

Accessories make the room

by **Cindy Potters**

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"All I wanted was to be a part of that world," Lorie Combias says of her first job at the recently shuttered House and Garden magazine. "As far as I was concerned, it was all that mattered."

The year was 1978 and the 22-year-old, fresh out of college, was determined to work for the glossy regardless of the fact she could not type, a prerequisite for being hired. She persisted, taking the typing test eight times, and eventually was hired as an editorial assistant.

That job was the first step of many down a path that would make Combias a tastemaker and accessory guru of sorts. Her house and store, The Muddy Boot, both in Summit, are chock-full of antiques and objects arranged in such a way that visitors are left to wonder, "Can I do that, too?"

Combias, now 51, lives in a 100-year-old Arts and Crafts style house with her husband, Tom Holevas, and their teenage children, Christina and Greg. She has spent the last 15 years creating a space that reflects her passion for collecting and arranging. The end result is a decor style that is both beautiful and inviting.

Summit is where Combias grew up. She says her mother, Marie, left that house in the trusty hands of Huffman Koos decorators. Combias preferred her own style. At 12, she showed signs of her talent when she sold her bedroom set to buy her first antique, a dresser. On Sunday mornings, she would accompany her mother and a family friend, Bart Zanelli, to Lambertville to shop the flea markets. Zanelli, who shopped purely for the pleasure of it, introduced Combias to the art of collecting.

Combias studied costume design at the University of Vermont and, after a year at House and Garden, moved to Washington, D.C. There, through luck and a connection, she landed a temporary position at the White House that became the coveted job of assistant to White House curator Clem Conger. She began her 2½-year tenure during the Iran hostage crisis.

"Not a happy time for the Carters," she recalls. "We tried to stay out of their way."

Because the curator's office was considered nonpolitical, she was able to remain in her post when Ronald Reagan was elected.

Combias recalls the excitement surrounding the day the new president was sworn in. They had to move Carter's things out and unpack Reagan's by the time the inaugural parade was over. Nancy Reagan's decorator, Ted Graber, gave her family photographs to place around the bedroom. The First Lady's gown was laid out across the bed. "I called my mother and said, 'I can't believe it, I'm touching Nancy Reagan's gown,'" she says, laughing. Combias was 24 at the time.

After the White House, she moved to New York to take a position with the advertising firm Ogilvy and Mather.

Walking to work every day along Madison Avenue, she watched in awe as the new Ralph Lauren flagship store was being constructed in the restored Rhinelander Mansion, an architectural gem built in the late 1800s.

"I felt a pang every time I saw it," she says. Soon, she was hired and was part of the original crew when the doors opened in April 1986. Over time, she worked her way up to co-manager of the home collection department. "They were the best six years of my life," she said. "The people I trained with were geniuses."

One bit of information that proved especially valuable was the importance of having the right accessories in a room. "People were always intrigued by the items not for sale," she says, referring to the antiques and flea market props used for display.

This was about the time it dawned on her that accessories could be a business.

When she left Ralph Lauren in 1992 to spend more time on the homefront, she began scouting antiques and accessories for her contacts back in New York, who knew she had connections in New Jersey and Pennsylvania (from her days with Bart Zanelli). Soon, she was selling pieces out of her house, by invitation only. People lined up along the street to buy her footstools, paintings, vintage sleds, silver collectibles and anything and everything she found at flea markets that was one-of-a-kind. In 2004, she opened her shop, The Muddy Boot.

These days, she says she is pleased with the way her house looks. "This is the first time it looks the same from one New Year to the next," she says. "I'm not kidding. I was always changing things around, but I'm finally happy with the way it looks."

"Or maybe I'm just tired," she adds.

It is no wonder she is content. Displayed around extremely comfortable seating (an absolute must, she says) are the antiques and accessories she has collected over the years, each one more interesting than the next. It is hard to find a place to rest the eye. Yet even with all of her things -- and there are a lot of them -- nowhere does the house look or feel cluttered. "There is a fine line between too many accessories and just the right amount," she says, noting that the trick is to focus on the important objects and edit out the rest.

Some of her favorite collections include art and design books (she has more than 500), white stoneware, brown transferware, starburst mirrors, dried herb botanicals (18 in her kitchen) and footstools (she has four in the living room and three in the family room). She also enjoys scouting watercolor and oil paintings. Two of her own paintings hang in the family room among a collection by other artists.

