





furniture

love it or leave it

While the bargain factor of used furniture rates high, decorators and home enthusiasts across the country prize thrift shops as an indispensable resource. Unique finds, such as turn-of-the-century armchairs, 1930s dressing tables, and Swedish modern credenzas can simply not be found in traditional furniture stores. With a touch of ingenuity, some sanding, and a dab of fresh paint, a discarded chair stands out as a dining room showpiece, a down-and-out dresser prevails as a regal storage solution, and a rusty metal table transforms into a balcony centerpiece. At thrift shops you'll see a revolving assortment of antiques, junk-shop bric-a-brac, flea-market finds, and everyday, useful home goods.





Professional decorators and furniture boutique owners regularly scour thrift stores and flea markets for merchandise. They look beyond the replaceable ugly knobs on a cabinet, or notice the decorative wood bases and scrolls on a nonworking Victorian piano that could be repurposed to accentuate another design project. One steamy summer afternoon I went to Housing Works with decorator Mark Ciolli, principal of Carl & Co. On that specific shopping trip, I witnessed a furniture transaction that happened so quickly and smugly that it felt like I was on some kind of secret mission and the detective had found his subject hiding under a pile of junk in a store. In a sense, he had. Yes, I saw the glass-topped table priced at \$45. Oh yeah, it was the one that had two metal dinette chairs by it and a pile of Mediterranean-style accent pillows on it. The glass was thin and poorly cut, and I couldn't understand why Ciolli would get so worked up over what looked like garbage to me. I leaned against an upended tacky, ruffled floral sofa as he flipped open his mobile phone and started dictating specific pickup instructions

ABOVE LEFT You can't judge a wing chair by its upholstery! Hallmark's David Jimenez replaced the hideous Naugahyde with pristine white vinyl to fashion it into a showstopper.

ABOVE RIGHT The centerpiece of photographer Bob Greenspan's living room is a pair of Hans Wegner chairs he found in the garbage.

OPPOSITE Two ho-hum dressers get zesty when painted bright green and put together to use as a credenza.

PREVIOUS PAGES Jimenez mixed vintage with new in his 1906 Kansas City home.

INTO THE WOOD

BY DETERMINING A PIECE OF FURNITURE'S WOOD TYPE, YOU'LL HAVE A CLUE AS TO A POSSIBLE REFINISHING JOB AHEAD.

- Soft woods, such as pine, lack the identifying grains of other woods and are prime candidates for sanding and painting.
- The most common maple variety is straight-grained, extremely durable, and can be painted or refinished.
- Curly and bird's-eye maples are hearty as well, but are mostly reserved for more decorative pieces.
- Walnut is the workhorse of woods: it's sturdy, takes paint well, and can be beautifully stained and finished.
- Oak is a hard, coarse wood with visible grains. If refinished, it's often left in its natural color since painting it can result in a rough surface.
- Cherrywood, while prized in furniture making, is more fragile, making it prone to dents and scratches. If refinished, its natural color, which deepens with age, is usually preserved.
- Mahogany is a rare, dark wood that is durable and resists moisture, so it is ideal to use on yachts or in humid climates. It, too, is most often refinished in a tone of its natural color.

to his delivery service, ending his conversation with "and leave the glass top there."

Why in the world would he buy an entire glass table and leave the useful part at the store? Ciolli pulled down his sunglasses and mumbled at me over his shoulder as we headed for the door. "Honey, those were two Maison Jansen gueridons holding up that horrible glass, and they alone are worth at least a thousand bucks apiece." And indeed they were. He used them just as he found them and created individual tables with captivating marble tops.

For most home decorators, finding an authentic Louis XIV chair or a Florence Knoll cabinet should not be a priority. Instead, set goals for finding furniture that fits into a design scheme or theme, serves a real purpose, and is structurally sound. A key to successful thrift shopping is keeping any refurbishing to a minimum. (I prefer none at all, but then I set my expectations high!) If all it takes is a coat of paint, a hearty wax job, some new hardware, or a simple refinishing, and you are willing to do it, then buy it. Whenever I see a painstaking mess of a project in the making that could cost more than it's worth, I just leave it alone. But of course, there are always exceptions, like the discovery of a piece that is obviously valuable, or one that you absolutely love and is priced right, like Ciolli's gueridons. Go ahead and buy it, and then pay a professional to restore it to your specifications.

a buyer's market

One way to evaluate a piece of furniture's worth to you is to look at comparable items sold new in other stores. A good-quality wood side chair at a middle-of-the-road, chain furniture store can run anywhere from \$100 to \$500, whereas a high-quality dining room table can cost at least \$1,000 and a small cabinet, in the \$2,000 range. When you move into the professional decorator or antiques dealer realm, those prices go up tenfold. At a thrift store, a \$50 hardwood reproduction side chair in perfect condition or a 1960s dining room table for \$200 that needs a good waxing is an obvious bargain. If you suspect you've

found a collectable piece, do a quick Internet search for similar items, but know that any time you take opens opportunity for the next eagle-eyed shopper. My rule of thumb is that if I like it, it's useful, and it's the right price, I buy it. It just becomes a bonus when I land upon something valuable.

