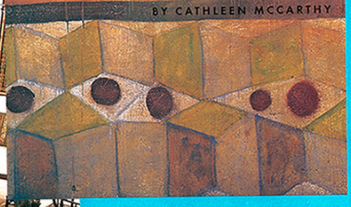
Furniture and crafts, arranged in vignettes, fill Material Culture's 25,000 sq.-ft. space to show the fun and sensibility in mixing objects from different cultures. Vegetable-dyed, handwoven carpets and tapestries hang from perimeter walls.

LIVING WITH MATERIAL CULTURE

The fine art of lifestyle merchandising

BY CATHLEEN MCCARTHY



Enter through a lobby filled with artifacts into a cavernous space whose towering walls are hung with brilliantly colored rugs. Beneath them, pottery is piled in one corner, hand-carved totems lean against a wall, ox carts serve as sofas and none of the furniture looks familiar. A closer look reveals that most of the pots are from Turkey, range from 50 to 200 years old — and begin at $35. In fact, everything here is old, authentic and (except for the rugs) not as expensive as you'd think — including the building itself, a converted train shed for a former assembly plant.

Material Culture is not a place you stumble on while out shopping. It's located in an enterprise zone in northwest Philadelphia, a warehouse among warehouses. There *is* nothing else around.

"That's okay, that's okay," insists co-owner George Jevremovic. "There's no one else doing what we're doing. We're recycling a lot of the world's art here. We're also recycling an early industrial building. It all makes sense. Once you come here the first time, it's easy."

Getting people in there that first time is a challenge Jevremovic and his partner Teddy Sumner have met by means as unconventional as the store itself. Rather than placing ads in the local newspaper, they stage events — lectures by well-known folklorists and parties with ethnic bands and food and open bar.

It was at one of these parties that I first saw the store. Gathered there, nibbling stuffed grape leaves and checking out the merchandise, was a mix of well-heeled suburbanites, scruffy academics and the kind of hip downtown crowd you usually see at art

GARY KILDONIS, PHILADELPHIA

Milk-paint washes with primitive graphics make a stunning backdrop to one-of-a-kind objects. Local artists worked in collaboration with the owners to achieve a look not too layered or too bare. Elsewhere (right), rugs are mounted like artwork and illuminated with track lights.

openings. They circulated among food-and-beverage tables strategically placed around the 25,000-square-foot store with its 35-foot sloping walls — perfect for displaying the rugs on which both owners built their reputations.

Co-founders Jevremovic of Woven Legends and Sumner of Michaelian & Kohlberg pioneered the use of vegetable-dyed, handwoven carpets in the eighties, jointly forming a rug company called Black Mountain Looms. Between them they have infrastructures set up in Turkey, Rumania, China, India and Nepal — complete with connections that allow them direct access to the villages' other treasures.

Two years ago, they came up with the idea of buying and selling these things, along with their rugs, through a conventional — or not so conventional — store. "Between the Middle East, the Indian subcontinent and China, you're talking about a lot of the world's historical, art-creating population," says Jevremovic. "We cover a lot of ground and we work at the village level." They also buy in bulk. In fact, they buy virtually everything the villagers want to sell — down to the last beat-up kitchen stool.

This converted garage is their prototype and flagship. Pulleys, an overhead lift painted bright red and tracks on the floor covered by concrete hint at the building's industrial past. A radio assembly plant in the 1930s, the Wissahickon Industrial Center building measures more than a million square feet. Material Culture is in the former shipping-and-receiving area, once a train garage. Jevremovic points to the ridges in the floor beneath our feet. "Trains used to come right in here and unload," he says. A sound system that pipes in progressive rock and world music replaced the roar of engines, and a 40-foot wall went up where the trains entered. But the building is still ideal for shipping and receiving. "We get forty-foot containers delivered every week," says Jevremovic. "Where am I going to do that — the middle of Manhattan?"

Jevremovic has run Woven Legends from another part of the building since 1989. "That's one reason we're here now, though not the primary reason," he says. Another is the rent: $2 per square foot each year. "It's almost absurd," he says. The store doubles as storage space for their inventory. "Even if no one buys anything here, the space pays for itself as a warehouse." He oversees a woodworking shop on the premises, making sure the furniture — which often arrives covered in cobwebs and grime — is minimally refurbished to keep it as close to original condition as possible.

He and Sumner designed the store themselves, working closely with local artists and sculptors, partly to save on start-up costs. But, Sumner adds, "I can't think of anyone who could package the statement that we wanted to make. It's a different kind of product and we wanted to put the objects in a context that was partly visual and aesthetic and partly about meaning and cultural connections. It would be very hard to find somebody to make sense out of that."

Sumner and Jevremovic don't use terms like "merchandising," but judging from the store itself, they have a knack for it. Seating areas are set up along a walkway that leads to the mountains of rugs in the back. If you want to explore the furniture, circle the clusters of 19th-century curved-back Chinese chairs and follow

the serpentine path through rustic chests and armoires from China, Nepal and India. Ceramics appear throughout the vignettes but are concentrated in their own corner.

