



Secondhand Pros

FOR THRIFT-STORE AFICIONADOS, THE BOSTON AREA IS RICH IN THE FINE AND THE FUNKY. BY CLEA SIMON

With its displays of crystal, fine china, and silver serving dishes, the packed storefront could be a luxury boutique. But with an Orrefors vase priced at \$75 and several of those silver chafing dishes costing less than \$100, it quickly becomes clear to even the casual browser that this 48-year-old Charles Street shop is a treasure trove in disguise. True, every item in the tiny Beacon Hill Thrift Shop is secondhand, donated by one of the store's many supporters, so the inventory can be unpredictable, but for thrift-store aficionados, that just makes their bargain finds more precious.

Not that value must be measured in sterling or Wedgwood patterns. Across the Charles River in Cambridge's Inman Square, the three-year-old Abso-

lutely Fabulous sets a different standard. There, exemplifying what owner Mara Loeber calls her funky-chic aesthetic, 1950s style rules, with vintage cocktail pitchers (under \$30) set up invitingly next to molded fiberglass chairs designed by Herman Miller (\$185).

The Boston area offers a full range of thrift-store shopping. Charity groups like the Salvation Army have outlets around Greater Boston with a wide, and often basic, range of items for sale. Other thrift stores are private, for-profit ventures in which the owners scour personal collections and estate sales to buy appropriate merchandise for resale. Still other stores offer wares on consignment, basically acting as the middle man for private vendors in return for a percentage of the sales price.

With all that's available, bargain hunters can furnish their homes in haute or cool style. "It's the thrill of the hunt," says Patrick McGrath, a West Roxbury homeowner who browses thrift stores at least a couple of times a week.

Although he is always on the lookout for the Roseville pottery he collects, he's open to any good bargain. He has found quality shelving for his house, as well as books, records, clothes, and an impressive array of kitsch Hawaiian-style ceramic Tiki mugs.

"Anything can be anywhere, so I don't shop in any sort of methodic way," says McGrath, who still remembers his first thrift-store purchase, a \$20 armchair bought in 1974. "That's how I plug in to the great thrift-store mandala."

For those in search of specific treasures, location often defines merchandise. To find thrift shops where goods are not picked over by hip bargain hunters, McGrath recommends getting out of town. "My Tiki mugs all come from retirement communities in Florida," he says.