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When All Else Fails, Apply Bamboo

By CONSTANCE ROSENBLUM

AS a child growing up in Jackson Heights, Queens, Masuo Ichida was bathed in the visual arts practically from the cradle. His father, Koji Ichida, an art historian and critic born in Japan, has written 15 books on art and antiques, and the family collected art for generations. Yet the son is as surprised as anyone that he has spent much of the past year designing and decorating his one-bedroom apartment in Morningside Heights.

“I have no design or art background,” Mr. Ichida said. Nevertheless, he has transformed his apartment “with no help other than some YouTube videos and advice from Home Depot clerks.”

His building, a nine-story prewar apartment house on West 109th Street, is familiar territory. Mr. Ichida’s parents lived here for a time after leaving Queens, as did his two sisters. Mr. Ichida moved into his apartment three years ago after sharing a studio next door with two roommates.

The space, which he rents for \$1,850 a month, was not only pocket-sized — under 450 square feet — but also in considerable disrepair. For two years, he lived with it. But last year he decided to make some changes in his life.

For the previous eight years he had been teaching at Frederick Douglass Academy, a Harlem public school, and was feeling burned out and eager to take a break. Time off would also give him the opportunity to fix up his place. So he applied for a leave and set to work.

To deal with the disreputable wooden floor in the living room, he consulted a clerk at Home Depot, who recommended covering the offending surface with strips of laminate.

“Then I watched a video on YouTube on how to laminate floors,” Mr. Ichida said. “It looked really easy — a piece of cake.” In fact, the task proved far more challenging than he had anticipated. “You have to snap together all the pieces, and the floor wasn’t totally level, and the edges were tricky.”

In the bathroom, the problem was the walls.

“They were horrible — layered with paint, wallpaper, and such a mess I couldn’t even scrape them” to make them smooth, Mr. Ichida said. In search of a solution, he drove to a company in central New Jersey called Bamboo and Rattan Works, bought 200 shoots of imported bamboo, and attached the shoots to the wall with lengths of twine.

“The bamboo stays up,” he said, “but the job took a week, and it was much harder than I expected. There’s no YouTube video for how to tie pieces of bamboo onto your walls.”

The tiny living room is made even tinier by the floor-to-ceiling plywood shelves that cover an entire wall and hold nearly 25,000 late-20th-century American prints. The collection was amassed largely by Mr. Ichida's father, and includes work by artists like Marisol and Lynn Sweat, familiar from the Amelia Bedelia books.

The son, who has added to the collection, is selling the prints through the Tokyo Arts Salon, a company founded by the father. The son is now president, and because he is still on leave, he has sufficient time to manage its affairs.

Mr. Ichida loves the art, but he is particularly proud of the shelves. He designed and built them himself, inspired by shelves he saw at a shop in Dumbo called Rare Posters. "There are no screws, no nails, no glue," he said. "It's just gravity holding the pieces together."

And the shelves are hardly his only creation. From the ceiling dangles a mobile — "I got the idea from Calder," he said — assembled from metal sheets, metal rods and a few paper clips from the stationery store around the corner. Using remnants from the shelves, which he had originally made too big, he built a lamp that he topped with a wooden wastepaper basket. He built another lamp using a large shoot of bamboo that he bought on Craigslist — three shoots for \$10.

Parts of old aquariums have been repurposed into works of art. Mr. Ichida doesn't know how to sew, but he created pillows using pieces of orange leather he bought on eBay, stapling them together inside out, turning them right side out and pinning the openings shut.

Unexpected touches abound. Rooms are separated not by doors but by lengths of bright fabric, much of it orange, Mr. Ichida's favorite color. A human anatomy poster by a Japanese artist covers a hole that resulted when a leak caused part of the ceiling to crash down. Décor includes a 40-inch-tall earthenware jar shipped from Japan and sculptures in which newspaper clippings about the Kyoto Protocol, the 1997 treaty on climate change, have been affixed to turquoise ceramic.

The kitchen is dominated by a steel dining table so heavy that Mr. Ichida barely managed to haul it up to his apartment, even with the help of a friend. He bought the table for \$75 on Craigslist, a Web site on which he is not ashamed to say he spends several hours a day.

Not surprisingly, the bedroom has a Japanese theme. Mr. Ichida, who was born in Japan, came to the United States with his family at age 2, but starting in his teens he has returned frequently.

A Lilliputian Shinto shrine, outfitted with miniature gilded furnishings and as adorable as a dollhouse, sits atop his dresser. A gold and black lacquer box from his mother holds the equipment needed for the traditional tea ceremony.

There are antique and modern samurai swords, Japanese prayer beads, a Japanese flag that covers cracks in the ceiling and a museum-quality wooden statue of a samurai that dates to the 13th century. A box containing prayers is made of wood from a temple destroyed during the Second World War.

The Japanese accents are understandable, but you have to wonder: How did Mr. Ichida become such a scavenger?

The answer is simple.

“I hate seeing things go to waste,” he said. “Especially in a neighborhood like this, where so much nice furniture gets thrown away. I get a great deal of pleasure from saving it, changing it and making it more usable.”

And his tasks are far from over.

“I’m thinking about making a dresser for my bedroom,” he said. “But I don’t really know how to do it. It might turn out to be a little much.”

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