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Welcoming and comforting, grandmillennial style brings vintage home

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If you traveled back in time to your grandmother's house, its rooms likely were a warm hug of chintz, tassels, embroidery and toile wallpaper.

That's exactly the mood that Antha Ann wanted in her 1924 Detroit home, filling its grand rooms with tufted pillows, lush fabrics, an upright piano and painted china cabinet along with her grandmother's well-tailored couch and chairs. It's a look that may remind you of your own grandma — and that's exactly the point.



A tailored hutch becomes a fun display case as well as a bar when the mood hits right for dinner parties at Antha Ann's home in Detroit. The only new item in the room is the dining table, which has some of Ann's 350 plants on and around it.
Antha Ann

It's a style that interior designers call grandmillennial, and it's a something homeowners like Ann and decorators in Metro Detroit and across the county say will continue for years to come. Credit the pandemic or just the desire for cozy vibes. Grandmillennial is the kind of interior design where heritage, hand-me-downs and homeyness is central to the overall look.



Carlton Varney created a cozy library of deep Irish green with a bold red plaid carpet and bright green sofa. The Joan Crawford portrait was from the actress herself when she was a client. *Carlton Varney*

“Being colorful and aware of a bit of yesterday is very important for the future,” said interior-design legend Carlton Varney, best known for his work in Mackinac Island’s Grand Hotel and his revival of Dorothy Draper’s enduring designs. “People like touches of the past. That’s why they go into the great houses of Europe — they want to see how they’ve been layered from one generation to another. They’re quality.”

Grandmillennial is a term coined around 2019 when House Beautiful writer Emma Bazilian described the rise of this style and persona. She described a grandmillennial or “granny chic” as someone of that generation who posts about decor on Instagram and has a passion for traditional design that brings in florals, chintz, doilies galore and over-the-top yet whimsical style.

Varney said what makes grandmillennial so warm is that it rejects the minimalist style. You can layer older items with newer, quality pieces. If something is a bit worn, you can give it fresh life with paint. If you have large collections, like photos or artwork, you can create dramatic wallscapes of paintings and portraits. These items are personal, Varney said, rather than generic big-box stuff.

“Take the things from your ancestors and bring them back to life,” Varney said. “You can take your mother’s night tables and maybe paint them a beautiful sky blue. You still have the quality of the furniture. This is the age of painted furniture — when you do that, you create something special.”



The same goes for artwork and accessories. “With wallscapes, you can do big things and make groupings with what your ancestors have. I like to walk through a room where people who live in the house know what they’re hanging. It’s not just bought from a calendar store,” Varney said.

Ann and other grandmillennial fans say they aren’t living in the past. Rather, they are honoring the quality of beloved brands, their family’s timeless style and the generational heirlooms they feel lucky to have in their homes.

Mixing it up

Ann, a 34-year-old senior art director, says she blends current trends and personal items in among her grandmother’s treasures. Her home isn’t all nostalgia — she has her own boho aesthetic, a Baby Yoda plush, lots of dog toys and more than 350 plants. Seen together, it is grandmillennial and Ann’s North Rosedale Park respite from the world.

“I started collecting vintage furniture in my early 20s when I was a burlesque performer. ... There’s a piece of vintage furniture in every room, many of which passed down from our families,” Ann said. “In many instances, our pieces are as sentimental as functional.”

What Ann and other grandmillennial advocates also appreciate about this trend is its environmentally friendly nature. Why throw something out when it is likely well made and useful?

“Vintage is sustainable,” said Rachel Britts, manager of Vitrine on Main in Plymouth, a store that curates a collection of fashion, home goods, accessories and gifts, where grandmillennial style is all the rage.

“Grandmillennial is literally me. It’s my style. I was thrift shopping when it wasn’t cool,” Britts said. “Now that it’s a trend, all of us who were into vintage or antiques are ahead of the game.”

In fact, grandmillennial has brought back some old trends in a fresh and exciting way. People looking to keep their hands busy and away from their addictive smartphones have brought back needlepoint, embroidery, knitting and other grandmotherly crafts, said Melissa MacLeod, owner of Grosse Pointe-based the Wool and the Floss.

MacLeod credits grandmillennial style and social media in part for keeping her business going during the pandemic. Over the past two years, one of the most popular things MacLeod created with her staff are unboxing videos for Instagram as well as a YouTube podcast about crafting the items they love, just like grandmas did.

“A lot of new, young designers are creating fun, cheeky designs,” MacLeod said. “They’re not just flowers on a square. You might see a ruffled pillow and the design might say something like, ‘If this ends up in a garage sale, I’ll come haunt your a--.’ It’s not language for your grandmother’s ears, but it’s making this new again.”

If you want to bring some grandmillennial into your home, Sarah Hoffman said the style is more flexible than people may think. Hoffman is the founder of Affordably Chic Art, an online retailer that specializes in antique, vintage and new décor as well as original artwork.

Bookshelves are a great place to highlight your grandmillennial style, adding family portraits and collectables to the shelves. The family doesn’t even have to be yours to be part of the display.

Hoffman’s own home and popular Instagram account is filled with blue and white porcelain, Chinoiserie, vintage needlepoint pillows, tassels and more. Some came from her estate-sale hunts with her mom; others are the influence of her 102-year-old grandmother, who still is setting trends, Hoffman said.



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Telling a story

“If you don’t have family china or silverware that’s been passed down, you can make your own traditions and find the things you love,” Hoffman said. “When you purchase antique and vintage pieces, you are honoring those things and giving them a new leg on their journey. I always wonder: What has this plate seen? Who ate with this silverware? I love imagining the stories.”

Hoffman encourages grandmillennial fans to go with their maximalist urges, adding as much as they want plus knowing that modern or new pieces can be layered in as well.

“People are putting their own twist on it. Your whole home doesn’t need to be decked out in antiques. You can have a great mix,” Hoffman said. “You can put a new sisal or natural-texture rug with a traditional sofa or pull out that vintage silver for a girl’s night. There’s no right or wrong. If you love something, you should enjoy it.”

Key to Hoffman and other designers is that these pieces are to be used — they’re not meant to be so precious that they sit behind glass or in a cabinet for another generation (unless you really want to do that).

“You can think outside of the box with these vintage pieces. They’ve lasted this long — don’t be afraid to use them,” Hoffman said. “Think about a secretary desk. You can open it up, set it up as a bar or use it to serve at a party. It’s so versatile.”

Grandmillennial Ann said her grandmother would be proud of the style she’s developed, full of upbeat colors, her grandmother’s treasures and memories of their years together.

“It’s your home. Make it happy,” Ann said.