

Home & Design

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Into the East

The uncluttered elegance of the Asian aesthetic has entered the mainstream. It helps that the look blends well with a variety of styles.

By Diane Goldsmith
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If you're looking for proof that the Asian aesthetic has hit the mainstream, look no further than Ethan Allen.

A bedroom from the company's contemporary Horizons collection shows a cleanly designed dark-wood bed with a grid of horizontal slats for a headboard. Above it is Oriental calligraphy framed as art. Fabrics are pale and muted, textures played up. The few accessories include a shallow bowl filled with pebbles, and a bamboo-shaped vase.

The effect is nothing if not Zen. Window-treatment manufacturer Smith + Noble has also interpreted the Asian influence with a variety of

shades made from such natural materials as grasses, bamboo and rattan, and introduced interior shutters for closets, windows and cabinets inspired by Japanese shoji screens.

"It started in the upscale market a few years ago, and now it's very much more mainstream — you're seeing more Asian-influenced products in the marketplace," said Karin O'Callaghan, merchandising chief for Smith + Noble, which, on a recent catalogue cover, featured Chinese calligraphy on the tapes of wood blinds.

Meanwhile, books such as *Zen Interiors* (Stewart, Tabori & Chang, \$30) and *Handmade Style Japan: Projects and Inspiration for the Home* (Chronicle Books, \$18.95) are See **ASIAN** on E12

helping readers pull the style together at home.

Area shops carrying furnishings, tableware and more from Asia are feeling the effect.

Center City's Ruka: Treasures of the Spirit, which carries everything from Tibetan meditation paintings to Japanese sushi dishes, just moved to larger, more centrally located quarters a block from Rittenhouse Square.

Newcomer Paragon, in an Old City space upstairs near Third and Market, is finding an audience that appreciates how vintage Asian furniture and objects can mesh well with a variety of styles.

And at the more established Liao Collection, at Sixth and Bainbridge, Michelle Liao doesn't have to do the selling job once necessary to move her treasure trove of antique furnishings. Shelter magazines, movies and auction houses have educated the public.

"People," she says, "come in looking for a piece that fits the style of their room."

Years ago, "if I walked into someone's house and saw an Asian influence to things, I'd think they were doing a theme room or had traveled extensively or had a personal attachment," said Center City interior designer Barbara Eberlein.

"But there's been a groundswell foundation that I don't think is going anywhere as people have grown to love the simplicity and elegance, quietness and contemplative nature of Asian pieces."

It certainly transcends the recent enthusiasm for feng shui, she said, referring to the ancient Asian art of placement to promote balance and harmony.

"What's interesting is the integration of it, where before, it was a separate, identifiable style and you either bought into it or didn't. Now, it's more a question of a sensibility":

- An aesthetic that can integrate well with other styles.
- A pared-down, uncluttered look with clean lines and a few well-chosen accessories.
- A less-is-more approach if there's an elegance to the lines and textures that are used.

"Zen is about freeing up the mind and the spirit," writes Vinny Lee in *Zen Interiors*, "which in turn means making your surroundings less complex and demanding."

That doesn't "have to mean a frugal or comfortless home," the book goes on — or one devoid of detail.

In fact, Meg Rodgers, principal of Marguerite Rodgers Limited, which is designing the look of Avenue B — the new Neil Stein/Gabe Marabella restaurant opening in October at the corner of Broad and Spruce — was applying words such as *warm* and *rich* to describe the Asian-influenced interior she's planning.

"It will have clean lines, revel in textures, and be very soothing — and also have the idea of the craft of things, the way they're made — so that even though they're simple, the details are fine."

Her Kensington firm has done nearly floor-to-ceiling, see-through wooden screens about 13 feet high to separate the rooms. Inspired by an image of Japanese slatted screens inserted into a window, "they're painted a rich black/brown," Rodgers said, "like coffee with a teeny drop of cream."

"They give privacy and ventilation but add mystery."

Banquette seating will reflect both the influence of traditional Japanese storage pieces and a Chinese daybed.

"It will have big, chunky legs and a thick platform. At the base, it's styled like a lot of Asian pieces."



