# Designer blends styles in his melting pot theory

BY JOAN BORAM
STAFF WRITER

It was standing room only at Gorman's when New York interior designer Vicente Wolf appeared at the Southfield store recently to help celebrate Gorman's 52nd anniversary.

Chairs, bar stools, hassocks and even the odd love seat miraculously moved themselves into the designer's vicinity. Those on the perimeter couldn't possibly see the slide presentation, but they were treated to the designer's articulate, sometimes outrageous, commentary.

Wolf, born in Cuba, is more than an interior designer. He also designs furniture for Henredon, crystal for Steuben, carpets for Schumacher, china and flatware for Sasaki, and contract furniture for Nierdermaier. And, the man who said he doesn't understand prints (or valances) is designing a line of prints.

"I just never did well in school," said the tall, bespectacled Wolf, who bears a striking resemblance to the young Yves St. Laurent.

"I understood what I heard, but I just couldn't pass the tests. In the '50s who knew about dyslexia? I never finished high school."

But Wolf, who said he can't tell the difference between "all the Georges and all the Louises," had a secret weapon that made up for the "medals and diplomas" necessary for success.

"I had a 150-percent focus on what I wanted. I knew what I liked and it takes money. So I went to work for designers who weren't very tasteful, and they let me do all the work. That's how I learned my craft."

At first glance, Wolf's design *trademarks seem* to be his love of natural light and an aura of tranquility. The rooms he showed were invariably white or beige, as were the furnishings. And windows were often bare, allowing light to flood the rooms.

"A blank wall doesn't necessarily need something on it. Great light is often enough."

But what about those of us who don't live on a Southern plantation, or a penthouse overlooking the New York skyline (as most of Wolf's clients seem to)? In other words, what about privacy?

"Often, I'll use sheer white wool. It's opaque, but it still transmits light. Or I'll have opaque glass installed, and leave the windows bare."

Eleven years ago, Wolf began mixing periods and styles of furniture, thereby launching his melting pot theory of design. That landmark room included an Eames chair, Chinese plates, an 18th century lamp and a vase from Tibet.

In another room, he included a sofa of his own design, paired with a 17th century Italian console. On the console, a grouping of two 18th century gilded French candlesticks and one 20th century Mexican candlestick punctuated by a Weegee photograph.

"I love objects that speak to one another — the same language, but with different accent.

"The more cultures blended together the better - we're all immigrants. Our history is measured in the 10s of years. An eclectic mix is more American. 'Today' doesn't mean brand-new; it means different periods, used in a clean, fresh way to give the room tension."

Wolf doesn't believe in hanging photographs or mirrors.

"For one thing, they become static when they're nailed to the wall, and, besides, painters are too expensive."

Instead, he leans pictures against the wall, or against furniture. And, a favorite trick is to lean a door-sized mirror against a wall; creating an entrance into the reflected room.

On close inspection, the tranquility of Wolf's rooms is often enlivened by a slightly discordant note.

In the Kip's Bay showhouse, for example, Wolf created a serene beige-silk walled sitting room. There's a draped table with two chairs, and on the table are three topiaries in natural clay pots.

A lovely place for tea? Yes, but . . . leaning on one of the chairs is a Diane Arbus photo of a woman at a nudist camp, wearing nothing but a smile and a pair of sunglasses.

And that discordant note pretty well characterizes the designer himself. It's said that Wolf's entire wardrobe consists of black suits, shoes and ties, and white shirts. Pretty blah, you say? Well, just ask him why he has a picture of a tornado over his bed.


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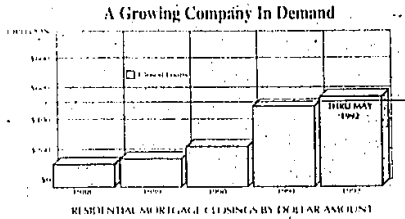


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