

By Grace Cain

Artist, creator, and magpie *Sean McNanney* has found a way to turn an *obsession* with old homewares into a *thriving* business

One man's treasures

I am writing a feature for a series called 'The Collector' and I have a problem. I don't know what Sean McNanney collects. Snuff boxes, perhaps? He has more than 400. Miniature paintings? He seeks those out "avidly" – but then, the same could be said for ceramics and jewellery. "I do tend to focus on small things, just because of space," McNanney explains. Fair enough. The fourth-floor NYC apartment that he shares with his husband, the artist Sinan Tuncay, is certainly compact – and yet it somehow manages to feel like an entire world of its own.

Which is the point, of course. "When you walk into my apartment, I want you to feel as though you have left New York," McNanney says. "I love that feeling when I come home and it's like... I could be anywhere, at any time – not in Brooklyn, or America, or 2021." This is no mean feat when you live in a railroad apartment in Williamsburg (in Brooklyn), in America, in 2021. But it's mission accomplished: stepping through McNanney's door, you feel as though you've walked onto the set of Wes Anderson's interpretation of *Alice in Wonderland* – only Alice lives in central Europe at the turn of the last century and hoards snuff boxes. It's McNanney's living mood board. "There's a reason for everything I find, besides the fact that it's pretty or interesting," he explains. "I'll buy something and just have it for a while before I figure out what I'm going to do with it."

McNanney is an artist, designer and the founder of Saved NY, a label that is perhaps best known for its vintage-inspired Mongolian cashmere blankets – although for the man behind the brand, it's so much more than that. "One of the reasons I started Saved was so I would have a reason to open a store that I could fill with my antique collections," he says. "Like, if I have a beautiful console, I can put a cashmere blanket on it and then each piece will help sell the other." McNanney is chatting to me from his original shop in Manhattan's Gramercy Park, but he recently opened a second, larger store, closer to his home in Brooklyn. "It's a blessing and a curse, because I've already filled it," he admits. "But it's nice to have somewhere else for all the pieces that I fall in love with."

In McNanney's world, minimalism never happened. That much is evident from the moment you step inside his gleefully yellow living room, which >



A few of my favourite things... Sean McNanney's living room is an emporium of objects in which vintage furniture is given a new lease of life – not least his reupholstered Biedermeier chair



“McNanney has an *all-or-nothing* approach... floors are covered in *floral* rugs, and ceilings *drip* with *lamps* from Turkish markets”

This page, from top: The vibrant wall provides a warm backdrop for prints; almost every surface in the kitchen is spoken for. Opposite page: Artworks by friends, family and McNanney himself

he says is inspired by mid-century American socialite Nancy Lancaster. “She painted her room yellow when she moved to London and it caused so much craziness,” he says. In these buttery surroundings, no surface is left bare. The sofas are heavy with ornate throws and patterned cushions. The Biedermeier chair that McNanney purchased in Berlin has been given a new life, upholstered in a fabric of his own design. The coffee tables double as curio cabinets for what he calls “top-drawer stuff like family mementos, or treasures that I’ve found”. One is an old industrial work table that he found discarded on the streets of New York and had fitted with glass.

Beneath the frieze that circles the room (painted by McNanney himself) hangs part of what is undoubtedly an impressive art collection. “A few are by friends, and I did some of them. A couple of things could be by Sinan, I guess,” he says. On one wall, a carved gilt Italian mirror is surrounded by an arrangement of 18th-century Ottoman plates. “Sinan is Turkish, and I’ve just fallen in love with the culture,” he explains. “I always joke that I’m trying to make him feel more at home, even though he hates most of my Turkish stuff.”

Unfortunately for Tuncay, McNanney has an all-or-nothing approach to the objects he loves. The floors are covered in floral-pattern rugs, and the ceilings drip with lamps purchased in Turkish markets. While trips to Istanbul provide the perfect excuse to seek out new treasures, McNanney points out that (paradoxically) Turkey is not necessarily the best place to find Turkish pieces. “You can’t bring a lot of the really old stuff out of the country,” he explains. “Oddly, it’s easier – and cheaper – to find Ottoman antiques here or in France.”

