

■ TREASURE HUNTING

Written by JENNIFER A. PEYTON

Photographed by JUDITH PETROVICH

The Owner Will 'Dumpster Dive' So You Can Shop Retro

Grace Napoleon loves old things with style. Just peek at the window displays for Best of Times, the eclectic antiques shop she opened in Danbury in May 1998. On a visit in March, we spotted an Eames chair covered in orange vinyl; a hand-hooked rug with 1960's psychedelic flowers; a Corning creamer and sugar bowl set in 1970's orange plastic, still in its original box, and a portable hairdryer, never used, in its original vinyl zippered carrying case with blue and green flowers. And don't forget the "flower power" flowers, still in their cellophane wrappers, which someone may have bought, but never got around to sticking on an early Volkswagen Beetle.

"You should have seen what I sold yesterday. It was the ugliest and most wonderful thing in the world," Ms. Napoleon said, going on to describe what was apparently a zodiac-theme wall plaque in red and gold. "It made somebody so happy. It was huge," she said, making her way carefully through the vintage merchandise crammed into her tiny store.

'We have naked-lady glasses. They're very tasteful. They have underwear on inside.'

Grace Napoleon,
Best of Times

When asked how she had acquired such a varied collection, she said: "People come in and sell me stuff. I go to tag sales and flea markets, Dumpster-dive."

Once, while traveling in Rhode Island, she took a wrong turn and found a flea market. "It was wonderful," she recalled.

Actually, her shop features the wares of six different dealers, but Ms. Napoleon is the owner and is there most of the time. When she is not, she can usually be found two doors away at Coffee, Please, a coffee shop on Main Street that she also owns.

A graduate of the School of Visual Arts in New York, she had been working as an artist and came up with the idea to open an antiques store only following her divorce. Her father, Frank Napoleon, was a cartoonist who worked on "Popeye" and "Felix the Cat," and her mother was an artist who worked in pen and ink and collage. So art and design have always featured prominently in her life.

"I've always been a collector," Ms. Napoleon, 43, said, "and the rent was decent," she added of the space her shop occupies on Main Street.

"What attracts me to stuff is it has to have style and be fun," she said, smiling as she held up an old toy clown, shaped like a fat bowling pin.

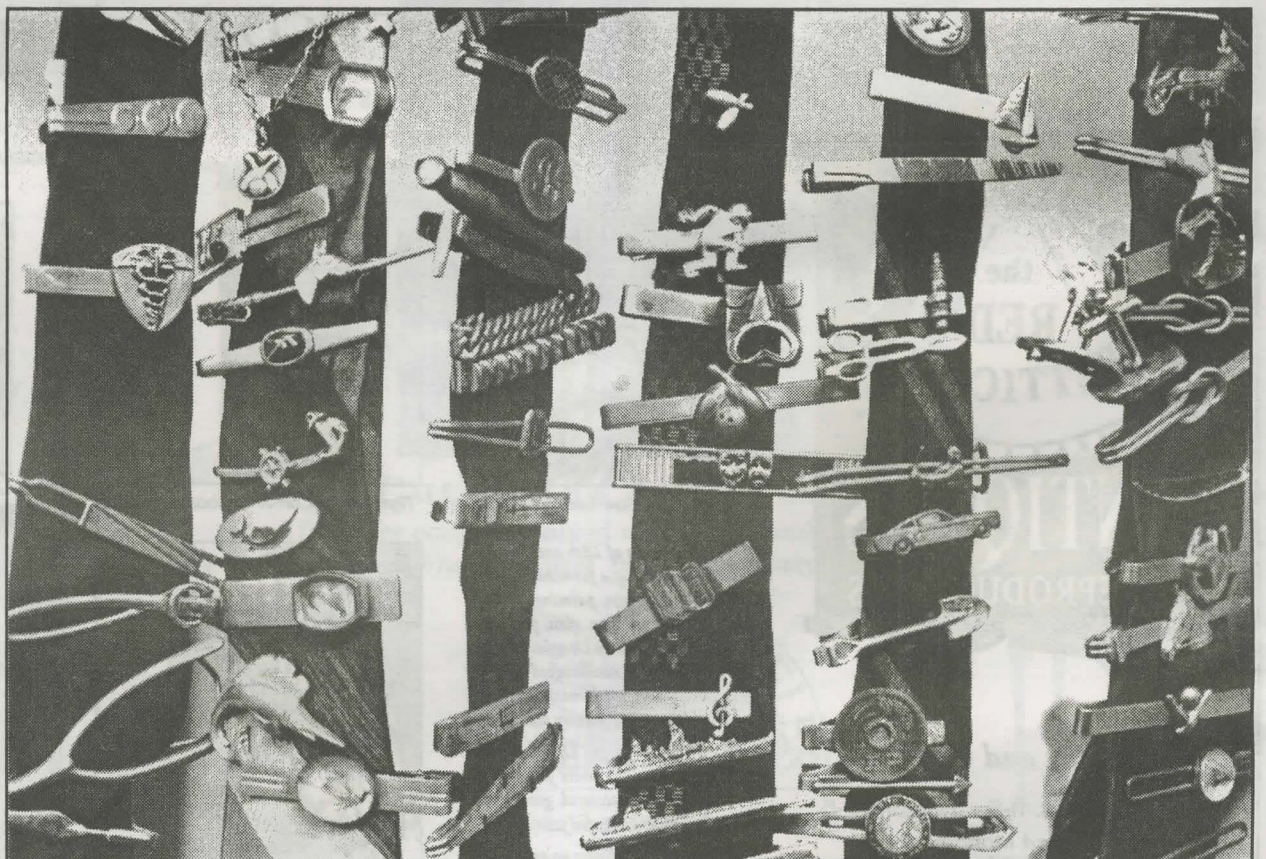
A better example is the Eames chair placed prominently in the front window, next to two Saarinen chairs. "We've sold from the top of the line to nothing," she said.

