

DESIGN & DECORATING

Haute Style From Humble Furniture

Designers no longer dismiss vintage wood pieces without pedigree as 'brown furniture.' Instead, they elevate them as crucial elements of décor

BY KATHRYN O'SHEA-EVANS

THE FURNITURE at San Francisco designer Justin Colombik's grandparents' house in Highland Park, Ill., was what you might see at a funeral home, he said: a faux-Chippendale dining table here, a pair of Hollywood Regency-style coffee tables there. Still, when his grandparents moved to Florida, Mr. Colombik showed up with a U-Haul and filled it with furniture.

In an age when new home goods can have the lifespan of a meme, designers like Puccini Group's Mr. Colombik are newly appreciating "brown furniture." The term refers to modest antique and vintage wooden pieces with traditional silhouettes, which have been out of vogue for decades. But now pros and laypeople are not

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only holding on to hand-me-downs, they're buying other people's. Online marketplace 1stdibs reports that between 2017 and 2018, sales of early 20th-century reproductions of 19th-century furniture styles increased 40%.

Part of the appeal: These "low-born" pieces are well-made and inexpensive. That 1stdibs jump included only furniture costing less than \$2,000. At press time, Chairish listed 232 traditional wood preowned dining tables for under \$1,000, including an English Oak Drop Leaf Table With Barley Twist Legs, circa 1920, marked down to \$299.

"Shockingly we've found great deals at Sotheby's and Christie's," said Hoboken, N.J., designer Jenny Madden. "Often they're auctioning off a whole estate, and you can get good deals on pieces that don't

have the same history as others."

Pros and homeowners value the soulfulness these patinated pieces bring. Los Angeles designer Windsor Smith noted that millennials, rather than opting for cookie-cutter newness, want to own something that has stood the test of time. Visually, brown furniture lends heft, said Houston designer Paloma Contreras, "much like a rug grounds a room."

Older furniture gives ballast in part because it is literally more solid. The slower growing trees of yesteryear yielded denser wood, explained Karen Keane, CEO of Boston's Skinner Auctioneers and Appraisers. "If you pick up an 18th-century side chair, it's pretty darn heavy," she said. "Then as you go through the 19th century and 20th centuries it becomes lighter."

But how to incorporate seasoned furnishings without dating your décor? One trick, said designers: marry potentially dowdy furniture with contemporary pieces. "I paired a fairly ornate 18th-century American secretary I inherited with a Frank Gehry cardboard chair, and it works," said New York designer Mark Cunningham. Ms. Smith recommends placing overscale art above it. Whatever you do, don't fust up a mature piece with lots of dated knickknacks and lamps.

Brown pieces need room to breathe, said the experts. For clients in Hillsborough, Calif., designer Heather Hilliard elevated a reproduction mahogany English server, probably made in the early 1900s, by first topping it with Torrone marble. She hung a monochrome blue abstract painting over it, then gave it pride of place against a white wall. "The crisp white paint is a sharp contrast to the wood case piece," said Ms. Hilliard. "The space around it makes it seem more curated and special."

Context is key, concurred Charleston, S.C., designer Tammy Connor, who included a folksy 19th-century corner bobbin chair in a Southampton, N.Y., show house recently. She also hung the room's green-and-blue striped wallpaper both horizontally and vertically, painted the ceiling a



URBANE RENEWAL

Clockwise from top: In a room by Tammy Connor, a vintage spool chair adds soul; Heather Hilliard distinguished a midrange piece with prime placement; Phillip Thomas's pink paint makes a statement of Victorian spindle-back chairs



pale apple green and placed the woven rug on the diagonal. "Adding whimsy to the other elements results in unexpected spaces," she said, "and the right antique or vintage piece of 'brown furniture,' which has almost become a derogatory term, can make your space unlike anyone else's."

Contemporary upholstery brings even complete dining sets—long rejected in favor of loosely related tables, chairs, benches, settees—into 2019, said Ms. Madden. Similarly, Chicago designer Tom Stringer flanked a young couple's fireplace

with a pair of early 20th-century Louis XIV reproduction chairs in pale fruitwood but not before recovering them in sapphire-blue silk. "Mixing materials, periods, colors and finishes lightens the room and the mood," Mr. Stringer said.

Eche Martinez, who softened his cavernous San Francisco design office with vintage wood furniture, recommends sticking to time-tested neoclassical and Regency styles ("On the record: No cherubs for me"). But other designers embrace embellishments. For a house in Bellport, N.Y., Phillip Thomas

painted a matching set of Victorian spindle-back dining chairs a rich pink. "You see a lot of bent and pressed wood in midrange furniture," he said, "and when you change the color it enhances that beautiful detail."

Mr. Colombik went for a radical transformation when he painted his ancestral coffee table. He colored the columned base acid-green then added a black-marble top. "That piece was meant to pose next to the davenport, itself sheathed in protective plastic," said Mr. Colombik. "Now it feels gleefully iconoclastic."