

BOOK REVIEW by Claire Whitcomb

A PASSION FOR ANTIQUES

by

Barbara Ohrbach

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If you've been bitten by the collecting bug, then you know what a compulsive behavior expert at a Manhattan hospital recently documented: When you narrow in on an object of desire, your heart rate increases, your blood pressure rises and your brain releases feel-good serotonin.

And that's good news for your decorating health, says Barbara Ohrbach, whose latest book is aptly named "A Passion for Antiques."

Decorating with collections, she believes, is a great short cut to charisma. Assemble a shelf full of antique bottles, vintage children's shoes, gather a mantel's worth of mercury glass (also known as "Poor man's silver") and your rooms will have instant character.

The question, of course, is what to collect. Though it's rare to find anything for a song in these overly educated times, Ohrbach still thinks bargains can be had. Among the up-and-coming areas she cites: china and barware from defunct hotels and cruise liners, antique cameras, early mezzotints, designer costume jewelry and space-exploration artifacts.

If a fear of clutter is keeping you away from flea markets and yard sales, Ohrbach sympathizes. "Everyone's simplifying these days," she says. "Even I've simplified, but I still love lushness."

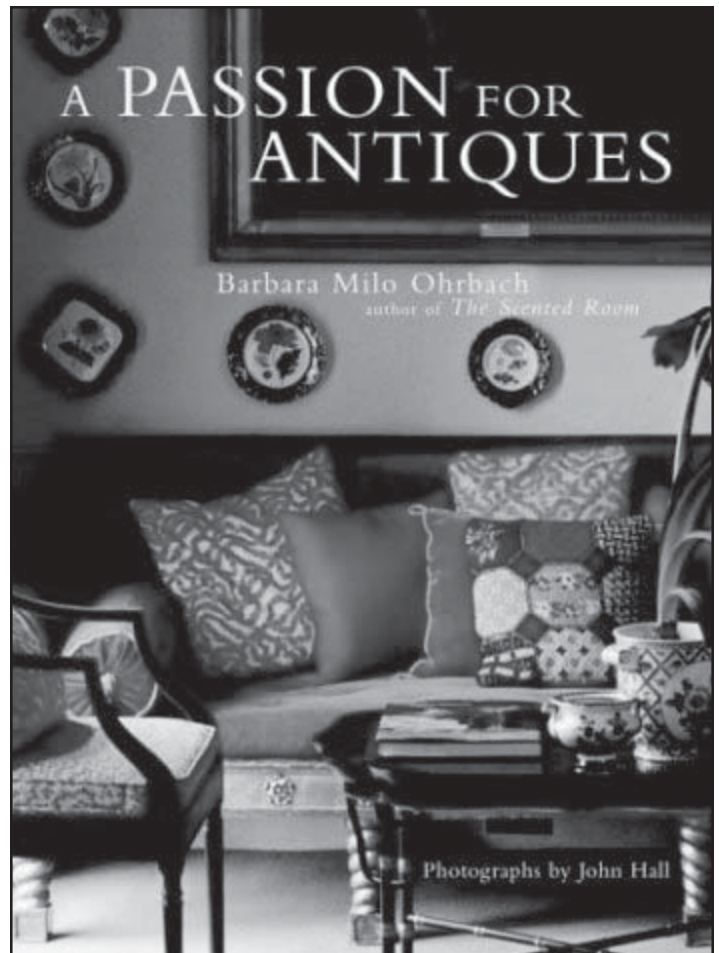
She recommends keeping clutter at bay by massing collections. Showcase bottles by spanning a window with bottle shelves. Take nine beautiful wallpaper samples, put them in matching frames and group them over a sofa. Or cluster antique alarm clocks on a bedside table.

Never mind that vintage purses, Staffordshire gravy strainers or military uniforms weren't intended to be displayed as art. That's exactly what makes them appealing as decorative focal points.

With tiny objects such as old tobacco tins or beaded Victorian reticules (women's beaded bags), Ohrbach suggests setting them in trays or in bowls. That way when company comes and you need to make room for drinks, you can whisk them away.

"Don't feel you need to display everything you own all of the time," she advises. Rotate objects seasonally, just as you would holiday ornaments. "I love the Japanese idea that when a guest comes, the family goes into the Tansu chest and brings out something special to display," she says.

In her own house in Dutchess County, New York, Ohrbach manages to keep a large portion of her collections out in the open by layering them expertly. She uses her vintage fabrics as undercloths for the dining table. She tucks old engravings behind architectural ornaments on her shelves.



In the bathroom she places folded pieces of antique chintz beneath a stack of towels. In her bedroom, she treats her collection of costume jewelry necklaces and bangles as a design element, setting them out in Irish woven willow baskets on a shelf.

As for simplification, Ohrbach pared down her living space in one fell swoop. She eliminated books.

"I had books filling shelves, books piled on tables and chairs," she explains. "I moved them all to a spare room that I lined with floor-to-ceiling shelves."

If you don't have a spare room, a library can easily be created in a hallway, a stair landing, or a guestroom. When your books are in place, Ohrbach suggests adding a dollop of romance by leaning framed pictures or prints up against the book spines. Rest tiny birds' nests or shells on the shelf edges.

"You want to take the edge of perfection off your assemblages," she explains. After all, the great joy of living with old things is their imperfection—the chip in the painted finish, the worn patina of wood, the gentle fading of old chintz. Their setting shouldn't be museum-stuffy, which is why Ohrbach advises thinking beyond white for your walls.

A joyful shade of spring green or lemon yellow "can keep things from getting too formal," she says. "In Ireland and England, countries where sunshine is at a premium, antiques are often displayed in rooms with luscious hues."

Ohrbach is right to title her book "A Passion for Antiques." Collecting is a heart-racing, blood pressure-elevating passion, or as Sigmund Freud diagnosed his own quest for Greek Roman and Egyptian antiquities, "an addiction, second only to nicotine."