MICHAEL S. WIRTZ / Inquirer Staff Photographer

A handmade Japanese lamp, of wood and rice paper, is a modern piece inspired by antique lanterns. The lamp, from Ruka, stands about 2 feet tall.

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Custom-crafting will be apparent in the bar, in its solid wengay-wood top and the fine veneer work of its soffit pieces.

"You wouldn't go in and say it's an Asian restaurant," said Rodgers. "It's eclectic and will be clean and soothing."

"That's part of what people are attracted to in the Asian influence."

"There have always been people who collected fine Oriental antiques and art," noted Eric Rymshaw, a partner in Fury Design in Old City.

"But when the economy fell apart about 10 years ago, we were looking for kinder, simpler ways to live, and part of what happened, we were looking for the Eastern philosophies people have always been into, and with them, we popularized Eastern decorative arts again."

The rediscovery of modernism has also fueled the Asian aesthetic, he added. "It's equally clean and spare," so the two mesh well.

He recalls some red-lacquered Chinese money boxes he used to striking effect in a cleanly designed, largely neutral setting.

The bright boxes, which came from the Liao Collection, are all different, and he and partner Jim Fulton arranged them on various levels of a table.

The aim of the room was "to create a warm setting conducive to comfort and entertaining that would allow for collecting."

Asian pieces can also be incorporated into more traditional settings, Rymshaw noted.

"It's a way of adding color and life, and is more interesting than using another Louis XVI table."

At Ruka the other day, incense, the sound of flowing water from fountains, and the strains of Tibetan monks chanting from a CD filled the store.

New lamps based on traditional Japanese lanterns with handles on top, and tankas, Tibetan meditation paintings framed in silk brocade with gathered silk shades, were among the inventory.

There were also sushi dishes.

The neat stacks of plates came square or rectangular, while soy dishes were small and variously shaped. Rice bowls and chopsticks completed the array.

In the center of the plates, shiny crackled glazes in turquoise and green were banded in a contrasting, slate-colored matte finish.

The dinnerware was drawing customers, among them Matthew Dubrow, a doctor with the Philadelphia College of Osteopathic Medicine.

"I'm looking for a wedding gift for two friends of mine," he said, picking up a lacquered bamboo plate from Vietnam.

"I had heard about this place and stopped in on my way home."

He already owns Japanese ceramic dishes.

"I like the food, the style, and the simplicity."

It's an environment more people want to create in their everyday lives, observed Ruka owner Cindi Raimondo.

At Ethan Allen, the Zen-influenced Horizons line has done better than expected since its debut in winter, said Craig Stout, vice president of product development.

Aimed at customers "with a sense of style who prefer a clean, modern look," it shows how the company has been "moving in a more contemporary direction," he noted.

At Smith + Noble, more Asian-influenced products are on the boards for January release.

"We design our products to fit into a lot of different room styles," Callaghan said. "We think it's a sustainable look."

The collection of roman shades, made from natural materials and applicable to a variety of looks be-

sides Asian, is the fastest-growing product in the Smith + Noble line. On a page titled "Fresh Ideas" in a recent Windoware catalog, the firm showed how the shades could be mounted in a wooden frame for a partition effect with an Eastern flavor.

Other Windoware products include interior shutters with acrylic-panel inserts that have embedded fibers to look like Japanese rice paper.

Over at Pier 1 Imports, Yvonne Rubenstein, one of the merchandise directors, says her customers want "pieces of the Asian look" rather than "a futon bed, shoji screens and square dinnerware. They think that's a little too trendy."

So when the store jumped into the Asian design trend in a big way last fall, it stocked such things as rice bowls and chopsticks, soaps on bamboo holders, pillows clad in Indian fabrics, ceramic pots with Chinese poems written in calligraphy, and furniture made of bamboo and other woods.

But Rubenstein sees the trend, "which began very minimal and very Zen," evolving into something "softer and more Pacific Rim-oriented in terms of the woods and grasses indigenous to those areas."

"But most of the pieces we've sold are mainly Japanese and Asian-influenced and have a more natural palette, more tactile finishes."

She foresees long life for Asian-inspired design, "unlike 1950s or '60s styles, which you might tire of."

"With Asian items," Gingles observed, "they could fit into the next round of whatever-it-is because they're not that intrusive."