

Vintage fur gets a new life

Designer's work also shines a light on reduce, reuse, recycle challenges

Kim Davis, Vancouver Sun

For the home, I am a fan of buying quality over quantity; of celebrating vintage and thrift; and of taking delight in anything I can deter from the landfill. (Reduce, reuse, recycle, chant the eco-columnists and design environmentalists, myself included.) That being said, the annual Interior Design Show West was a reminder that even the noble pursuits of reusing and recycling must negotiate moral and ethical tangles.

Browsing the isles of IDS West this year, the rich, visual tactility of Venetian Decor's booth offered an alluring contrast to the clean, smooth lines of many of its neighbours. Channelling old world craftsmanship, with a nod to B.C.'s history, Pamela Beattie, Venetian Decor's owner, upholster and designer, uses re-purposed fur coats, natural stuffing (wool and down), vintage rhinestone buttons and jewelry and low-impact finishes (no-VOC paint and lavender beeswax) to create finely crafted throw pillows, duvets and furnishings. Mixing boho, french, glamour, eco- and shabby-chic, Beattie's attention to quality and detail is obvious in each piece.

As someone who finds even faux fur a bit discomfoting, I couldn't help but wonder if and how vintage fur, whether worn or repurposed in furniture, fits into an eco mantra. Should it be treated the same as its virgin counterpart, shunned by many of us for animal rights issues (whether directly or symbolically)? Or should it be respected like any other natural resource? After all, recycling an old fur coat means that no animals need die today. It also means that no faux fur, with its own environmental issues -- pollution-creating, petroleum-based synthetics -- needs to be made to satisfy people's desire for this luxurious look.

Consider for a moment that there are thousands of fur coats and stoles hanging like guilty secrets in the back of closets across the country. Furry fashion from the 1940s, '50s, and '60s passed down from mothers and grandmothers who wore fox and mink, among others, long before any discussion of animal rights or the People for the Ethical Treatment of Animals began their high-profile "I'd rather go naked than wear fur" supermodel campaign.

Lucy Siegle, a British environmental broadcaster, journalist and author, thinks there are potential environmental benefits to recycling fur. But, like many others, she is concerned by the connotations of wearing fur for fashion's sake. In a recent article on AOL Living, Siegle is quoted as saying, "despite the practical case for recycling fur, the emotive politics remain. If you wear fur as a fashion item -- even if it's vintage -- there is an argument to say that, to some extent, you are perpetuating a taste for wearing real fur." Arguably the same could be said for the fur that fashions our homes.

For Beattie, who is quick to state that she does not promote the trapping and killing of animals, using vintage fur not only ensures historic resources are respected and their useful life extended, it also provides an opportunity to remember and acknowledge Canadian history. "I wanted to grasp some of that history," she says. "Pull it back and preserve it. There are so many people who would rather hide it under the carpet, sweep it away and pretend it never happened. We have to teach our children that it is part of us and has been since the beginning of time."

Beattie talks about how bringing together a grandmother's fur coat and a great-grandfather's smoking chair can create the foundation for a functional piece of history; one that can be used and enjoyed in our homes today. "I truly believe that I have found a final resting place for these animals," she says. "A way to say that 'we appreciate and respect you.'"

Given the new "waste not want not" approach to textiles, coupled with the fact that vintage fur can last up to 100 years, Beattie's commitment to preservation by re-purposing the remnants of our fur-trading past makes sustainable sense -- economically, environmentally and socially. Her message and motto, "old world with a new twist" is certainly ringing well and true with people who have discovered Venetian Decor. "I'm really impressed with the response," Beattie says. "I was quite nervous, but it is something I really have a passion for. "I feel I am doing something for our world, our history and our children. Embracing and preserving our history, and appreciating and respecting the animals that were part of it." For more information, visit venetiandecor.ca on the Internet.

Have fur, but would like some ideas of what to do with them? Consider donating it to animal rights organizations for educational aids; to theatre groups for costuming; or animal rescue shelters, where furs are used to provide cozy, familiar-feeling beds to young and infant residents.

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Photograph by : Handout photo
Wrapped in reminders, now controversial, of the luxuries of another place and time, Venetian Decor's wares are also wrapped in Canadian history, says owner Pamela Beattie (above). 'I feel I am doing something for our world, our history and our children: embracing and preserving our history, and appreciating and respecting the animals that were part of it.'

