

The New York Times

Cowboy Hats and Koi Fish Photos? There's a Reason.

Some interior designers decorate their adult apartments to be reminded of the hometowns where they grew up.



A row of Lucchese Western boots await visitors at the entry to Andrew Torrey's home, one of many nods to his upbringing on a farm. Katherine Marks for The New York Times

By Heather Senison

July 2, 2024, 5:01 a.m. ET

Andrew Torrey has turned the front door of his New York apartment into a teleportation device, whisking visitors off to another place and time whenever they drop by. That, at least, was his intention.

Mr. Torrey, an interior designer, was raised on a farm in rural Kansas, six miles from the closest neighbors. It's a setting he sorely misses and aims to recreate in his carefully decorated Sutton Place rental.



At first, Mr. Torrey's Sutton Place rental gave no hint of the farm he grew up on in Kansas. Over time, he transformed it into a Western wonderland. Katherine Marks for The New York Times

"I want to be surrounded on all sides by things that I love," Mr. Torrey said.

New York is nothing without its newcomers, and while the city embraces a multitude of traditions and cultures, many transplants — including a real-life cowboy like Mr. Torrey — still feel out of place.

To stay connected, some interior designers use their professional know-how to remind themselves of the places and people they grew up around. As a result, one can experience the Asian influences of Hawaii, the Western prairie, the artistry of Ukraine and European design without leaving the city.

A Prairie on Sutton Place



Mr. Torrey carried the Western motif to his bedroom. Katherine Marks for The New York Times

When Mr. Torrey relocated from West Chelsea to a 14th-floor condominium rental in Sutton Place, the space couldn't have felt farther from the farm he grew up on in Kansas.

The sleek one-bedroom gave no hint of his childhood showing American Quarter Horses, a breed known for its ability to sprint short distances. But over time, he transformed the place into a Western wonderland.

"I know you shouldn't find your joy in things, but I'll think about how I felt when I was in my house as a little kid and it's amazing to feel that now," said Mr. Torrey, 45, who owns the design firm Torrey.



A wooden box with a hand-carved cowboy hat. Katherine Marks for The New York Times

A row of Lucchese Western boots wait at the entry followed by a half-bath where four-and-a-half-foot-long steer horns hang above the mirror.

In the en suite bedroom, two paintings of his grandparent's quarter horses shown standing in Kansas prairies hang over his bed.



The brash lifestyle of the American cowboy is a motif throughout the apartment, left, including paintings from Mr. Torrey's grandparents' home, right. Katherine Marks for The New York Times



One of the many nods to cowboy hats in Mr. Torrey's apartment. Katherine Marks for The New York Times

The brash lifestyle of the American cowboy is a motif throughout the apartment — sourced from Kansas and elsewhere — starting with a waist-high antique Marlboro light-box standing next to a stool from Paul Newman's study, which Mr. Torrey bought at Stair Galleries, an auction house in Hudson, N.Y. Mr. Torrey grew up watching “Butch Cassidy and the Sundance Kid,” “Hombre” and the actor's other cowboy movies.

Mr. Torrey's collection of drawings by the artist Robert Loughlin, depicting a man having a smoke, hangs on the walls.

The pièce de résistance, however, is a 6-by-6-foot bookshelf in the living room. Between the expertly stacked art books and the “Old-West” series by Time-Life Books, are treasures from his travels. “I have a real aversion to decorative filler,” Mr. Torrey said, sitting in a deer-antler chair that came from the rustic New York study of his best friend's grandfather. “All of this means a lot to me.”

Several sculptures sit on the shelves, including a Benin Bronze that he bought on his first trip to Morocco, which remind him of his grandparents' sculpture collection. There are fossils and minerals and, here and there, bundles of authentic wheat, his talisman.

Mr. Torrey, said he spent \$225,000 on the décor, and that the theme throughout the apartment is his connection to the Earth and the elements.



A bookshelf in the living room displays expertly stacked art books and treasures from Mr. Torrey's travels. Katherine Marks for The New York Times

“I have an appreciation for natural materials,” Mr. Torrey said. “My values, my respect for things and respect for people, reflect how I live my life.”

