

Going Vintage

Classic furnishings spark curiosity, tell a story, and add character to interiors

BY TRACY KALER



Eric Roth



A parchment coffee table, shown on opposite page, is an example of a vintage find utilized by a designer to add some personality to a room, as are a colorful pop art piece, left, and a statement lamp with a rust shade, below.

A TRENDY AND VERSATILE STYLE

Vintage ranges from 20 to 99 years old, with collectibles 100 years or older qualifying as antique. Although vintage items and antiques have long had their places in well-appointed spaces, pre-owned furniture and accessories seem to be more on-trend than ever. With lingering supply-chain issues, long lead times for custom furniture, and the rise of sustainability, recycling, and eco-friendly products, designers and their clients are frequently outfitting rooms with vintage seating, tables, lighting, and accouterments.

Weaving in vintage accessories is an easy way to add charm to a room, Ms. Markowitz says. She “sprinkles” vases, urns, mirrors, and other vintage tokens throughout her interiors, adding timelessness in the spaces she designs. And on occasion, she even discovers a great vintage accessory by accident. While working on one of her commissions, she wasn’t even thinking about art but happened upon a Pop Art piece ideal for a hallway off the home’s foyer. “It was like a ‘wow’ moment,” she says about finding the multicolored geometric work.

Like Ms. Markowitz, those who adore vintage often include a mish-mash of articles in a single room, layering and blending finishes, fabrics,

and materials. That curated mix of objects, ideally reflecting several periods in history, can revitalize a home.

“I love items that evoke another era’s sense of style and glam,” says New York-based designer Andrew Suvalsky. “Certain eras appeal to me in particular, from the Art Deco of the 1930s and 1940s and the more obviously mid-century look of the 1950s to 1970s.”

According to Mr. Suvalsky, such collectibles not only create a mood in his home, but they enhance his other pieces. In his Montclair, New Jersey, residence, he has placed a medley of vintage items and never grows tired



From left: Kyle Caldwell; DLux Editions

Jennifer Markowitz was trying to wrap up the decor on a project when she ventured to an estate sale at the former Vanderbilt property on the North Shore of Long Island in New York. Little did she realize, but the accessories she had been searching for were waiting inside the storied, Gilded Age mansion.

“I walked through the house and found the most perfect add-ons to this dining room: two vintage ginger jars,” says Ms. Markowitz, who is the owner of JNR Designs, a boutique interior design firm in Manhasset,

New York. “Their harmonious curves were the perfect counterpoint to the geometric wallpaper.”

Estate sales, flea markets, marketplaces such as Chairish, Etsy, and 1stDibs, and even secondhand shops like Goodwill are where interior designers forage for vintage treasures. Be it a 1940s Danish sofa, a mid-century tulip table, or a striking starburst chandelier, vintage pieces are flawlessly woven into home decor, as they pair well with both new furnishings and priceless antiques.



A vintage Biedermeier chest, above, fits perfectly in the entryway of designer Liz Caan's home, while designer Andrew Suvalsky has a 1950s rattan set, right, in his sunroom.

of his carefully curated assortment. For instance, he points out an oversized, oxidized metallic-finish lamp from the '60s in his living room. He gave it a fresh look by topping it with a modern, rust-colored shade. Likewise, his pair of '70s armless chairs were recovered in a "groovy" houndstooth fabric, playing up the mid-century aesthetic of the



upholstered duo. But natural materials like rattan aren't off the table, either. "In my sunroom, I have a 1950s rattan set—sofa, chair, and side tables—that has also been reupholstered in a preppy and durable indoor-outdoor fabric," he says. "Each piece adds a sense of history and playfulness to the room, a vibe that people really love."

'INSTANT CHARACTER'

There's no doubt that vintage furniture, textiles, and accessories introduce personality, a characteristic that a room may otherwise lack when solely decorated with new furnishings. Hartford, Connecticut-based designer Georgia Zikas believes that vintage breathes life into spaces, especially those with a stockpile of recently produced furniture.

"Adding vintage pieces is essential to any great collected room," Ms. Zikas says. "The age and grit of vintage add life and a story that helps deepen the room and sparks the curiosity of anyone in it."

One time, Ms. Zikas browsed through a client's home to finish off the sunroom and stumbled upon a fabulous find. A vintage English sofa purchased at an estate sale years earlier was sitting in a dark lower level. "We brought it up to the sun-filled sunroom, and it totally transformed before our eyes," she recalls.

Ms. Zikas mingled the sofa with a newer wood-framed loveseat and a vintage area rug that anchors the floor plan. "It was such a great pairing," she says. "Having the age of the vintage sofa made the room feel more mature and immediately stately."

Some designers like Liz Caan in Newton, Massachusetts, are so passionate about vintage they would have a tough time working without it.

"I design with vintage because it's instant character, and it's responsible," she says. According to Ms. Caan, she introduces pre-owned pieces, be it a chest, table, or lighting, into every room she designs.

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From left: Eric Roth; DLux Editions



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"I generally look at the whole space and decide what should be the old, interesting piece that will make everything else look better," she explains.

Ms. Caan has slipped new art into vintage frames, placed a Biedermeier chest in her entryway, and picked up bamboo bookshelves, vintage Thonet stools, Tiffany silver, and vintage Gucci barware.

"All of these pieces are scattered about my home and my office and they all bring a lot of personality to these spaces," she says. "They are quirky and imperfect and invite conversation as they all have a story to tell."

START WITH A MIDSIZE PIECE

For a first-timer, designers generally recommend starting with one or two vintage pieces. Gradually phasing articles into a room is a way to get one's feet wet. Then in due time, one can become a seasoned pro when browsing flea markets and online marketplaces. But introducing a single trinket such as a blue and white candlestick or a jadeite vase wouldn't be enough to spur the eclectic sensibility that vintage represents. Mr. Suvalsky suggests beginning with a midsize piece.

"Accessories can be too small to really know how vintage can affect a room and a large piece of furniture can be too big of a commitment before you are more versed in vintage decor," he explains. "Middle-size items, like lamps, small tables, or an accent side chair can likely find a home in any room."

When blending, he believes

straight-lined furniture is most compatible with vintage. "You want to be careful to not overly stylize your pieces, so the vintage furnishings are not competing with the look of new pieces," Mr. Suvalsky says.

He suggests sticking with the 70-30 rule—70% of the items are from one era and 30% from another.

As far as costs of vintage versus contemporary furnishings, Ms. Caan says they can vary.

"A rare iconic piece can be a large investment, as will a piece that is in excellent condition versus something that shows more of the life it's lived." The provenance of the piece, condition, and the crating and shipping

costs can play a huge role in the final price, Ms. Caan adds.

Patience is key when shopping for vintage, too, yet the hours of scouring sources to unearth the ultimate item are usually worth the trouble. Hunting for flea-market or estate-sale finds means digging through a treasure trove of accompaniments waiting to be repurposed, but hopefully, one discovers that perfect vintage companion in the process.

"When you find the right piece, it's like finding a diamond in the rough," Ms. Markowitz says. "It's also a great way to feel good about your purchase—recycling and helping the environment is a winning combo." ■

Designer Georgia Zikas discovered a vintage English sofa on a client's lower level and paired it with a vintage area rug and several new pieces, bringing this sunroom to life.



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