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HOME
FASHION
BEAUTY

Helene Florence
NEW ORLEANS

HOME

CUE IN

WINDOW ON THE EAST

INSPIRED BY HER LOVE OF HISTORY, EASTERN
CULTURE AND TEXTILES — HELENE FLORENCE
BREATHES NEW LIFE INTO PIECES FROM THE PAST.

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MAKE UP BY RANDALL WATTS
FOR CUT LOOSE HAIR STUDIO

Helene Florence
NEW ORLEANS



ONCE A PART OF A COLORFUL KIMONO, THIS PAIR OF BIRDS HAS BECOME THE CENTERPIECE OF A BELT DESIGNED BY HELENE.

On the day that I met Helene Florence, she was busy fielding the comings and goings of contractors she'd hired to open a wall in order to repair the worn pipes that were leaking. Like New Orleans itself, the infrastructure of the circa 1895 house she shares with her family — her husband, Rob, their three children, Bella, 8, Robert, 6, and Lilly, 5, and their dog, Clementine — had seen better days and was now rebelling. Yet for Helene, the beauty of the old far outweighs the allure of the new, and preservationists will be happy to know: the past is safe in her hands.

"I was a history major," says the petite beauty, whose slender figure, dark, exotic eyes, broad cheekbones and bohemian style is part prima ballerina and part gypsy enchantress. "I like old things. When we bought this house, we knew it was our forever house."

Having fallen for the weathered house itself rather than a notion of what it could be, Helene appreciates the massive pocket doors with stained-glass windows, the ornately carved moldings, the veiny cracks that are creeping up the faux-marbled walls, and the third-story balcony that feels like a bell tower overlooking the neighboring rooftops.

When she and her husband Rob bought the house in 1994, its amalgam of Mediterranean, Italianate, Moorish and Spanish Colonial features appealed to both their love of history as well as their predilection for the unconventional and offbeat. They have no plans to change any of the above in an effort to update it. So far, their home renovations — adding central air, a new kitchen and a passageway leading to the third floor, and doing some painting and repairs — have been designed for family living rather than for a making a contemporary design statement.

"I like to feel the history of the house," Helene says. "I wasn't about to start gutting it." That history, or alleged history as Helene calls it, includes some interesting details. According to the couple, the grand Esplanade Avenue house — along with the house next door — originally was built by an attorney and his brother. It later was owned by an honorary counsel of Austria and was reputed to be a brothel serving a socially elite clientele in the 1950s. Among the items that the Florences were delighted to find in the attic are an antique horn with the name Hanz, a fez and an assortment of old newspapers. "It's right up our alley to have that kind of history (here)," says Helene. "My imagination ran wild."

Last fall, she turned her fondness for old artifacts into a new business, called Belle Lille Designs after



THE HOUSE'S PREVIOUS OWNERS DESIGNED A CENTRAL AMERICAN-STYLE STAINED CEMENT TUB AND CREATED A HAND-PAINTED PAPER CEILING COLLAGE FOR THE MASTER BATHROOM. HELENE BOUGHT THE SILK KIMONO AT A FLEA MARKET IN KYOTO, JAPAN.



MADE IN FRANCE BY DELILL, THIS HAND-BEADED EVENING BAG WITH RAW JADE BELONGED TO ROB'S GRANDMOTHER.

A CHOKER HELENE PURCHASED YEARS AGO FROM WET DOG GLASS STUDIO IN THE FRENCH QUARTER



THE TWO ARMLESS SOFAS BY MITCHELL GOLD ARE MADE EVEN MORE INVITING WHEN YOU PULL UP THE OTTOMAN (PICTURED NEAR THE FIREPLACE) THAT HELENE COVERED WITH FABRIC FROM A KIMONO SHE PURCHASED IN JAPAN.

her two daughters. In addition to being a busy mom and helping her husband run their company, Historic New Orleans Tours, Helene turns vintage Japanese kimonos into wearable and decorative arts (an art known as kimono reform), such as chokers, belts, appliquéd tee shirts and collages.

"I love the idea of taking something beautiful and damaged and doing something new with it — giving it new life," she says.

Working with the past has dominated Helene's workdays for years. In the early 1990s, she put her degrees in French, history and American Studies to work as an education curator of Louisiana History and Culture at the Louisiana State Museum. And in 1996, she and Rob — a playwright who authored and co-photographed the book *New Orleans Cemeteries: Life In The Cities Of The Dead* — started the tour company. But what stands out about Helene is the unique, personal style that she brings to everything she does. Her bohemian

sensibility is clearly informed by her fascination with all things Asian and her passion for textiles, two subjects that have intrigued her since childhood when she admired the objects collected by a close family friend.

"I love the mystery around the Middle East and Far East," she says. "I must have been Asian in another life, because I have such an affinity for Asian culture."

