

MARY LIES OF MERCATO ITALIAN ANTIQUES AND ARTIFACTS

BRINGING ITALY HOME

STORY BY CLAIRE M. CATERER | PHOTOGRAPHY BY JASON DAILEY



I MAGINE USING A 1910 MILANESE
ICEBOX AS A MINI PANTRY. OR LOCKING
YOUR SECRETS IN A 19TH-CENTURY DESK
THAT ONCE SAT IN A TUSCAN TRAIN STATION.
MARY LIES, PROPRIETOR OF MERCATO ITALIAN
ANTIQUES AND ARTIFACTS IN DE SOTO, CAN
MAKE IT HAPPEN. SIMPLY PUT, LIES SAYS,
"WE GO TO ITALY. WE FIND GREAT THINGS. WE
BRING THEM HOME."

The Italian word *mercato* translates to "market," and that's what Mary has created in her wide, high-ceilinged space that mimics a warehouse with gray-washed walls and wood floors. She began the business in 2003 because Italian antiques were so scarce in the United States, and today Mercato showcases pieces that Mary imports from Italy herself.

"You could find English antiques, you could find French antiques," she says. "There wasn't anyone specializing in Italian antiques and that is what I liked."

Mary, 47, fell in love with the country of her ancestors when she spent a college year abroad in Florence. These days, she travels a couple of times a year to Italy, bases herself in Florence and hunts down unique items mostly from Tuscany and the surrounding area.

Longtime customer Carrie Brous is amazed that such an unusual resource sits in downtown De Soto. "She should be in New York City or L.A. But I'm glad she's not, because it keeps her prices so reasonable."



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Carrie has purchased several items from Mercato and values Mary's judgment. "She has exquisite taste," she says. "She knows color and incorporating antiques with modern elements."

Mary's design resources help her customers fit these Italian pieces into their current décor. When Carrie bought several terra-cotta roof tiles, Mary connected her with someone who crafted them into unique wall sconces.

Jill Phillips also appreciates that Mary looks at the functionality of each piece. "I've never seen anyplace like hers," says Jill.

While Mary's husband, Tim, and other family members help at the shop, her vision is what carries it. "I buy what I love," she says. "My store is 'Italy according to Mary.'"

Walking around her showroom, Mary praises the craftsmanship of her pieces. "Nothing in Italy was manufactured," she says, recalling an oversize bookcase that "was never in a store. It was made for someone's home."

Unlike other dealers, Mary doesn't frequent the overseas antique shows. Instead she relies on a network of Italian contacts to discover unusual yet beautiful objects. There's no substitute, she says, for getting to know a craftsman and learning the secrets of his trade. One Italian friend recently worked on restoring the altar at Florence's Basilica di Santa Croce. "They're masters," says Mary. "They know everything."

Once she's made a personal connection with a craftsman, he'll put aside special pieces for her, whether it's a wrought-iron chandelier or a small ladder once used for harvesting figs. Mary finds items that other dealers likely won't see.

Displayed at the front of the store is a framed page of 17th century parchment depicting Gregorian chant painted in the square notation prevalent at the time. The object is unique in itself, but that's nothing to the workmanship it represents, which can't be reproduced today. "You could never find someone to make that for you today," she says, adding that the skills and materials just don't exist anymore.

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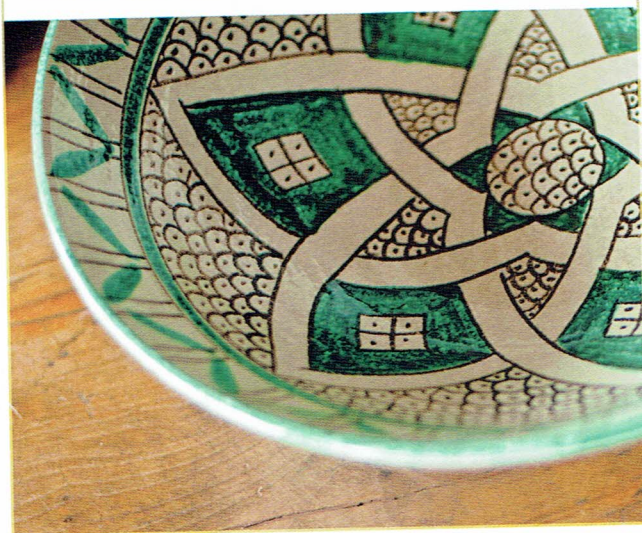
— MARY LIES





A TOUCH OF WHIMSY

THE BUON RICORDO PLATES ARE ONE OF MERCATO'S MORE AMUSING ITEMS. BUON RICORDO, WHICH MEANS "GOOD MEMORY," IS A UNION OF ITALIAN RESTAURANTS FORMED IN 1964. EACH CERAMIC PLATE COMMEMORATES A PARTICULAR RESTAURANT'S HOUSE SPECIALTY AND LOCATION. MERCATO HAS COLLECTED DOZENS OF DESIGNS FROM ALL OVER ITALY. THEIR COLORFUL, HAND-PAINTED IMAGES MAKE THEM A COVETED COLLECTOR'S ITEM.

