

1970s Chinese Secret

Bamboo meets ceramics in this newly hot collectible with a Nixonian twist

TRUCE AND CONSEQUENCES

The vases were among the first imports from China after President Nixon's visit in 1972.



AS A CHILD in the bohemian 1970s, Melissa Rufty was oblivious to the rattan, straw and bamboo that warmed up Jackie O's and Candice Bergen's chic Manhattan apartments in Vogue pictorials. What *did* make an impression on the New Orleans designer: the basket-work vases her mother used around the house, and later filled with garden roses to place by Ms. Rufty's bedside as a welcome home from college.

More recently, Ms. Rufty began collecting the handcrafted vessels herself, drawn by the intricately plaited strips of tawny bamboo in classic Chinese-pottery shapes. They're generally believed to have

been imported to the U.S. from Shanghai in the '70s.

She has nestled them together, their ceramic inserts empty, as objects in a still life. For dinner parties, she has run them, filled with yard cuttings, down a chartreuse floral cloth, mixing in classic china, monogrammed linens and mismatched brass candlesticks. "The brass and wicker took the formality of the china down a notch," she said, while the light played off the wicker's slightly lacquered finish. "These handmade vases vary so much in size, texture and shape that the joy of the chase is never-ending and the grouping possibilities are limitless," she added.

Noticing how often the basketry pieces sparked conversation, she began to curate mini collections for her Magazine Street boutique Malachite Home, together with co-owner Adrienne Casbarian.

Basketwork connoisseurs took notice. When Hearst Magazines executive Debra Shriver, who maintains a second home in New Orleans, spied the pieces in Malachite Home, she couldn't resist adding them to the bricolage on her French Quarter mantelpiece. "The detail is quite wonderful," said Ms. Shriver. "They are pure sculpture...to me, museum quality." That's high praise, and the objects sporadically pop up at flea markets

and estate sales, on eBay and Etsy, for as little as \$15.

Jane Scott Hodges, another NOLA resident, philanthropist and founder of Leontine Linens, was struck by the vessels' blend of artistry and functionality. "I could not believe [the vases] actually would hold cut flowers," she said.

'The vases are pure sculpture—to me, museum quality.' High praise, and they still pop up for as little as \$15.

The vintage pieces sometimes bear an original red-and-white paper tag reading "Shanghai Handicrafts: Made in The People's Republic of China." According to Terry Kovel, co-founder of Kovel's Antiques in Cleveland, the specific designation seems to date from 1972 to '79, when trade between the U.S. and communist China resumed after President Richard Nixon's 1972 visit but before full diplomatic relations were restored. Post-1979 exports typically have the now-familiar "Made in China" label.

Though little is known about China's 1970s export basketry, historians have lately been reappraising exported goods, explained Emile de Bruijn, art historian at the U.K.'s National Trust. Decorative objects once dismissed as commercial wares created for the western market are being examined for clues to complex cross-cultural pollination.

Today, Ms. Hodges displays her collection on a marble-topped antique table in her Greek Revival home's dining room. She likes how the subtly luminescent ochre-colored bottles glimmer against the aubergine grass wallpaper. Filled with pink peonies, the humble basketwork holds its own against opulent gray silk curtains and an ancestral portrait. A bonus, said Ms. Hodges: The vases' narrow necks helpfully restrict her to just a few stems: "Even I can manage an elegant arrangement with them."

—Courtney Barnes



◀ Jasper Morrison Containers, \$115 for set of 3, vitra.com

THE SHORT LIST

Hex Urges

Three alternate uses for a chic new desk set that exploit its triple-height dishes

To beautify the bar (shown)

Tall Bottle opener, muddler and that very long spoon with the Lilliputian bowl at the end
Medium Toothpicks on which to kebab the items below
Short Cocktail olives, onions and one maraschino cherry for old time's sake

To elevate Chinese takeout

Tall Conscientiously reusable lacquered chopsticks
Medium Munchy, crunchy wok-roasted peanuts
Short The incandescently potent red peppers you've fished out of your food

To arrange flowers oddly

Tall Short-stemmed conceivably found-in-nature roses
Medium Bitsy blooms like dandelion. Yes, dandelion
Short The dahlia you (oops!) recklessly snipped short