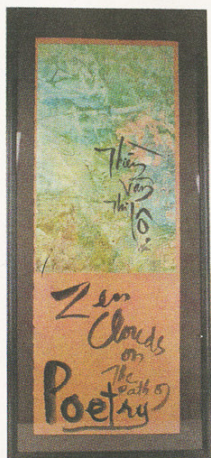
Twelve years ago, she and Rob traveled to Japan, Laos, Thailand, Cambodia and Vietnam. While visiting several Japanese flea markets, Helene was amazed to find kimonos carelessly strewn on the ground. She snapped up several and subsequently received others via her brother-in-law, a photojournalist who used to live in Japan. Though she'd wanted to rework the kimono fabric into new items for more than a decade, it wasn't until last year that she finally turned the idea into reality. Encouraged by her friend, designer Alexa Pultizer, and by her husband, Helene produced a

A PAIR OF CAMEO AND MARCASITE EARRINGS HELENE'S PARENTS BOUGHT FOR HER IN SICILY



THE COUPLE FOUND THE TWO CHINESE PANELS HANGING OVER THE BUFFET AT A FLEA MARKET IN NEW YORK'S HELL'S KITCHEN. THE RED VASE BY MARK ROSENBERG WAS A MOTHER'S DAY PRESENT PURCHASED AT JAZZ FEST.

WARMING UP THE DINING ROOM ARE A ZEGLER RUG THE FLORENCE BOUGHT FROM AN ANTIQUES DEALER IN FAIRHOPE, ALA., AND AN ANTIQUE SILK, HAND-EMBROIDERED CHINESE TAPESTRY, A GIFT FROM ROB'S PARENTS. THE DINING ROOM TABLE IS A WOODEN, HAND-PAINTED FOLDING SCREEN — THE SCENE IS OF A SLEEPING WOMAN IN A GARDEN SURROUNDED BY WEeping WILLOWS AND PEACOCKS — THAT THE COUPLE CONVERTED INTO A TABLE USING BRACKETS AND A CUSTOM GLASS TOP.



PAINTED BY A VIETNAMESE MONK THE COUPLE MET ON A TRIP TO ASIA MORE THAN A DECADE AGO, THIS FRAMED PIECE IS ONE OF A SERIES OF FOUR PAINTINGS THAT HANG NEXT TO THE FLORENCE'S STAIRCASE.



A FRENCH QUARTER FIND AND ONE OF A PAIR, THIS WOODEN STATUE IS THOUGHT TO BE OF INDIAN ORIGIN.



PRACTICING THE ART OF KIMONO REFORM — USING FABRIC FROM VINTAGE JAPANESE KIMONOS TO CREATE WEARABLE AND DECORATIVE ARTS — HELENE RECENTLY STARTED A NEW BUSINESS CALLED BELLE LILLE DESIGNS. SHE MAKES AND SELLS ONE-OF-A-KIND CHOKERS, BELTS, APPLIQUÉ T-SHIRTS AND COLLAGES. HER WORK IS AVAILABLE FOR PURCHASE AT PERCH (2844 MAGAZINE ST., 899-2122; WWW.PERCH-HOME.COM). HELENE ALSO SELLS DIRECTLY TO CUSTOMERS BY APPOINTMENT. CALL 874-2183 OR EMAIL HELENE.FLORENCE@YAHOO.COM FOR MORE INFORMATION.



group of pieces and hosted a trunk show party where friends and friends of friends bought out her inventory and began placing orders for more.

"I'm making things that I'd want to wear — one-of-a-kind, beautiful things," she says. "I like to have a unique look."

Naturally, evidence of her love of Asia, textiles and original, handmade creations is found in her wardrobe as well as her home. Helene's look often consists of basic black or neutral staples from places like Banana Republic paired with unusual accessories such as belts and necklaces. She gravitates to the striking and rare, the visual and sensual. She'd rather wear something no one else has than the label du jour. Some of Helene's most prized pieces are from a favorite Greenwich Village boutique that specializes in Israeli designers.

Kimonos hang upstairs on bedroom walls; watercolors painted by a Vietnamese monk, who lived in an abandoned pagoda, hang downstairs. Assorted pillows with an Eastern feel line the sleek, armless sofas in the living room. A Chinese tapestry given to the couple by Rob's parents and a pair of Chinese panels from a flea market in Manhattan hang in the dining room. Paintings and artworks in glass and clay by local artists, some of them close friends, are part of the harmonious convergence of objects as well. The common denominator among the various pieces is that most represent something more: a trip, a memory, a person, a culture.

"Our house reflects where we've been," Helene says. "I like putting things in the house that have some meaning. I'd rather wait and have blank walls than buy something that has no significance." [E]