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Home & Garden

All Dressed Up

By JULIE SCELFO

AT J. Roaman, a home furnishings store in East Hampton, N.Y., a painted white iron bed wears a giant charm bracelet over its left head post. The bracelet isn't there because the bed wants for visual interest; it's already enveloped in a brightly colored quilt by Lisa Corti, a Milanese designer, and topped with four pillows, five throw pillows and a bolster. The reason for the jewelry, according to Judi Roaman, a former fashion retailer who opened the store in May, is that furniture, like any carefully curated outfit, should express its owner's personality. "Accessories make the bed into who you want her to be," she explained.

The idea that furniture should wear jewelry may strike some people as, well, nuts. But the notion behind it — that the kind of personal style associated with fashion can and should be expressed through home accessorizing, in ways that go far beyond

throw pillows — has become a guiding principle of the furnishings industry.

Decades after that industry began routinely drawing inspiration from fashion, the boundaries between the two worlds are starting to erode, as their philosophies, vocabularies and materials become increasingly hard to tell apart. Fashion and home design are "collapsing into each other," said the New York furniture and interior designer Celerie Kemble, who has described her curvy new side tables as having "the insouciant kick of a flared hemline."

This coalescence was on view throughout last month's High Point Market, the huge furniture trade show in North Carolina. Henredon, a company known more for classic styling than for marketing gimmicks, introduced Debonaire, a \$5,775 striated beige couch with a matching silk shawl — to be worn *by the sofa* — for \$390. At Julian Chichester, new coffee tables (\$2,995) and living room chairs (\$4,995) were wrapped in chocolate-brown faux shagreen, a material more commonly seen on clutch purses. Visual Comfort & Company, a designer lighting manufacturer, showcased lamps by Thomas O'Brien and Barbara Barry that featured beveled crystal, dainty pearls and white gold accents that could have come straight from Tiffany.

Natuzzi, the Italian company specializing in contemporary leather upholstery, introduced an array of warm metallic fabrics and metallic-finished leathers that were adapted, according to the company's vice president for brand development, Tod Craft, directly from women's ready-to-wear.

"It started in handbags, went to boots, went to jewelry," Mr. Craft said. Just as a woman might wear a chunky gold belt to jazz up an otherwise lackluster skirt, Natuzzi's executives think customers should plunk down \$2,995 for a metallic bronze-finished leather chaise to inject flair into their living rooms. "These are accent pieces that make the room sparkle, give the room personality, give it style," Mr. Craft said.

In showroom after showroom, consoles and

sideboards in basic black or glossy white were adorned with gleaming objects that looked like earrings and pendants pumped up to match the scale of a room. Such accessories "make the room look warm and accessible," said Mitchell Gold, whose company, Mitchell Gold & Bob Williams, known for its understated upholstered furniture, introduced mirrored glass vases, crystal spheres and sculptural objects in polished nickel.

"When Bob and I are designing furniture, we think, what does Audrey Hepburn look like? How did Jackie Kennedy dress?" Mr. Gold said. "The perfect black dress worn with nothing else looks pretty blah. But then just put white pearls on, you look elegant."

To be sure, furniture designers have often looked to fashion for inspiration. At various points, the animal prints, distressed leathers and deep ruffles that sashayed down runways have appeared, a year or two later, on upholstery, carpeting and other furnishings.

And ever since Bloomingdale's flagship store sold \$35,000 worth of Ralph Lauren home furnishings the first day they went on sale in 1983, manufacturers have recognized the potential of names like Giorgio Armani and Donna Karan to imbue armoires and bedding with cachet. But the industry's current focus on accessorizing as a form of self expression represents a marked change from most of the last 50 years, when Americans typically strived for a living room of uniform style that looked as if it had been done by a professional. "Home design used to be so much about these old-fashioned rules," Ms. Kemble said. "It was about showcasing the accumulation of things that met a certain level of finish. There was an achievement in having that living room that nobody lives in — that you actually had gotten everything up to snuff."

Things have changed. "People want every aspect of their lives to say something about themselves," said Deborah Needleman, the editor in chief of Domino, the three-year-old Condé Nast shelter magazine that became an instant hit with its treatment of style as a matter of personal choice. Decorating that feels personally driven, she



FINISHING TOUCH The giant charm bracelet by Nicola Malkin, a designer and ceramicist, is typically displayed on chairs, large tables or bedposts, as at the J. Roaman furnishings store in East Hampton, N.Y.

said, “shows you have confidence and a sense of independence.” It also shows creativity, much as individualistic fashion choices do, Ms. Needleman continued. “I think most people between the ages of 25 and 45 would feel like a jerk if they bought a suite of furniture.”

