

DOUGLAS E. SMITH / "JUNK BEAUTIFUL" BY SUE WHITNEY AND KI NASSAUER © 2008, TAUNTON PRESS



Factory Direction

Rusty sign letters, wheeled farm carts and old metal doctors' cabinets create a new industrial revolution — in home decor

Barack Obama and Hillary Clinton keep reminding us that the United States is shedding manufacturing jobs faster than a speeding steam engine.

But what factories and farms have left behind — weathered wooden carts, steely drafting lamps, battered sign letters that might've once spelled out "Allentown Smoldering" — isn't going anywhere. Industrial detritus, with its colorful past and patina-ed present, now does time in lofts, interior design magazines and shops.

This might mean an old metal glove-making mold used as sculpture or an iron window grate morphed into a fire screen. At Penn Quarter's Rocket Bar, a wooden factory machine-mold even frames a mirror behind the beer taps. "It weighs 300 pounds. It's not for the faint of heart," says Jeff Dawson, co-owner of Bedrock Management, which runs the bar. Other Machine Age reminders there: rocket ship art made of vintage vacuum cleaners.

"Part of the appeal is that these are things that weren't originally intended to be used in the home," says Anna Kahoe, co-owner of U Street's Goodwood (1428 U St. NW; 202-986-3640) which traffics in glass jars from long-shuttered apothecaries and wooden cabinets that held crop seeds decades ago. "They're infused with human energy, since someone once touched them on a daily basis."

Indeed, it's the well-worn materials (tarnished metal, cloudy glass) and workhorse lines that make these artifacts so popular. "There's such beauty in found objects, their shapes, their stories," says Baltimore interior designer Patrick Sutton, who has put warehouse carts and hardware-paint display racks in rooms for clients. "They're charming, almost like old, gruff people."

Battle-scarred leftovers of assembly lines and agrarian life play well with other furnishings, from plastic Ikea dressers to Asian platform beds. "They have clean lines, so they fit in with any style," says Sue Whitney, co-author of "Junk Beautiful" (\$22, Taunton Press). "Whether your place is country or modern, drop in an industrial piece for an unexpected jazz-up." Whitney's new book (written with business partner Ki

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1) In their "Junk Beautiful" book, Sue Whitney and Ki Nassauer demonstrate how industrial "trash" like metal grates and a chick-incubator-turned-table give a home an edgy look. **2)** Whitney and Nassauer hung sign letters over an iron and wood buffet for an old-meets-new combo. **3)** Wisteria.com's new French Industrial collection riffs on European flea-market pieces with items like a wheeled wood-and-metal coffee table (\$550) and a photographer's lamp (\$450). **Inset:** Old printers' letters inspired these hooks. (\$16 each, Anthropologie.com.)

COURTESY WISTERIA



Nassauer) shows off how the pair incorporates rusty junk into stylish rooms. Think old hand-crank drills turned into coat hooks or metal bread pans transformed into window shades.

Much of this new industrial revolution involves rethinking or repurposing sometimes-obsolete 9-to-5 equipment. That takes creativity — and sometimes a strong stomach. Kahoe loves metal doctors' cabinets with glass panels for storing towels or even, as she does in her own Mount Pleasant home, jewelry. And at Goodwood, she sold a man what she thought was a farm trough. "It was long, narrow and in old wood," she says. "Turns out it was a hog scalding that they used to boil skin off pigs! He was going to put glass on it and use it as a table."

Local antiques hound Carter Anderson (703-963-5913), who supplies area shops and individuals with merchandise like steel desks and old porch columns, occasionally unearths a vintage coffin gurney. "They call 'em casket creepers," he says. "They'd use them to roll a coffin out of a hearse. They make dynamite coffee tables."

The popularity of this blood, sweat and timecard look means authentic pieces have become rarer, with school lockers, roll-top steel desks and machine cogs commanding big prices at auction. That may explain why big-box retailers have gotten into the "artifact" biz. Pottery Barn (Potterybarn.com) and Sundance Catalog (Sundancecatalog.com) both replicate Chaplin-era movie tripod lamps. Anthropologie traffics in metal sign letters — though it's probably best to spell out "Welcome," not "Welding," on your wall.

The Wisteria catalog's French Industrial collection includes a spindly architect's chair (\$349, Wisteria.com), and metal and rough wood wheeled bookcases. "The products, even reproductions, have a story," says Hudson Weichsel, Wisteria's vice president of merchandising. "You look at those wheels and wonder, 'What was that cart used for?' Picking up nouveau relics gives a pad that "I-live-in-a-loft" vibe, even if it does lack the thrill (or trouble) of the hunt. "The general public is sometimes scared to deal with jagged edges or rewiring," says Kahoe.

To get the real deal, haunt antiques and salvage shops. Besides Goodwood, nearby sources include the Brass Knob (2311 18th St. NW; 202-332-3370), Patrick Sutton's Baltimore shop (1000 Light St.; 410-783-1500) and Darryl Dean Antiques (1524 Wisconsin Ave. NW; 202-333-6330). In Frederick, Md., Great Stuff by Paul (Greatstuffbypaul.com) boasts two stores (and a fab Web site) specializing in much-used merch like Dutch bakery bread boards and English coal scuttles (\$55) that make nifty flower pots. Dig even deeper by "going to junkyards or restaurant-supply places, which a lot of people don't think of as places to shop," says Whitney. Anderson even suggests checking out government surplus auctions (Govliquidation.com).

Overall, this desire to fill rooms with such gritty glamour may be nostalgia for the era of factory bosses and steel workers. "Nobody manufactures anything anymore," says Anderson. "We've romanticized the ethic of building something. That's why we're turning castoffs into art." JENNIFER BARGER (EXPRESS)



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