

Let's face it: New York is a city of insomniacs.

I've read countless advice columns on how to prevent it—what to eat, drink, or think to put yourself back to sleep. But after trying it all, I'm now of the Don't Fight It school. As a result, those strange and mysterious hours between night and day have become some of my most productive. Don't get me wrong, I'm not writing books or cleaning the house at 4 A.M. What I am doing is studying, and I'm doing it online—at 1st Dibs, to be precise. That site, which has revolutionized the world of antiques dealers, has become my favorite place to learn about designers. You simply go to the part of the menu that lists furniture according to creators, and start looking. And looking—not reading and not shopping (though shopping is, happily, a by-product of browsing through 1st Dibs; its founder would surely say that it is the point!). Looking is the key to understanding what design is all about.

I suppose it says something about my state of mind that I am on 1st Dibs at four in the morning—and not, say, watching reruns of *Project Runway*, or trying to hack my way onto my son's Facebook page. 1st Dibs is design 24/7, nirvana for the design obsessed. I can't tell you how many times I have redecorated my house, in my mind's eye, scrolling through page after page of antiques; I can say that my research on that site has made me a crackerjack hunter at consignment shops. And with a close reading, over many months of watching changes in dealers' inventories, you can spot emerging trends in the antiques markets.

Okay, so this isn't necessarily diverting for everyone. I've come to realize that the design obsessed are a different breed of cat. I'd put myself in the "mild" range, diagnostically speaking—though certain people who have had to contend with my urge to reupholster and rearrange their furniture might vehemently disagree. But you should see what life is like for the truly afflicted. Four A.M. shopping trips for gueridons don't even put you in contention. The design obsessed leave no stone unturned—literally. Everything, and I mean everything, must be just so. This means that the breakfast table is set with an interesting mix of gorgeous china; that the coffee cup, if that is the object with which your day starts, is exactly the correct shape for soothing the hand and holding the heat; that the morning playlist streaming from the iPod fits the mood of the day; that the bath oil for the morning soak comes in a streamlined bottle, so that the tub's ledge doesn't have that clinical CVS look; that your jewelry on the vanity table is arranged in a seductive way; that the family schedule is displayed in an elegant and readable manner; and that, when you finally get yourself out the front door (painted just the right shade of muddy green you see in France), the car you drive—which,

by the way, happens to be the largest and most important accessory in front of your house—speaks to your aesthetic sensibility both in terms of looks and efficiency. And that's just a superficial glance at what life is like before 7 A.M.

Pity the design obsessed. It is hard for us to understand how much it hurts them, literally, to see poorly articulated road signs, or badly appointed restaurants, or ugly storefronts. That's why so many of them live in New York City, which I've come to realize is the design capital of the world. There's just a better chance of getting through the day without too many eyesores here. (And we, too, could use work on some of those road signs and storefronts.) Not that London or Paris or Rome is lax in this department, but there is something innately, effortlessly elegant about the way they go about designing their worlds. History is on their side. All Colefax and Fowler have to do is say "chintz" and you know it will be gorgeous stuff. Not having had centuries of a cohesive, national design sensibility to build on, Americans have had to work harder at looking good. And New York, being a place populated by few who are actually from New York, but instead from Dallas or Kansas City or Sacramento or Peoria, is the most fertile design lab of all. New York is the magnet school for the design obsessed from around the country, and there is a New York sensibility that has spread out across the country, settling in quite nicely to mix with the aesthetic of Charleston or New Orleans or Boston.

I would like to posit something I think should be a corollary condition to being design obsessed, and in doing this I am marking the death, in August, of Mrs. Brooke Astor. She was once an editor at *House & Garden*, and I like to think she passed some pleasant hours sharing with readers the refinements of the houses she visited. For all her wealth and entrée, Mrs. Astor understood that design was empty if it was divorced from the institutions that shape our cultural life. Her support for the restorations of the New York Public Library and the New York Botanical Garden, to name just two, was lifesaving for those institutions—and life-enhancing for the rest of us. It isn't enough to decorate your house lavishly; it isn't enough to nurture a beautiful garden; it isn't enough to study and appreciate the finer points of design in the dark hours of the night. All of that is only the beginning; Mrs. Astor's life reminds us that design in the service of a better world is a goal worth the obsession, 24/7.




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