The proliferation of decorating shows and magazines, not to mention Target’s ubiquitous ad campaigns, has no doubt helped give rise to the idea that everyone, regardless of budget, deserves and is capable of attaining a unique and stylish space. “It’s a whole different moment now where design is for everyone,” said James Nauyok, the vice president for marketing and visual display of Baker, one of the country’s pre-eminent furniture brands. “Today, you can find good design at any price point.”

And magazines, manufacturers and retailers

The desire for personalized home design is just as pronounced, if not more so, at the high end of the market. Hickory Chair, a luxury American furniture brand, introduced an array of “personalization” options at High Point, including Made-to-Measure Upholstery, which allows customers to order upholstered pieces in any size between 24 and 120 inches, down to the inch. Another, the Customer’s Own Hardware, lets customers have their own knobs and pulls — whether antiques, heirlooms or specially ordered crystal knobs from Swarovski — installed on almost any Hickory Chair product.

These options are meant to help customers secure a one-of-a-kind piece, and to relieve them of the worry that someone else in the world could end up choosing the same combination of upholstery, hardware and wood finishes from the several thousand

Today, Homeward Bound carries a carefully selected mix of high-end furnishings and clothing items, at a ratio of two to one, all meant to promote “interior harmony,” the store’s slogan. (For Ms. Walsh, interior harmony means “you walk into your home and your bedroom, and your clothing and closet and everything feels good to you. Even though you have an antique piece and a modern piece and a vegan-leather handbag it all goes together because it expresses who you are.”) Sales at the store have been so good that last year Ms. Walsh and her husband, Trip Rothschild, opened a second location in New Milford, Conn., and a third is scheduled to open in West Hartford on Saturday.

Fashion and furnishings have grown so close lately that the tide of influence may even be starting to turn. While shelter magazines have long featured references to fashion, it is just

in the last year that two of the biggest American fashion magazines, Vogue and Harper’s Bazaar, have started publishing spinoffs about home design. And after decades of furniture taking color, pattern and material cues from fashion, Deborah Needleman says she has noticed the inspiration flowing the other way. “Lately,” she wrote in an e-mail, “I’ve seen the fabrics of upholstery, curtains and throws, like ikats, damasks, suzanis and 80s chintz-like florals on the runway.”

Few furniture designers have taken steps into fashion, but it may only be a matter of time. Oly, one of the most design-forward companies at High Point, actually designated a small nook off its main showroom to

sell earrings and shagreen clutches to visitors. Kate McIntyre, a co-founder of the company, who designs all its furniture with her partner, Brad Huntzinger, said designing fashion accessories was “a very natural transition” for the two. “Quite often we’re captivated by a material,” she added, like polished horn or volcanic glass. Their main concern, she said, is finding the right way to express it.

As for fabrics, she added, she often finds herself selecting one for a home-related project and thinking, “This would make an amazing gown.”



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From top left, D&G belt and Celerie Kemble chair; Gwen Stefani in L.A.M.B. blouse and Natuzzi pillows; Chanel bag and Jacques Garcia chest; John Galliano jacket and Kartell chair; Jennifer Lopez’s oversize ring and Thomas O’Brien chest with Swarovski crystal knobs; Jessica Simpson tote and Shine Home sofa; Randolph Duke & Kendra Scott necklace and Laura Kirar chandelier; José & María Barrera cuff and Shine Home floor lamp.

now relentlessly push the idea that changing your home is as easy and affordable as changing your look.

“Just like you want to change your sweater, you want to change your house,” Ms. Roaman said. Expensive purchases like sofas and dining tables, retailers say, can be transformed with accessories as effectively and cheaply as a good navy suit can. “I carry bright dishes that go from \$8 to \$12 — we’ve sold hundreds of them,” Ms. Roaman said. “For \$500 you can change your whole table.” At Target, 12 Thomas O’Brien stoneware dinner plates in deep marine blue cost just under \$75, and at Target.com, you can get two potentially room-altering deep red silk pillows with a gold dandelion design for \$58.48.

options already available.

Not surprisingly, the blurring lines between fashion and furniture have also led to changes in consumer behavior. Some stores, like ABC Carpet & Home in New York and the national chain Anthropologie, have treated the two categories as part of a single continuum for years, showing candles and bed linens on the same shelves as jackets and jewelry. Now, consumers appear to have internalized that concept, as Kathy Walsh observed after starting a furniture store in Great Barrington, Mass., in 2005. From the moment the store, Homeward Bound, opened its doors, customers began telling her they loved her personal style and asking her to sell clothes along with the dining tables.