Nature plays an important role in her design scheme, as well. "It's a good way to bring something unexpected into a room," she says. Her rooms are decorated with antlers, pieces of petrified wood, coral, shells and animal skin rugs. A large taxidermy goose sits in the center of a side table in the dining room. "Isn't it great?" she says as she walks by.

Layering expensive pieces with bargain finds is a skill she has mastered. In the family room, she pairs an antique harvest table, which would fetch \$6,000 at retail, with a small \$10 table made from three old twigs. "We get more use out of that little table than any other in this room," she said. She does the same with rugs. A high-end sisal from Stark in her family room flows seamlessly with leopard-print area rugs from Target in the dining room.

When it comes to shopping flea markets, Combias (who does not shop online) is in her element. "I start to hyperventilate when I get to the Brimfield exit," she says, grinning, of the huge outdoor flea market held in Massachusetts three times a year -- the next is May 13-18.

Her cull, those one-of-a-kind finds -- old threadbare rugs, art, frames and slightly off-kilter objects -- are what make her home special, she says. "It has nothing to do with the price tag. If I find a piece for five dollars that is aesthetically beautiful, then I love it. I know if something will work right when I see it."

And that, coming from a woman who can make a stuffed goose look good, is the truth.

Finding your style

Does home decorating style tell a story about you? Here are a few tips from Lorie Combias to get you there.

Making a statement, whether it is with one stand-alone piece or a vignette of collectibles, is the best way to get things to stand out. If antlers interest you, display one huge pair or fill a basket with many smaller ones. If you like having family photos out, put together a grouping of framed photos, either on a wall or tabletop, rather than scattering them about on every surface.

Look for interesting frames, even if they have an ugly painting in them. Replace the art with a mirror.

Look for old lamps with a great base, color or shape, or interesting objects to make into a lamp. It's not expensive to rewire.

Use threadbare rugs, which are inexpensive and look great layered.

Start a collection of things that interest you. ♪. ♪. in this case, more is more.

Buy tabletop books and pile them everywhere. You can find them on sale at bookstores.

Use books to create a variety of display levels on your coffee table (but leave room for a drink).

Try old baskets for storing things like sporting equipment and smaller ones for mail and keys.

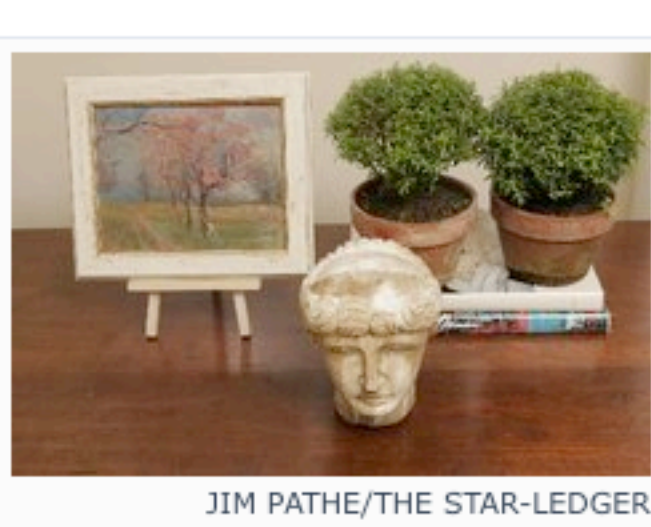
Look for interesting objects like an animal skin or print to add the element of surprise to your decorating style.

Use shells, wood, rocks and plants to bring nature indoors.

Invest in footstools; they are great for extra seating or as a tabletop.

Paint your walls a new color to make your things pop. (Combias painted her foyer a dramatic black.)

Add pottery, small paintings and silver picture frames to your bookcases.



JIM PATHE/THE STAR-LEDGER

A vintage oil on board painting, sculpture and topiary plants on display in Lorie Combias' home in Summit.



JIM PATHE/THE STAR-LEDGER

Lorie Combias of Summit.



JIM PATHE/THE STAR-LEDGER

A carved wood starburst mirror frame, oil on board painting, sculpture and shell planter at Lorie Combias' home.