Supporting Ukraine From Afar



After moving from Brooklyn to Ukraine in 2018, Artem and Julia Kropovinsky began buying artifacts from merchants back home to support their country while it's at war. Katherine Marks for The New York Times

When Artem Kropovinsky and Julia Kropovinska moved from Ukraine to Brooklyn in 2018, they left behind a lot of their practical items for day-to-day life. Instead, the three suitcases carried by the couple mostly contained silverware, ceramics and photos.

“Considering we are so in tune to design and detail, it was very important to bring memorable things with us,” said Mr. Kropovinsky, 32, an interior designer and founder of the studio Arsight. He frequently works alongside his wife, Julia, 33, a photographer and interior stylist.

Among their stowed-away items were ornate, century-old silver spoons, including one passed down to Mr. Kropovinsky from his great-grandmother. Careful to preserve its patina, Mr. Kropovinsky refuses to clean it. “I don’t want to peel off the memory,” he said.

The Kropovinskys have spent about \$5,000 to expand their collection of Ukrainian décor substantially since settling in their one-bedroom rental in a brick house in Bay Ridge. Some treasures, like a ceramic bust of a Ukrainian woman in a head-scarf, were found at the “I Am U Are — Ukrainian Creators Fair” held last year on the Lower East Side.



The Kropovinskys have spent about \$5,000 to expand their collection of Ukrainian pieces. Some treasures, like a ceramic bust of a Ukrainian woman, right, were found at an art fair in New York. Katherine Marks for The New York Times



Katherine Marks for The New York Times

Supporting small businesses in Ukraine is a small comfort for the Kropovinskys, who are unable to return to their home country while it is at war.



Images of Crimea, where Mr. Kropovinsky was born, are scattered around the apartment in photos and books. Katherine Marks for The New York Times

On her computer at night, Mrs. Kropovinska has found ceramics, like a table vase resembling a poppy seed, a common plant back home, from makers like [Gorn](#), [Quiet Form](#) and [Dasha Ptitsami](#) in Ukraine. Images of Crimea, where Mr. Kropovinsky was born, are scattered around the apartment in photos and books.

On the refrigerator are mosaic magnets made with fragments of destroyed buildings in Saltivka, a neighborhood in the Eastern Ukrainian city of Kharkiv, where the couple lived before moving to Brooklyn. Mr. Kropovinsky ordered the magnets from Ukraine, where an architect sold them to raise money to buy portable heaters for households experiencing blackouts in the winter during the war.

Mrs. Kropovinska retrieved a 1930s handmade linen tablecloth with matching napkins from one of her closets that she ordered from a company in western Ukraine.

“It’s a little piece of my home and it makes me so happy to have all these things around me in every corner,” she said.

A Taste of Milan



Jonathan Fargion moved from Milan to New York in 2012 to attend the New York Botanical Garden's School of Professional Horticulture. Katherine Marks for The New York Times

Jonathan Fargion can visit Little Italy whenever he wants, but when asked if the downtown Manhattan neighborhood reminds him of home, he just laughed. It’s “too touristy,” he said; SoHo is more his style. Mr. Fargion, 37, a landscape architect who owns Jonathan Fargion Design, moved from Milan to New York in 2012 to attend the New York Botanical Garden’s School of Professional Horticulture. But he was prevented from returning home for much longer than he planned because of problems with his work visa followed by pandemic travel restrictions.

“It’s a very intense thing to go through,” he said of being stranded in America. “My dad was sick and I couldn’t go to see him.”



Each time Mr. Fargion visits his mother in Milan, he brings back works of art and furnishings for his Washington Heights rental, left. He is particularly proud of his lamp collection, including the "Atollo" glass table lamp by Oluce, right. Katherine Marks for The New York Times



Katherine Marks for The New York Times

To cope with his homesickness, Mr. Fargion perused Italian design showrooms in SoHo. He filled his Washington Heights prewar rental with tributes to his Jewish Italian heritage, starting with a hand-carved wooden mezuzah given to Mr. Fargion by his father, who lives in Israel.