"We have wacky stuff," she continued, moving toward a corner of the store. "We have naked-lady glasses. They're very tasteful. They have underwear on inside."

Some 1950's crib toys, in pink, blue and yellow plastic, were hung from a nearby shelf. She noted a collection of pillows made of silk neckties from the



In Danbury, Reliving the Best of Times



Top left, ceramic dolls at Best of Times in Danbury. Top right, a toy clown shares space with other items. Above, vintage tie clips.



Owner Grace Napoleon in her Danbury shop.

same era, and identified, hidden beneath a dozen other items, a classic chrome dining table, with a sunshine yellow Formica top.

"We cannot keep them in the store. I've sold probably 24 sets," Ms. Napoleon said of the chrome dining tables, which she usually has with four matching chairs. "If it goes in the window, it's gone. I've got a waiting list of people for them. It's fun, and we've sold some totally wacky ones. Ridiculous."

Some items, such as the Murano glass pieces and old Fiesta Ware she had in stock, are true collectibles. But even if trend-setters like Martha Stewart declare an item valuable, that should not affect the prices, Ms. Napoleon said. "People are always asking how much something is worth. It's worth whatever someone is willing to pay for it," she said.

"We try to keep our prices reasonable. We know we're not Ridgely and we don't try to be," she said. "If we get something for a deal, so do you."

One collector from Bethel, where Ms. Napoleon also lives with her daughter, Siena, bought what she described as one of the ugliest lamps she had ever seen. "Some people would say it's hideous," the collector, who asked to remain anonymous, said of the vintage lamp, which cost almost \$100. "I think it's cool."

Customers typically come from surrounding towns such as Bethel or New Milford, and even from as far as

Kent and Westport. Last year, she said, she counted customers from 29 states and 13 countries.

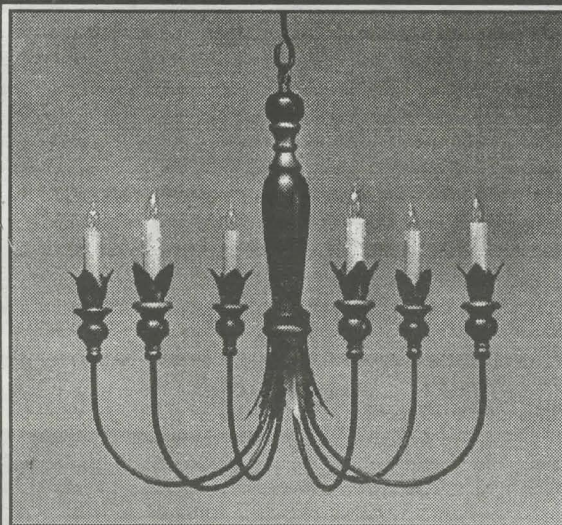
"Danbury is quite a center," Ms. Napoleon said. "I think Main Street is a wonderful place to be. There is an eclectic mix here of creative people."