There are, however, some concrete ways to tell if a wood piece of furniture is durable. Avoid purchasing anything with heavily cracked or warped surfaces or that is completely destroyed or missing vital parts, such as arms or legs. Unless you know exactly how you are going to fix a broken item and plan on doing so immediately once you get it home, you are unlikely to actually make the repair. Several years ago I fell for a 1960s tufted vinyl-and-wood Swedish modern recliner that I knew had an unstable armrest. The repair is easy enough, requiring only a few drops of white glue and a wood clamp, but I've procrastinated tending to it. The result? An annoying armrest that continually swings off its peg and leaves an unsuspecting friend hanging off the edge.

Also, pay special attention to veneers, thin layers of more decorative wood applied to the surface of an inexpensive one—not necessarily a bad thing. The surface treatment has been around since ancient times and has been used in furniture making ever since. Fine antiques display intricate marquetry or wood inlays, which if done in solid wood would have been next to impossible to achieve. The issue isn't necessarily the veneer itself, but the thickness. Most furniture made before 1970 was covered in a veneer that was thick enough to endure sanding, refinishing, and touch-ups. However, most later, mass-market furniture is made with veneer so thin that it's extremely difficult to refurbish when cracked, bubbled, or torn. Even worse, some furniture makers started using veneers made of cheap paper and vinyl, again making them nearly

ABOVE RIGHT The drawers of this Belgian credenza were well made and exhibited good working hardware.

RIGHT A coat of black paint does wonders for a Thomasville buffet. When David Jimenez found it, it was in a weird cream color and had a melamine top.





ABOVE RIGHT Sometimes you can put a mirror in front of a window, especially if it's on a landing that gets light from all directions.

impossible to refinish and an assured mess if you try. When you see furniture with obviously damaged veneers, stay away unless you can live with the damage or the affected areas aren't obvious.

checking the bones

You can appraise the furniture's structure with simple tests right on the sales floor. When considering a large cabinetlike specimen, such as a dresser, an armoire, or a credenza, lean against it and give it a gentle nudging. If you can see that the frame is wobbly or loose or if it makes lots of horrible creaking noises, there's definitely a problem. Looseness of a furniture case (that's why in professional terms, they're called case goods) can cause joints to crack, eventually leading to a piece that falls

apart. If you can determine how to tighten the case (maybe by firming up a screw, hammering in a nail, securing it with glue, or hiring someone outright to fix it), then it could be worth the risk of purchase. If the case good has drawers, they should slide in and out smoothly. Look for solid, hardwood drawers and avoid those with bottoms and sides made from particleboard or cheap veneers, which is usually easy to see because they don't quite match the rest of the decorative wood components. These types of drawers have a tendency to flake or fall apart. Solid-wood drawers that dovetail into their corners (where they look like they are interwoven seamlessly without the use of nails or screws) are an indication of a well-made piece of furniture.

give it a pull

Before moving on, remove as many drawers as possible so you can take a look at the guts of the piece. The drawers themselves should be in good working condition, and all internal hardware that guides them should be in place or easily repairable with a screw, nail, or glue. Corners should be held together sturdily, and bottoms should be flat and smooth. Any buckling may push the drawer's contents above its top, making it irritating to open. Remove each drawer completely from the cabinet and apply light pressure on all four sides to see if it wobbles. If there is obvious movement, then the drawer has endured much wear and tear or is of poor quality.

open wide

On furniture with doors, make sure they, too, open effortlessly and meet at the obvious angles and on level planes. If you see two doors that are clearly off-kilter, then there is a balance problem, either in the structure of the cabinet or with the hardware of the doors themselves. Doors should stay closed, either by design or by added hardware. A slightly crooked case might be the reason doors stay ajar. If door

COLOR TIP

PAINTING IS ONE OF THE QUICKEST AND EASIEST WAYS TO ADD ZIP TO AN OLD PIECE OF FURNITURE.