Mr. Fargion now travels about once a year to Milan, staying with his mother. She's an avid collector of art and antiques, having a 16th-century console among her furnishings, he said.

Each time he goes, Mr. Fargion returns with more pieces: a collage by the Italian artist Lucio del Pezzo, and a print of the cartoonish "Rattle-less Snake," by Belgian artist Pierre Alechinsky.

"My family always had an eye for art and beautiful things," he said, adding that he has brought so many pieces back from his family in Italy that he has spent almost nothing on his décor.

There are numerous works around his apartment by the Italian artist Giuseppe Capogrossi, including a foldable print he found in his mother's cellar.

"Capogrossi represents home," he said. "If I go somewhere and I see a Capogrossi, it feels like a cuddle."



There are numerous works around his apartment by the Italian artist Giuseppe Capogrossi, whose work "feels like a cuddle," Mr. Fargion said. Katherine Marks for The New York Times

Mr. Fargion is particularly proud of his collection of lamps. The tallest of the group, the "Papillona" floor lamp, another keepsake from his family's apartment, was designed by Afra and Tobia Scarpa for Flos. He also has the "Atollo" glass table lamp by Oluce in a living room window under a canopy of purple oxalis. Founded in 1945, Oluce is one of Italy's oldest lighting designers.

“It’s my favorite at night because, the cool thing is, it also gets lit at the bottom,” he said of the little white lamp. “All the lights I have are like sculptures.”

Honolulu Meets Bed-Stuy



Jarret Yoshida spent 10 years and \$50,000 turning the first floor of his Bedford-Stuyvesant townhouse into a tribute to his Hawaiian and Japanese heritage. Katherine Marks for The New York Times

It took about 10 years for Jarret Yoshida and a former partner to renovate the first floor of their 1930s Bedford-Stuyvesant townhouse. When they finished the project in 2015, after spending about \$50,000, the only original features were a few doors, which they painted white.

In 2018, the pair listed the studio apartment on Airbnb and moved their possessions upstairs. They were named a Super Host in their first year. (They ended their relationship in 2023.)

Mr. Yoshida, 56, was raised in Honolulu and moved to New York in 2002.

“When I think about my house, I think about it being an extension of my family,” said Mr. Yoshida, owner of Jarret Yoshida Interior Design.

Walking through the 800-square-foot studio is like perusing a restoration showroom. Most of the furnishings are found and refurbished, according to the methods Mr. Yoshida learned from his elders, he said.

“My grandparents grew up working in sugar cane fields,” he said. “When you have no money, you’re forced to look at everything like, ‘Can I keep this for the rest of my life?’”



Mr. Yoshida's 1800s Japanese screen hangs on a wall, left. He estimates it'll cost around \$20,000 to restore it. His hand-crafted backsplash was made by having blown-up photos of koi fish printed on the back of glass, right. Katherine Marks for The New York Times

Katherine Marks for The New York Times

Anything custom-made for the space was done so with D.I.Y. creativity. In the kitchen, Mr. Yoshida crafted the glass backsplash with blown-up photos of koi fish he took in Hawaii. To make it, he had the photos printed on the back of glass and hired glazers to install it.

In the dining area hangs a tapa cloth, a gift from Mr. Yoshida's friend from high school. The cloth, formerly owned by the island's Bishop Museum, hangs by a silk-covered thread from the cornice molding, a technique Mr. Yoshida learned while working at the Smithsonian Museum.

The showstopper, however, is Mr. Yoshida's imported Japanese screen, constructed sometime around 1868 during the Meiji Restoration, a political revolution in which Japan embraced Westernization.

It was around that time that both sides of Mr. Yoshida's family left Japan for Hawaii.



A tapa cloth hangs in the dining area. Once owned by Honolulu's Bishop Museum, it was given to Mr. Yoshida by a friend from high school. Katherine Marks for The New York Times

When asked if he's nervous that Airbnb guests could damage the precious artifact, Mr. Yoshida shrugged and said he plans to have it restored anyway — a project he estimates will cost around \$20,000.

“Even if you don't understand anything about art,” he said of the screen, which cost \$3,000, “you know when you look at this that this is kind of amazing.”