the market saturation with modernism (if it hasn't already), will come and go. But the fad was so abrupt and, frankly, shocking, it provides an excellent marker in relationship to the shifts in fads and fashion. The forces of the dot-com market collapse, (the market prong) followed by the attack of September 11, (historical influences) had undeniable impact. Economic disaster followed by a national security nightmare left the country reeling. When you add the quantum leap development of the internet and global marketing (taste-makers, the power elite) it might just have been the perfect storm. It's true that after the World Wars and the Depression during the first half of the 20th century, The United States, and the rest of the world to some extent, turned to modernism. The frowsy, dowdy clutter of the Victorian era was swept clean. The 1950's, 60s and 70s had a passion for all things new. Think: The Jetsons. Similarly, the period of national recovery or restoration at the beginning of the 21st century was a clean-sweep. The return to modernism and restraint was perhaps an antidote to the excesses and decadence of the late 1990s. But that's not all; there was something more that only the internet and globalization could provide: total market

saturation and control by the multinational corporations. The internet provides an unprecedented level of control by the taste makers. In this scenario the marketplace increasingly resembles a pin-ball machine where the poor consumer is rolled around and batted about and generally assaulted by a glut of choices.

The fact that we've just experienced the revival of a period and style of design that somehow parallels the national mood and events that occurred over half a century ago makes sense. In this regard fashions and fads can reflect something about where we are economically, politically, psychologically, intellectually and spiritually- the zeitgeist if you will. There is nothing new in this. What's new is the speed with which the pulse of the country can be taken and a

fad is disseminated. In the past, shifts in fads and fashion took time.

The power elite and always leads the way. An interesting example of this, as well as how historical influences (the second prong of the trident) impact changes in fads and fashions, was the rediscovery of Pompeii. The privileged swarmed there as well as to other ruined, Classical Greco-Ro-

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man sites. Neo-Classicism, one of the first international styles was born. This style worked well, reflected the spirit, of the newly formed republic of the United States that had borrowed its model for democracy from the Roman Republic. It also resonated in relationship to the end of European Monarchies and the establishment of new republics and governments. American Federal and Greek Revival styles, late Georgian Classicism in Britain, Neo-Classism in Italy and Louis XVI in France were all directly influenced by the “discovery” of the classical world. The styles for architecture, furniture, decorations and wardrobe were all received from the Greco-Roman tradition. Drawings and later engravings distributed in folios provided patterns for wealthy trend setters who commissioned artisans and cabinet-makers to execute designs. It was a kind of Arcadian ideal that eventually trickled down to a broader demographic. Undoubtedly when it did, those in power looked elsewhere for inspiration. Fads and fashions usually become repulsive to the elite once they’re reflected in the masses.

These days it works a little differently. There’s certainly still a group who starts and steers the fashions, but some have said it’s no longer from the top down, but bubbles up from the bottom. More than likely the dissemination of ideas, subsequent development of designs and marketing of products has more to do with garnering the largest market share possible (i.e. the bottom line), than a reflection of Arcadian ideals or notions about truth and beauty. The frequency of changes in fads and fashions in art and architecture, furniture and decorations seems to be accelerating. Maybe this is partially due to the global marketing that has changed the time and space context in which business is being conducted. Influences are international and simultaneous. The database of the market can offer us rusticated Adirondack-style twig-furniture, a futuristic Ming inspired altar table and a Florence Knoll credenza on the same page. Everything is in--so if my designer friend is right that means everything is also out. This insures a constant demand and stream of new and ever changing product choices all. It’s an ever changing, dazzling array of new products that keeps the wheels of commerce spinning at warp-speed.

Last thoughts. Mega chains like Restoration Hardware, Pottery Barn, Williams Sonoma and others have an enormous impact upon shifting fads and fashions, changes in taste and style. It’s mass marketing on a national, if not international level. These catalogue companies, their corresponding internet sites and all pervasive marketing in various media present an endless parade of must have items. The selections are sophisticated, well designed and well made, and for the most part reflect a “look” that seem based upon antique prototypes. And there’s very little mid-century modern to be found.

Go figure (or something like this).

PHILIP ALVARÉ specializes in writing about decorative, fine arts and design. For ten years he distinguished himself as owner of BOTANICVS Antiques & Fine Arts in Hudson, New York, a gallery of late eighteenth and nineteenth century antiques and decorative elements for the garden. His background includes film, television and print production where he earned a variety of credits including PBS, ABC, NBC and MGM-FOX.