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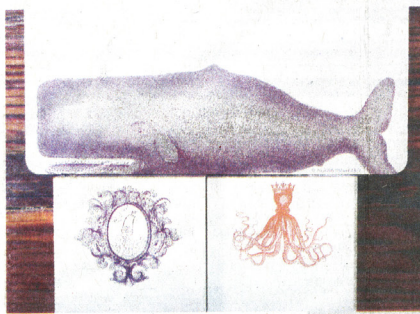
NOLA.COM/LIVING COMPLETE LIFESTYLE COVERAGE

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A sweater from LiaMolly, a knitwear collection designed by Seema Sudan



A painting by New Orleans artist Sarah Ashley Longshore was reproduced as upholstery on this wooden chair. PHOTO COURTESY OF ANTHROPOLOGIE



Stationery designed by Alexa Pulitzer

Work by six New Orleans artists, from left, Helene Florence, Seema Sudan, Alex Williams, Sarah Ashley Longshore, Shelley Hesse and Alexa Pulitzer, was picked up by Anthropologie. The company sent scouts to New Orleans last year to find new talent.

PHOTOS BY BRETT DUKE / THE TIMES-PICAYUNE
PHOTOGRAPHED AT THE CONTEMPORARY ARTS CENTER



Arti\$ts in residence

Upscale home and fashion retailer Anthropologie taps the 'hotbed of talent' in New Orleans to create one-of-a-kind designs for its 140 stores.



SUSAN LANGENHENNIG

Fashion

Aaron Hoey has one of those enviable jobs, traveling the globe, cherry-picking artists for collaborations with Anthropologie, the upscale chain beloved for its bohemian mix of women's fashion and home decor.

But in all that crisscrossing of continents, Hoey and company always had skipped over New Orleans.

"In my gut, there was this feeling there was some place in our own backyard we were missing," said Hoey, divisional home merchandise manager for the Philadelphia-based chain. "We're constantly on the search for new creative people, talented artists who may be undiscovered. Last year, we got to New Orleans, and we fell in love with all the characters."

That love has blossomed into a series of collaborations with local artists.

Work by sweater designer Seema Sudan, painters Shelley Hesse and Sarah Ashley Longshore, potter Alex Williams, T-shirt and accessories designer Helene Florence and stationer Alexa Pulitzer can now be spotted among Anthropologie's eclectic product mix.

Some of those products — a chair upholstered with a watery print based on a Longshore painting, and a line of pillows, bedding and plates featuring Hesse's pastel parrots and sea life designs — debut today, when Anthropologie's newest catalog hits mailboxes around the country.

For a closer look, locals will have to wait until August, when the company's first New Orleans store opens in The Shops at Canal Place.

Anthropologie — or "Anthro" to the initiated — peddles an escapist experience. Each store is a vintage-inspired curiosity

See FASHION, C-6

Artists' work will adorn linens, plates, stationery

FASHION from C-7

shop, designed so that you'll wander around, blithely picking up embroidered sweaters, voile sundresses, floral-patterned plates and glass-handled door knobs and wonder, "How have I ever lived without this?"

A masterful visual merchandising team sets the scenes. Trestle tables are stacked with dainty dessert plates and hefty art books. Iron lamps are topped with frilly shades. Tailored jackets with nipped-in waists are slung over wide-legged trousers. Silk scarves spill out of bureau drawers.

Unabashedly feminine birds, butterflies and flowers are popular themes, finding their ways onto necklaces, tea cups and pillow cases.

The aesthetic is finely honed, merging the needs of a retail store with the sensibilities of a Kate Chopin novel. It's a world that's easy to glide into and get lost. That's the goal, said Hoey, who describes the concept as "stepping into a fantasy."

For shoppers, a step back into reality typically comes at the cash register. Those chairs that seem like a one-of-a-kind flea market find can come with a five-digit price tag.

Anthropologie is a fast-growing division of Urban Outfitters Inc. It operates 140 stores, most of them stateside, but with three in Canada and two much-buzzed-about locations in London, including one that boasts a "living wall," a 50-foot-tall vertical garden sprouting up the interior.

Merchandise changes frequently to keep the shelves fresh and the customers hungry.

Finding all that stuff requires lots of legwork. But Hoey and the team of buyers and executives who arrived in New Orleans in February 2009 had some help, thanks to Seema Sudan.

Sudan is the designer of LiaMolly, a colorful knitwear collection. Before moving to New Orleans and starting her own line, she was the senior sweater designer for Anthropologie, and her former colleagues are now her customer. Anthropologie carries LiaMolly sweaters and a seasonal children's

collection designed by Sudan.

In conversations and e-mails with Anthro staff members, Sudan would describe the Crescent City as a place that "oozes talent."

"There's an authenticity here that I knew they would get," she said.

So when they were ready to see for themselves, Sudan helped line up a three-day itinerary. On a whirlwind tour, they packed in visits to artists' studios with lunch at Galatoire's, a trip to the Mother-in-Law Lounge, a tour of the 9th Ward and a sampling of sweets at Sureau.

The studio visits struck gold, opening the door for local artistic collaborations.

Hesse's watercolor paintings were turned into pillows, platters, organic cotton bedding and a rug. Her images of parrots and cockatiels, seashells and a spiny blue lobster now can be found on embroidered linen, dishwasher-safe ceramics and hand-hooked wool.

Longshore, a pop artist whose paintings often feature larger-than-life representations of desserts, weapons and Audrey Hepburn, worked with the company to produce an upholstered chair modeled after one of her pieces.

Another collaboration with Longshore is in the works, but Hoey kept the details close: "All I can say is that it involved sending her to Portugal to hand paint some products for us and it will debut in mid-April at our new Chelsea store (in New York)."

Alexa Pulitzer created a new line of stationery exclusively for Anthropologie. It features whales and anchors and octopuses on slender note pads and round-cornered mouse pads.

"Working with them is truly a collaboration," she said. "I can present designs, and they'll come back to me and say what about this?"

Alex Williams churned out 1,100 vases and bowls



Shelley Hesse's artwork was reproduced on linen pillows



A bowl by Alex Williams of Potsalot studio.



Anthropologie picked up two Japanese-inspired tops by Helene Florence last fall. PHOTOS BY BRETT DUKE / THE TIMES-PICAYUNE

last year from his Potsalot studio on Magazine Street for delivery to select Anthro stores. "It was the biggest order I've ever had," he said. "We had to hire another part-time employee."

Helene Florence is a small-scale New Orleans designer, who makes one-of-a-kind T-shirts, obi-style belts and bib necklaces from vintage kimono fabrics and other found objects. Before Anthropologie, she sold only at local trunk shows.

The company picked up two of Florence's sleeveless Japanese-infused shirt designs and mass-produced them. They hit stores and online last fall. "They looked remarkably like the one-of-a-kind pieces Helene did," said Kathy Gross, divisional

apparel merchandise manager. "They sold especially well online."

Picking up so many artists in one spot isn't typical, Hoey said. "But there just so happened to be a hotbed of talent there."

With that in mind, the Anthro group already has plans to swing back through New Orleans for another scouting trip in May.

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