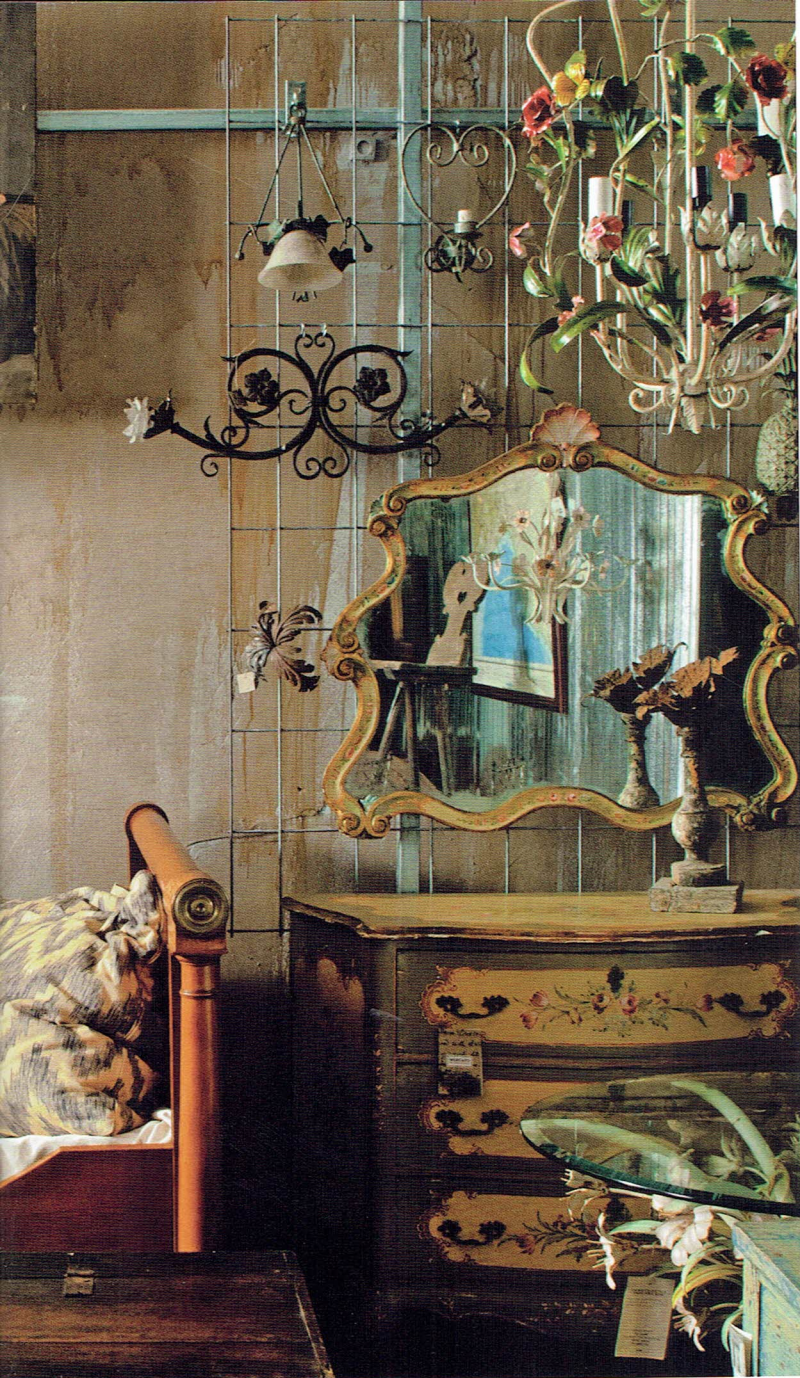


In addition to artistic pieces and architectural salvage, Mercato specializes in seating, tables, religious objects, lighting and ceramics. Almost all are antique; the rest evoke some part of Italy that touches Mary's heart. Her newest project is a line of tableware she's having made that echoes designs from 15th-century ceramics. The pieces will be hand thrown and hand painted, a Mercato original that links to the past.

Some enthusiasts deal in elaborate baroque or rococo objects, but Mary's taste tends to the classic lines of functional pieces. An 18th-century Tuscan dining table hints at big celebrations.

"I'm always curious about a piece," she says. "How many people sat down to this table to have a great meal?" That's the kind of information she brings home with her finds, which is part of her value as a direct importer.

Jill Phillips likens Mercato to a museum and Mary to a curator. "Every time you go there it's a different experience. She knows the story behind every piece."



Such stories evoke the Italian lifestyle that Mary adores. "Italians are the best," she says. "They really value time with their friends and families. They live with things that are important to them. They live with family heirlooms."

Mary and her family echo that spirit, opening the store to various events and hosting large dinners in their own home. Mercato's clients want to bring that way of life into their own living rooms.

"A lot of customers come if they really want and value unique things," Mary says. "Something different, something authentic, well made, that has character."

But it's more than that. Once you've experienced Italy, according to Mary, you want to hold on to it. "If you can just have a beautiful piece from that place that captures a wonderful moment in time spent in Italy, that's what people want and love." SM

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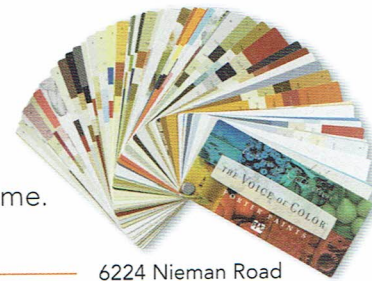
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