Before painting, sand off uneven finishes and clean away any grit and grime. If necessary, treat the wood with a good primer, and then determine whether you want a glossy or matte finish. Glossy finishes are perfect for pieces that get lots of use since they are easily cleaned with a damp cloth. These finishes also focus the eye's attention on furniture details, such as curvy legs or elegant arms. At the same time, more care must be given when painting since every little flaw will show under the surface.

Matte finishes are easier to apply and are good options for pieces of larger scale or where a shine might be distracting. Metal furniture might need more durable finishes, especially if you plan on leaving them to weather harsh elements. Paint smaller furniture pieces, such as side tables and accent tables, in prominent colors so they stand out in your home, whereas subtle tones that mix with your current room setting are more appropriate for larger pieces.

All home experts say it, but do heed their advice to test your color choice on an inconspicuous spot, let it dry, and see how the paint looks before painting the whole piece. In the end, if you wind up using a color that you find absolutely repellant, don't panic. Just pick another color and get painting again.



ABOVE Intricate mitering at the corners of this wood drawer indicates a piece of furniture that is well-made.

OPPOSITE A wooden 1960s chair that when found, “was something an old aunt would buy,” Jimenez says. What was once painted in off-white, flecked with gold, and covered in a funky paisley print is now a model of sophistication.

alignment isn't bothersome visually, you might consider using specially designed clips or heavy-duty magnets to solve the problem.

a fabric finish

Buy upholstered furniture with careful attention. When spying a potential purchase, there are three things to consider: the appeal of the upholstery, the comfort factor, and durability. Does it have sturdy legs and arms, clean fabric, and intact stuffing? If you can answer yes, then by all means, buy it. Let's say you've determined that the piece is structurally sound, but you just can't stand the upholstery. Cover that thing up with a custom-made slipcover in the fabric of your choice. If that's beyond your budget, premade slipcovers for almost any size and shape of chair are available at home stores and on home-shopping Web sites. A reupholstering job can cost as much as, if not more than, buying a whole new piece. One indication of upholstered furniture's quality is its weight. Try to pick it up. If it's really light, you most likely have furniture that doesn't have all the springs, extra padding, and strong structure that goes into a really good piece. Just like wood furniture, make sure the frame is sturdy. When you lean against it, or sit on it, it shouldn't wiggle or emit any creaking noises from its wood frame.

Odd sounds indicate that the frame has taken a particularly heavy beating over its lifetime, though some noise is to be expected. If you buy the piece, remember that its decorative purpose far outweighs any practical applications. Any weird sounds coming from under the fabric and ticking might point to a cracked or warped frame or broken springs, both of which are almost always beyond repair, and quite costly if not. All that internal racket may be saying, “Leave me alone!”

Persistence in finding quality pays off when shopping for thrift furniture, whether you're decorating a turn-of-the-century home, sprucing up a contemporary condo, or maintaining the integrity of a midcentury living space. A little TLC may refreshen and modernize pieces of old furniture to transform them into cherished possessions.



Falling in Love

Hallmark's David Jimenez

When David Jimenez first saw the 1906 Georgian Revival house with its pristine columns, dormer windows, and elegant portico shaded by oak trees on a double-sized lot in the Hyde Park section of Kansas City, Missouri, he knew it was the place he would call home. "It was the first house that the real estate agent showed me," says Jimenez when recalling the process that brought him from San Francisco, where he had worked for Pottery Barn and Restoration Hardware, to Kansas City in order to take the post of vice president of visual merchandising and store design for Hallmark. "When we drove by it, I told the agent to stop," he says. "And there it was, quintessentially what I imagined a home in Kansas City should look like—beautiful, stately, classic, and traditionally elegant."

His real estate dreams had come true even beyond his expectations. With its three bedrooms, living room, sitting room, library, formal dining room, dressing room, study, media room, office, and finished basement, the home is the largest place in which the New York City native has ever lived. There's a carriage house, too. "This was exactly what I wanted, but I never imagined I would find something of this scale," he says.

Jimenez's quick assessment of the house's exterior revealed that the structure had been well cared for during its lifetime: the condition of the bricks was nearly flawless, and the original copper gutters were in excellent shape and worked perfectly. Then there was the gracious portico that lured him from the street: its grand columns unblemished and its expressive moldings unchipped and intact. Once inside, Jimenez fell even harder for the house, as he marveled over woodwork that had never been painted in its hundred years and the smooth ceilings and level floors, evidence of a firm foundation resistant to years of settling. Built and originally inhabited

ABOVE LEFT In his bedroom, Jimenez placed a turn-of-the-century French armoire next to a 1960s thrift chair that he fell in love with for its Hollywood sensibility. He simply painted it black and reupholstered it in high-quality satin plumped full of goose down.