"We do a lot with vintage clothing," she said, pointing out items that range from the 1920's on. "We have people who buy it for themselves, people who come for theater."

Some items are not exactly chic, like the 1980's zebra-pattern blazer with big shoulder pads from Bloomingdale's. "But it's cool," Ms. Napoleon said.

A faux-fur coat in leopard print had arrived the previous week, and she seemed pleased with a set of

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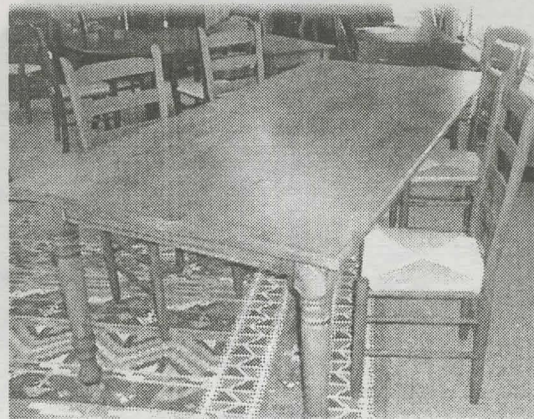
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BEST OF TIMES IN DANBURY

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molded plastic chairs, a stack in five different colors, priced at \$65. "The buy of a lifetime," she joked.

From somewhere else, Ms. Napoleon pulled a bright orange and blue vinyl pocketbook, in the shape of a fish. "They're not selling this in the antiques shops in Bethel. They're not selling it in Ridgefield. We're the people who are a little crazy," she joked.

"This is the rubber chicken," she said, pointing out another item. "He's not for sale. It's the mascot."

"I'm selling you back your childhood is what I'm doing," she said.

She said she had included a turquoise adding machine in her window display, "simply because it's turquoise," and noted that an old-fashioned bicycle from the mid-1960's had a working light on the front.

Set on a table nearby was a Polaroid Swinger cam-

era for \$20. "I remember the commercial. It was called a Swinger because the girl was wearing hot pants and walking down the beach, swinging," Ms. Napoleon said, pretending to swing the camera from her hand.

She has collected annual volumes of the Book of Knowledge and World Book encyclopedias, which are popular birthday gifts. Asked about her collection of hat boxes, she noted, "This is Hat City."

"We sell a lot of [vintage] suitcases, too," she said.

A modest side table came from a "no-tell motel" that has since closed, she explained, and ceramic poodles were lined up in every color, just because.

"It's the original carpet bag, made out of carpet," she announced, holding up another unusual find. "It's got to make you laugh," she added.

Best of Times is open from noon to 5 p.m. every day except Sunday and Monday. Evening hours are extended to 6 p.m. "as the weather gets better." ♦

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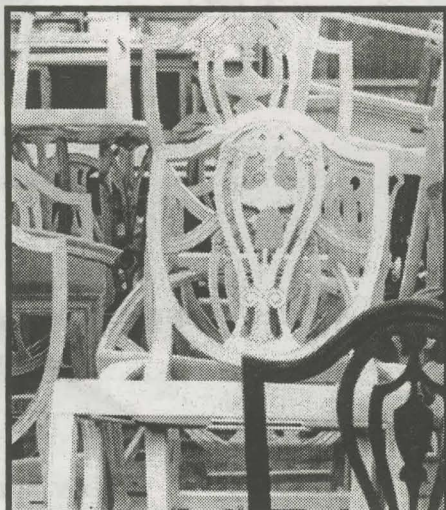
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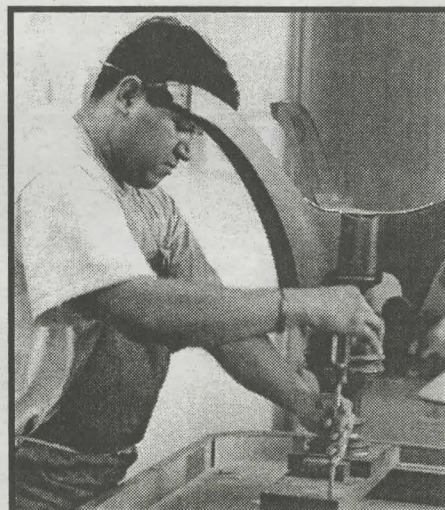
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