

CHRISTENE
BARBERICH

cottage industry

For John and Monique Davidson, the designers behind leather-goods label J&M Davidson, home isn't just a break from business, it's a touchstone for everything they offer—from handbags and hides to linens and leather belts. CITY peeks inside their West London townhouse.

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FOR SOME PEOPLE, WHEN THE FIVE O'CLOCK WHISTLE BLOWS, the reports are shelved, the proposals are filed, and the Blackberry goes into silent mode. And then there are those who take their work home with them, which isn't exactly a burden for U.K.-based leather-goods connoisseurs John and Monique Davidson. Their work is often shaped like a sexy bag or a sleek belt.

As the creatives behind J&M Davidson, a leather line that has recently added apparel and home items to its repertoire, John and Monique live in and among their work. Upon entering the couple's West London townhouse, one finds belts on mantelpieces and bags on seats. Plush piles of patterned cushions—samples from the couple's Maison line—are nestled on a plump loveseat; well-worn hides are scattered about on the aged wood floors; and watercolor images of women toting the couples' handbags punctuate icy-pale walls.

It's quickly apparent that this is not an English house simply to be admired, but a home to be seriously lived in. "Things are not perfect here," John says of the house they bought more than 20 years ago. "But that's a big part of why it all seems to work so well."

The Davidsons' Queen Anne Revival-style house was built in 1870 in the world's first garden suburb, Bedford Park. "All the houses were designed by Richard Norman Shaw with a lot of studios for artists, which, at the time, charged reasonable rents," John shares. "We were attracted to the property initially because of the fireplaces and all the original features that were still in place." Around every corner, another element, upon close inspection, reveals its pedigree. In the conservatory, for example, impeccably preserved ceramic tiles (the couple had additional tiles expertly copied when they renovated years ago) and stained-glass windows are all original. As for those fireplaces, there are six in all.

Drifting from room to room, there is a textural, often sensuous, uninterrupted harmony—classics dance with contemporary, English tradition marries with French flair. This kind of organic intermingling has become the aesthetic hallmark not just for the couple's home, but for their lifestyle brand as well.

John, an Englishman, and Monique, who is French, met on a beach in Spain, near Cadaques, and began their business in London in 1984. "We both have always loved accessories, especially belts," says John, who, with Monique, loves to tell the story that the entire company began with one single belt. "We made our first design from a lengthened dog collar," he recalls. "We knew from the start what a powerful transforming quality a basic accessory like a belt could have on a look."

Though the company has since blossomed to become an international arbiter of luxe knitwear, homegoods, and, of course, sumptuous leather bags (all produced in the company's factory outside Manchester, England), it is still that staunch focus on the details that beautifully feeds the Davidsons' surroundings at work and at home.

Evidence of the couple's ongoing world travels is found in every room: A collection of ceramic bowls and vases from Japan coexists with a lifetime's gathering of antique French furnishings and pieces from local London markets. The Davidsons are longtime fans of the clean Nordic style of Carl Larsson (there's an old Aga cooker in the kitchen), and the serene canvas they've created is ideal for bringing such eclectic finds as Monique's coveted 1950s Murano mirrors and collection of chandeliers into sharper focus.

"We love to mix up contemporary elements with older, offbeat pieces," says John. "It's elements of the unexpected that we like so much."

Back in the conservatory, one of the couple's favorite rooms, a 100-



This page: The conservatory with a zebra print hide on the sofa; bags were produced in that same material. The tiles and the stained glass windows — a signature of houses in the area — are both original to the house. Opposite page, top left: Illustrations by Tanya Ling mix with family photos. Opposite page, far right: Teapots, cups, and saucers rest near the Aga cooker — the pride and joy of John, the designated cook. Opposite page, bottom: In the bathroom, French linens; similar styles are sold in the shop.

This page: On the mantel, a vignette of J&M Davidson belts, family photographs, candles from the Maison line, and pieces from the Davidsons' blue-and-white porcelain collection. Opposite page, left: In the lounge, animal hides are strewn over a chair. A similar style hide will be used for bags next season. Opposite page, right: In the kitchen, Monique and John hold court at the kitchen table. Opening page: A bed and a glass chandelier from the couple's travels fill the bedroom. On the door hangs the Dylan bag in a woven fabric.





year-old sofa from France is draped with a zebra-printed calf skin, a remnant from a run of the designers' popular travel tote.

With their collections continually expanding, the two admit to using their own London address (as well as their country house in Normandy) as a working laboratory. Prototypes of handbags in crimson, sage green, and metallic gold hang from various doorknobs and the backs of dining room chairs. "They're more like decoration," says John, though it's clear that there's also a bit of in-house test-driving happening here. If the designers can't peek over their Sunday paper, spot a work-in-progress, and acknowledge its potential, then the customers won't see it either.

Traditional decor—like the works watercolorist Tanya Ling painted of the Davidsons' designs—is relegated to the couple's gallery on Golborne Road. This February, the gallery, which shows fashion-inspired illustrations, will exhibit the work of painter Alice Gates.

Although the couple spends much of the year on the road, their home offers a soothing detachment from the busy London life surrounding them. "We like the way that different parts of the house are used at different times of the year," Monique says. "The garden in the summer, the conservatory in the spring, and the kitchen and dining rooms in winter for entertaining."

Having just celebrated the company's 20th anniversary, the Davidsons are poised to further grow their brand—with much of Europe and Asia conquered, China and Russia are next. But London will always be home to their flagship store and for the couple. "This city is always surprising us," says John. "It's an inspiring place to be, especially if you're doing something creative. Living here makes all the difference."

J & M Davidson, 42 Ledbury Road, London W11; (44 20) 7313-9532.

J & M Davidson Gallery, 97 Golborne Road, London W10; (44 20) 8969-2244.

Go to www.jandmdavidson.co.uk