

HOUSE AND HOME

Weird and wonderful accessories

Nicole Swengley marvels over new curiosity cabinets and terrariums, while Michael Clerizo enjoys high-end aquariums

As anyone wandering around Sotheby's flagship store in London recently might have guessed, over the clear and coloured bell-jars on sale. After all, these glass domes mean more suitable for a science laboratory than an interior department.

But vintage glass apothecary bottles, bell-jars and glass-and-wood display cabinets are emerging as a popular decorative accessory for trend-conscious homeowners. Why? Because they evoke perfect "curiosity cabinet".

Victorian and Edwardian display cabinets and bell-jars make ordinary things look extraordinary," says Jerome Leck, who sells a range of examples, either empty or filled with temporary additions, such as terra-cotta votive figurines, from San Cristobal de Chile, his store in west London.

"The many of our interior furnishings are standardised these days and this is one small way in which homeowners are rebelling against the style dictators. They're wood, metal and not particularly expensive. [And] they're perfect for displaying collections of any kind. The Victorian filled ones with natural history items - shells, butterflies, seeds - but imagine putting a steaming vintage handbag inside or a stack of coloured glassware."

Mass sales come from Paul Smith's quirky new cabinet in Dorset, which is full of curios and hand-painted, glass-fronted wooden cases

"If one more person walks into this store and mentions 'Finding Nemo', I'll scream," he says with a smile

stocked with toys and kitchen clutter. Smith bought his cabinets in Dorset but late Victorian English examples frequently feature in weekly sales of furniture and decorative objects at Christie's South Kensington.

Artist Aligned Lane's passion for curiosity cabinets is evident in the London home that doubles as a base for her company, Sherrona Danford. "I've always loved the aesthetic of curiosities," she says. "Glass display cases make the most beautiful, most precious and glamorous. They focus your attention in a similar way to picture frames."

"The glass shelves of a cross-sectioned globe cabinet placed in her bedroom are filled with perfume bottles, a vase and a book. A wooden, glass-fronted display cabinet in the living space makes a great repository for jewellery. A big, bevelled metal cabinet houses an ever-changing selection of objects developed in connection with her work, while a wall cabinet is filled with vintage watches. It is a wonder. There's even a bell-jar containing stuffed ostrich.

Living landscapes

Tony Hayward is a horticultural designer who recently started curating extraordinary miniature landscapes

inside bell-jars for clients. "I think there's a renewed interest in curios and apothecary presented in glass cases, [and] these living artworks, which create their own micro-climates, are a contemporary twist on this idea," he says.

The first book Tony featured a "garden under glass" from the company English Creek Gardens in its fashion and style pages late last year. The company sells bell-jars with terracotta, brass and apothecary jars which its website shows filled with fruit such as lemons or red or green apples.

Haywood's designs, which were featured in a recent exhibition at Debenham, a Shropshire gallery, include weirdly shaped, sub-tropical plants, succulents, air plants, moss, fibrous and inert elements (shagreened glass, resin, crystals, volcanic rocks) and geological samples in jars hand-painted with cartoonish graphics and images inspired by 1930s pulp fiction. There's a science-fiction feel to these living landscapes as if they've escaped from a mad professor's laboratory. Each installation comes with a miniature manual and appliances for feeding and watering.

"As a landscape designer, it's the living content that matters most for me," says Hayward. "I'm also intrigued by the concept of homeowners interweaving with an internet through feeding and watering it." Inspiration came from several sources: the Japanese tradition of *niwaki* in which landscapes represent mythical gardens; miniature Chinese gardens where rocks imitate mountains; the miniature alpine gardens with the Victorian raised on planks; and the horticulturists that were so popular with English hipsters in the 1970s.

Dodd reckons that terrariums - those miniature indoor greenhouses beloved by the Victorians - are the next iteration of the trend. Structures in house plants can be bought from garden specialists, such as The Chelsea Garden and Chelsea Nurseries in London, while artist Ron Gladkowski creates bespoke versions.

"Terrariums go in and out of fashion but there's always a market for them," says Stephen Dixon, house plant manager at Chelsea Nurseries. "We can find them all, unless that they are obsolete."

The Nemo effect

It's not often that a curious difference between cities. But according to Young, officer of outdoor magazine Practical Living, a 2003 file from Australia's powerhouses Pismo did exactly that.

"A few years ago we noticed that more people were interested in having their own decorations," the explanation. "They're beautiful, they're so easy to look at and these days easy to care for. [But] interest really increased after *Picking Nemo*."

Jeremy Stannard of Sotheby's Tropical Marine (STM) in Kent, one of the UK's leading marine retailers, confirms the phenomenon. "We see more people walk into this store and mention *Picking Nemo*, I'll scream," he says with a smile.

Although he acknowledges that the Nemo effect has ebbed and that STM's customers are still mainly hobbyists, he says that some people are buying



Curious and curious: shelves from top, Paul Smith's new outfit in Borough Market; an aquarium designed by Digital Liquid; an English Creek Gardens apothecary jar; and Superbotanic, one of Tony Hayward's bell-jar landscapes



terrariums or fashionable home accessories, as well as housing for fish. "When the Nemo people saw what else goes into a tank, they realised they were looking at an alternative type of decoration," he says.

Great Britain, a family-based business and father of three, recently hired STM to install a high-end aquarium in his newly enlarged home. "As a child I had a tropical fish tank, which I gained enormous enjoyment from, so 20 years later with children of my own and a hole in a wall to fill on the roof of a building project I thought it would be interesting to create a 'living wall' between the original house and the new one," he says.

Another STM client commissioned a 10 ft by 6 ft by 6 ft tank with its own water supply on a roof divider. The "cool system" cost £20,000 and incorporated hard and soft corals, floating and oxygenic aquatic plants and a variety of jellies and snails. In addition to fish and other creatures such as shrimp, snails, crabs and star fish, as well as lesser-known brackish water and their relatives, the system.

The infrastructure includes pumps, filters, water pipes and nozzles, all usually located in "hidden" spaces and chambers outside the house or under the aquarium. And computers do most of the maintenance work.

Digital Liquid, one London marine retailer, has designed and installed elaborate, hi-tech systems for kitchens, home bars, under-stair cupboards

and the walls of a shower. Most customers who buy tanks for decorative purposes "are busy people who work long hours, some of them travel a lot, some of them have families," says salesman George Davy.

Best systems need therefore to ensure to keep an optimum balance with water levels, temperature and the amount of oxygen, salt, calcium, algae and assorted proteins present in the tank of automatically monitored and controlled. Lights are programmed to mimic the movement of the sun across the sky, sunrise, noon, twilight, sunset and darkness.

Even feeding is done electronically with trays that store enough food for 20 days, which is then released when appropriate. Most marine retailers will sell these and regularly the recommended for a fee from £25 to £200 per

month. This also covers the cost of emergency visits.

"Marine aquariums are billed as a nightmare to maintain but [our] tank is virtually maintenance free," Scriver says. "Clean the glass, feed the fish and replace any of your tubes will take care of the rest."

GARDENS IN A BOTTLE

- Tony Hayward, www.conceptgardens.co.uk
- www.englishcreek.com
- www.digitalliquid.co.uk
- www.dobogardens.co.uk
- www.fan-gardens.com
- www.ste-shops.co.uk
- www.digital-liquid.co.uk