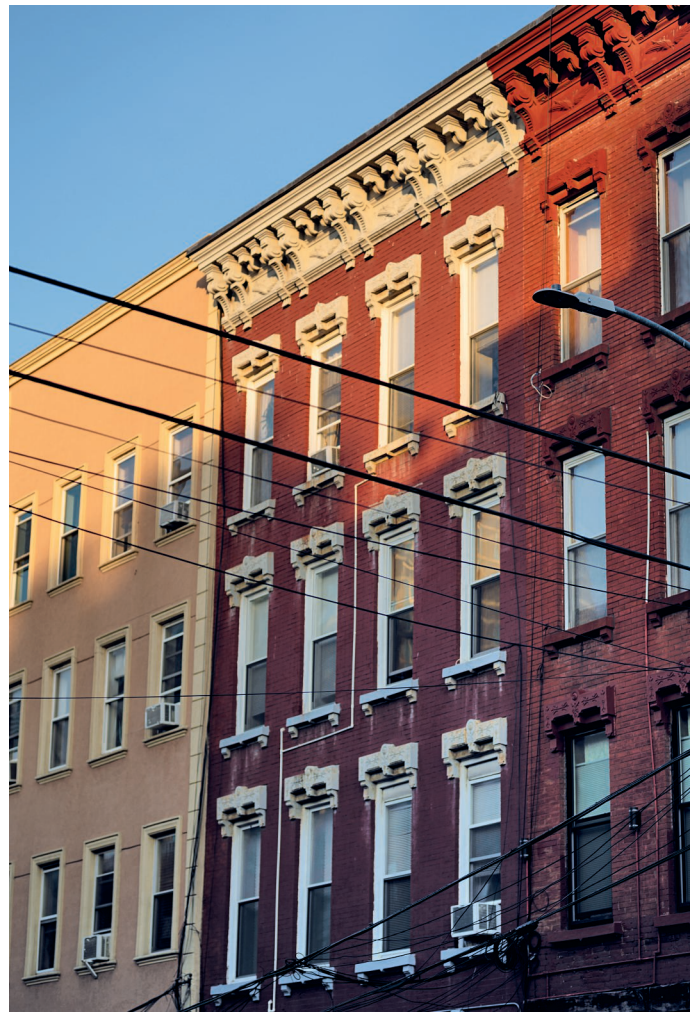
The Turkish influence continues into the kitchen, where evil eyes from Istanbul keep watch over the 200 (or so) objects that jostle for wall space from the floor to the ceiling: commemorative plates, scallop shells, paintings, 18th-century cameos, dolls, deer skulls, sepia photographs, horseshoes... a kaleidoscope of memories. “I call it my 3D wallpaper,” says McNanney. “At some point down the line, I think it would be interesting to photograph it and make it into actual wallpaper.”

The kitchen is also home to the first major antiques purchase McNanney ever made: an Aesthetic Movement ebonised cabinet that he thinks is probably English (although he can’t be completely sure). “I bought it from an Indian man when I first moved to New York,” he remembers. “It cost, like, \$300, and I had to put it on layaway and give him \$50 a week until I could finally take it home.”

McNanney’s interest in antiques took root long before he first set foot in Brooklyn. He grew up on Whidbey Island, a place just north of Seattle that he describes as having a “small-town, close-to-the-big-city, hippie vibe”. By the time he was 14, McNanney had become bored of school and opted instead to join an “alternative education programme” that would allow him to work with various local antiques dealers.

“That’s how I met Nancy Nichols,” he says. “She was an older lady, American, although” – here, he affects a *Downton Abbey*-style accent that would have made Dick Van Dyke proud – “she spoke with a little bit of a British accent. I would spend two days a week with her, mostly just cleaning and dusting. There are not many antiques dealers like her any more. She was kind of old school; she wore loads of diamond rings, and she would smoke cigarettes in her store and talk about her buying trips to England and France. I learned so much from her. She made antiques seem like a good thing to get involved in.”

Considering the nature of his first real investment, it will come as no surprise that McNanney considers the Aesthetic Movement to be one of his favourite styles. “The British designer Christopher Dresser is a big inspiration for me,” he says. “I really feel as though he was the founder of Modern, because he was doing some crazy stuff. When you think it >



“The *early 20th century* was a really interesting *pocket of time* for design”

was the high Victorian period, and he was travelling to Japan and bringing that influence back to Europe, it’s amazing. Some of the shapes he was creating were unthinkable in the 1870s. They actually look more like they were made in the 1970s.”

Of all the treasures in his collection, it’s primarily those by Dresser that McNanney insists he would never sell. “I have a pair of his andirons that some New York decorator turned into lamps, so I’ll keep them.” Any other specific pieces he wouldn’t part with? He pauses to think. “All the stuff from my grandma – mainly pictures and ceramics. I’ll never get rid of those.”

The Aesthetic Movement furniture, the infinite curios, the Ottoman textiles, his grandmother’s plates... is there anything else McNanney would care to highlight? “I also love early-20th-century design, particularly anything that was made in Germany just after World War I,” he says enthusiastically. “It was a really interesting little pocket of time where Berlin was the hub of Europe, and all the artists were building beautiful homes, and the designers were creating incredible furniture, and everyone else was just going bonkers.”

We’re nearly at the end, and I still haven’t found a solution to my original problem: how do I define Sean McNanney as a collector? An ocean away, the designer shrugs, and a second later I see it on the screen in front of me. “I really just look for the things I like,” he says. “I guess I wanted to create the sort of space I wished for.” Maybe some things are just that simple. □

From left: McNanney’s “3D wallpaper” comprises an array of more than 200 keepsakes; the railroad apartment in Williamsburg, Brooklyn

SEAN’S COLLECTING TIPS

01/ When you’re setting out to build a collection, go for what you really like. I find that some things will just speak to me.

02/ Always go for quality over quantity. It’s much smarter to buy an antique piece, because chances are that it’s going to be cheaper and better than anything you’d find in a regular store – plus, when you move, you can always sell it.

03/ If you’re doing up your house, start by focusing on the basics.

04/ Look everywhere: auctions, flea markets, thrift stores, eBay, old stuff that’s been tossed out on the street. Travel is also a great way to discover new things.

05/ I have a new rule: whenever I bring something home, I have to remove two other things. I went through a phase where my apartment was full – like jam-packed. Now I try to upgrade what I have.