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VINTAGE ALL OVER AGAIN

Call it kitsch. . . or call it vintage style, but beneath the retro craze lies a yearning for the comforting imagery of a bygone day BY CAROL POLSKY, STAFF WRITER

Retro style is enjoying yet another 15 minutes on the pop culture whirligig, with designs from the Jazz Age through the Reagan years showing up everywhere from Tiki bars to car showrooms.

Old Navy commercials and television programs such as "That '70s Show" celebrate - and parody - icons of bygone days. There are vintage gowns on movie stars and vintage T-shirts on hip youths. Cocktail shakers and reproduction Bakelite radios are going 'round again. Desk phones, mid-century furniture, retro wall calendars, toys, comic books, toasters, kitchen mixers. Restoration Hardware's bestselling holiday gift item is a 1950s-styled portable record player.

"Retro is everywhere," says Leslie Rosenberg, who three years ago co-founded ATOMIC Magazine with Jeff Griffith (wearer of custom zoot suits and spats) to cover retro culture "from the 1920s to the early 1960s, from Prohibition to Camelot." It now boasts a circulation of 50,000 among "young urban professional hipster types," she says.

There's a certain kitschy, tongue-in-cheek appeal to the retro look, she says, but its popularity goes beyond that: "I think people need a sense of balance. You can balance the excitement and novelty of modern innovations with the comfort and aesthetic appeal of what was revolutionary 50 or 60 years ago."



"Of course, past styles recycle through the culture periodically: In the 1970s, the '50s enjoyed a fashionable moment with the success of the musical "Grease," the TV show "Happy Days," the movie "American Graffiti," and the rockabilly music fad. Dior's full-skirted New Look after World War II looked back at 19th century ballgowns, and the theme of the 1939's World Fair (harbinger of much innovative design) was "colonial revival."

But today's sampling - which cuts a swath from the '20s to the '80s, transmuted with each fashion season - is like a high-speed strip-mining of the past for fresh imagery to sell.

Leslie Rosenberg and Jeff Griffith, at Wokko Wokko, publish Atomic Magazine, catering to the retro lifestyle.

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