"We needed a backdrop that would make a connection between this ceramic piece from Turkey and this one from China — in other words, between material objects from different traditions and places," Sumner says. "We were also trying to set up discreet tableaus, vignettes that kind of put things together as you might find them in that culture."

Sumner, a former art student and painter, had already laid out rug showrooms in a SoHo loft and in Atlanta. "I'm tuned into the visual arts, color and layout," Sumner says. "We've had some good people working with us — we're into our third generation of them now. They're not the normal window-dresser types, more sculptors and artists who are good at being inventive.

"We didn't have a formula in the beginning," he admits. "I know it sounds crazy, but we knew what we didn't want. We didn't want something too baroque and layered, so that you couldn't see things. Some stores are so filled up with stuff, it's hard to isolate any one object. Yet we didn't want a spare, bare gallery with white walls because we didn't think it would suit the organic-ness of our merchandise."

The high plaster walls are the focal point of the store, covered in vivid milk-paint washes that segue from earthy sienna to ochre to turquoise, with occasional primitive graphics of animals and trees and abstract shapes. Carpets and tapestries cover much of it, but it makes a stunning backdrop. Three local artists have worked on the walls in the past year, in collaboration with the owners. "The biggest challenge in that space has been to integrate it vertically," Sumner says. "Like anything else, I try to work out the big organizational elements first and then go back and tune up the little stuff."

Jevremovic and Sumner have both spent extensive time in the villages where their goods are bought. Jevremovic wanted to create the feeling of an ancient "souk" or covered bazaar like the one in Turkey, Kapali Charsi, where he spent many years buying antique rugs. A passionate collector of folk art, he was reading a book on Egyptian "hajj" paintings when he first saw the sloped walls. "A lot of the images on these walls were basically mimicked from that book," he admits. "When people from Egyptian villages go to Mecca and come back, they paint narratives on the walls of their villages to commemorate their spiritual journey. If we take all these rugs down, there's a really nice painting underneath."

Philadelphia artist Rebecca Johnson, primary painter of the hajj walls, also made a sculpture of ceramic shards that extends from the wall above the pottery. Though the space was put together in the course of four months, it is in many ways a work in progress. "It's set up like a stage set," Jevremovic says, pointing out the network of I-beams and vertical columns. "We can put up walls and take them down to create room divisions and vignettes. Form is an extension of function here; we're recycling things in a building that is itself recycled. It works as a metaphor."

Remarkably little was done to turn this train garage into a store. Lobby walls were knocked down. A couple of walls and a few windows were put in. Concrete floors were painted to look

like clay. Jevremovic is considering opening up the skylights. "It's a big space so anything you do is expensive. Why spend the money if the space is good as it is?"

So far, there are two smaller Material Culture spinoffs, one in Bethesda, Md., that opened in January and one that opened in February in San Francisco's Design Center. An in-store concession in ABC Carpet & Home in New York City opened last summer. Jevremovic believes the 6000-square-foot version in Bethesda is "probably the one that would travel best." On the other hand, he says, "maybe what we need to do is just have more of these — a big one in Chicago, one in Los Angeles. We'll just let it grow organically."

Rolling out this concept on a large scale presents some problems. "The danger in trying to replicate a situation like this," Sumner says, "is that what we sell is all one-of-a-kind. It's not the kind of stuff you can pick up the phone and order. The challenge will be trying to figure out how to systematically get enough interesting goods. I think we need to keep moving to different locations in the world. There's a lot of neat merchandise out there that has character and personality that doesn't cost a whole lot more than the same functional items at Pottery Barn or IKEA."

The notion that good stuff has to cost a lot of money is "jive," Jevremovic says. Take their $35 Turkish pots. Some closely resemble Pennsylvania redware which can sell for $1200. Or their $600 Turkish chests that look like New England versions selling for $20,000. Not that they're ruling out New England or Pennsylvania.

"I'm open to anything from anywhere. I have confidence in the inherent value of things," Jevremovic says. "The whole point of Material Culture is to cross boundaries and express universal ideas about art and craft." It's a philosophy he borrowed from his friend and mentor Henry Glassie, an Indiana University professor and well-known folklorist. Glassie, who has traveled with Jevremovic for several years, will hold a book signing at the store's next party scheduled in November.

"If Material Culture is heavily weighted in inventory, it doesn't bother me," he says. "I feel comfortable buying excessive amounts — in a conventional retail sense — of a category like country Chinese furniture, if I feel it has long-term viability. I have confidence in my inventory." For this reason, he and Sumner look more to the antique and auction house business than to conventional retail stores as a model for how to do business. "What we're trying to do," he says, "is establish a new kind of store." ■

Cathleen McCarthy is East Coast Editor for VM+SD. *Her last piece for* VM+SD *was a profile of I.N.C., Federated's new private-label apparel program, in May 1997.*

DESIGN: Material Culture, Philadelphia – George Jevremovic, Teddy Sumner, co-founders; Margot D'Amico, Maria Churchill (graphics); Michael Heffernan (fixturing)
MURALS: Rebecca Johnson, Philadelphia
SIGNAGE: Robert Alford, Philadelphia