

# Made to Treasure

ALLEN ABRAMSON'S FURNISHINGS REVEAL A WEALTH OF ELEGANCE  
// BY GEORGE BULANDA // PHOTOGRAPHS BY BETH SINGER

**W**hile most boys his age were collecting baseball cards, Allen Abramson was collecting antiques.

At the tender age of 7, Abramson bought a Victorian bronze statue at an auction in his native Akron, Ohio.

"I had \$3.10 from my allowance," he recalls. "It cost 10 cents for the bus, \$3 for the bronze, and I had no bus fare home. I couldn't even carry the statue. Some people took pity on me and drove me home."

That was the start of a lifelong enthusiasm that hasn't dimmed for the 82-year-old. "I've always loved beautiful things," he says.

Abramson picked up many *objets d'art* during his world travels, and he bought other pieces from dealers, friends, or at estate sales. Many treasures he bought decades ago, when the dollar was strong and bargains were plentiful in Europe and Asia.

"Oh, I made some mistakes through the years, paying too much for this item or that," he says. "But you learn, and you learn to trust certain people."

Entering his western Oakland County home is like visiting a museum, but the atmosphere is far from stuffy, owing largely to Abramson's lapidary wit. He peppers his speech with Yiddish humor and colorful — sometimes off-color — reminiscences. And while some collectors would be deathly afraid of breakage, Abrams allows his gray cat, Tata, to pretty much rule the roost. At the moment, she's curled up on a gold silk-covered sofa.

Through the years, Abramson has worked as an antiques-shop owner, a dealer, an estate-sale director, and as co-owner of an art gallery.

"Among my souvenirs," he says with comic understatement as he gestures toward some of his treasures. There's not a tchotchke to be

found. His furnishings include an imposing bronze Buddha that once belonged to English writer Somerset Maugham; a huge painting on silk from China; a late 18th-century French gilt chandelier; two handsomely carved wooden Chinese angels from the 18th century; stunning collections of ivory, jade, and Peking glass, as well as carved turquoise, coral, lapis lazuli, amethyst, and malachite; and a small Renoir. "I picked that up at a flea market in France," Abramson explains. "I got it authenticated."

There's also an oil by John Everett Millais he bought from a dealer in London; another in the kitchen of a soulful-eyed little girl by Gustave Doyen he purchased from a violinist in the Cleveland Orchestra; bronze troikas from Russia; brilliant Persian rugs; a Steuben lamp and aubergine Steuben bowl atop the Baldwin grand piano; and a clay horse from the Tang Dynasty.

A few whimsical paintings and drawings add a dash of levity to the otherwise awe-inspiring ambience.

Abramson's walls are covered with vintage art, but one contemporary artist dominates his collection: Detroit painter and former College for Creative Studies teacher William Girard. The two met shortly after Abramson moved to Detroit in the early '60s to start a gallery called The Arterie. They've remained close friends ever since.

"Bill Girard is like a son to me," Abramson says. "I'll never forget when he came to my gallery wanting to sell a painting," which was reminiscent of the vivid intensity of the Pre-Raphaelite movement of the mid-1800s. "I couldn't believe it was done in the 20th century," he says.

Girard is inspired by myth and fantasy. A cast-bronze chess set in Abramson's living room was crafted by Girard after the artist became acquainted with Tolkien's *The Hobbit*, and the pieces are modeled after characters in the book.



> **PRECIOUS PORTRAIT** Abramson acquired this lovely painting by 19th-century French artist Gustave Doyen from a violinist in the Cleveland Orchestra.

> **GEMS OF A LIFETIME** Allen Abramson relaxes in front of a Chinese screen he bought in the '50s. The bronze Buddha (upper right) once belonged to Somerset Maugham. Below it is a Rodin sculpture. The cast-bronze chess set was created by local artist William Girard.





“If the company isn’t good, you can’t have a good party.” — ALLEN ABRAMSON

sionally entertains. But isn’t he skittish that guests might knock over a precious piece? “Oh, you just put blinders on,” he says.

And then he offers a bit of entertaining wisdom: “I used to overcook everything at my dinner parties. But no one cared, because the company was so good. At my last party at the Garden Court, [violinist] Itzhak Perlman was the guest of honor. If the company isn’t good, you can’t have a good party, no matter how great the food is.”

Abramson surveys the photos on his walls of the famous he has met — Marlene Dietrich, Josephine Baker, Jean Sibelius — and of dear friends, many of whom have died, and his tone turns wistful. Many memories were captured in his book, *Allen Abramson: The Odyssey (or the Idiocy)*. He’s working on another memoir, as well as a book on Jewish humor.

“You think those wonderful people and good times will last

> **GRAND POSSESSIONS** Atop Abramson’s Baldwin grand piano are porcelain Japanese figures, a Steuben lamp, and a deep-purple Steuben vase. Below: William Girard made the gold-plated bronze unicorns, and Abramson affixed them to a chunk of quartz he bought at a gem show. It rests on a slab of malachite.



Of course, all of these gems require space, and Abramson has plenty of it — 2,500 square feet on the first floor, and another 3,500 on the lower level. However, he really didn’t want to move from his roomy 1919-era apartment on East Jefferson in Detroit three and a half years ago. But the Albert Kahn-designed Garden Court Apartments were being converted into condos, and Abramson had to move, the memory of which still fills him with dread.

“Those movers were awful. Things disappeared.” And the biggest insult: “They labeled my carved jade ‘bric-a-brac!’”

As much as he enjoyed his 30 years living downtown, Abramson’s favorite residence was his first apartment in Detroit on Six Mile Road, overlooking the Detroit Golf Course. “It was a beautiful Georgian-style building, with 3,000 square feet,” he says. “I loved that place, and I’d entertain often. I’d schlepp groceries up three flights of stairs. I couldn’t do that today.”

Though he’s slowed down, the gregarious Abramson still occa-

forever, but then they’re gone,” he says. “It’s just a moment in time.”

As he takes his visitor into the library, Abramson looks up at a large, vibrant painting he bought from the old Whittier Hotel in Detroit. It depicts a barefoot boy in a straw hat and overalls on a sun-splashed day, carrying fish he has caught, his lips puckered as if to emit a carefree whistle. “I like to think, that’s me,” Abramson says, his blue eyes brightening. “I’m happy-go-lucky, too.” ■