BELOW LEFT Jimenez's 1906 home in Kansas City.





by the architect Selby Kurfiss and his mother, the beloved home clearly had successive owners who continued to look after it, with its heavy, solid-wood doors and refined, crisp moldings throughout.

That's not to say the house didn't need a little updating. Jimenez carved out a luxurious spa bathroom upstairs by incorporating old closet space, and he modernized a 1980s kitchen. After these major projects and some wall painting and floor refinishing, Jimenez could then spend his time and money furnishing and decorating his new home. The cohesive visual appeal Jimenez directed is a testament to his skill of mixing the old with the new. "I love the look of antiques and thrift-store finds because they have such visual character," Jimenez says. "They make a room look collected and give it soul."



ABOVE LEFT Jimenez found a spectacular cast-iron coat rack, painted it white, and placed it on his mud porch.

ABOVE For the portico, Jimenez rewired a vintage-store lighting fixture and hung it over two thrift wing chairs that he upholstered in white vinyl.



ABOVE A marble-topped antique chest feels contemporary with current purchases from Pottery Barn, framed iconic photographs, and a vintage orb Jimenez bought at a San Francisco flea market.

OPPOSITE Jimenez's home office takes a modern turn with a Knoll Barcelona chair at a chrome-and-glass Parsons table.

Unlike many decorators who recommend starting the whole process with a fabric swatch or the colors in a rug, Jimenez, who is not a decorator but a visual merchandising professional, was guided by his desire to create rooms that elicit emotion. For inspiration, he pored over shelter magazines and home-design books, and finally decided that he would honor the existing style of his home and give it a bit of sexiness with textures and layered elements. "For instance, on the main level in the living room, I knew I wanted to give a nod to Paris in the 1960s with pretty, open chairs and an angular straight-arm sofa."

He already owned a thrift-store sofa from Palm Springs that fit that description, but then he had all these other rooms to fill. "I love watching a visual thread come together," Jimenez says. The economic advantage of living in Kansas City allowed him to stretch his decorating budget far more than if he had been embarking on the same shopping spree in San Francisco or New York. Before he started scouring thrift stores, estate sales, and antiques shops in both Palm Springs, where he has two homes, and Kansas City, he secured storage units on both coasts. "Anything I fell in love with, I bought it, photographed it, wrote a description, cataloged it, then put it in storage." Next, he created a simple organization system for his refinisher and upholsterer to follow, since there was so much furniture to tackle at one time. Furniture pieces were labeled with notes on paper to get a coat of either black or white paint. Jimenez also jotted down additional indications as to what kind of fabric would go where and which items would get the added accent of decorative nail heads. His black-and-white theme unified the rooms. The white paint highlighted furniture with interesting lines or carvings, such as a pair of 1960s Regency reproduction chairs, one of which sits in his blue guest room, and the other, as a towel stand in the upstairs bath. The black paint allows a piece to blend in a room, or to tie together similar yet different furniture designs. All the antiques kept their natural wood finish.







SOFA Jimenez re-covered what was once a hideous orange 1970s sofa and placed it into his masculine and moody Paris-inspired living room.

LIGHTING New lighting—a nickel chandelier, a crystal table lamp, and a metal, shaded piece—fits in a room that is otherwise decorated with thrift and vintage discoveries.

COFFEE TABLE A Lucite shelf once used to display a collection of toy automobiles gets tipped on its side and topped with a piece of cut glass to form a floating coffee table.

CHEST Part of a pair, a Moorish-style 1950s Dorothy Draper piece by Heritage Henredon retains its original Hollywood flair.

ARMCHAIR Once covered in eye-burning fabric, an armchair from a thrift store got a sexy French twist when Jimenez painted it black and gave it fresh upholstery.

SIDE TABLE Decorating themes need not be taken literally to evoke emotion. A thrift-store 1960s table with romantic metal legs sits well in its inviting Parisian-flavored living room.



ABOVE Old clocks and cameras sit atop an antique dresser.

As Jimenez embarked on his Kansas City decorating adventure, it was at an estate sale in Palm Springs that a dilapidated Chesterfield sofa first called out to him. “It was a mess,” he says. “The leather was tattered and in disrepair.” Nevertheless, Jimenez noted that despite the horrible look of the rest, the wood frame was in good condition. He paid \$250 for the gentlemanly object and sent it off to storage to wait for its rebirth. When he needed a seating solution for his sunny mudroom off the kitchen, he thought, “Why not try the sofa in storage?” He reversed the aging process with a coat of black paint, fresh upholstery, and nail heads to complement the curls and curves of a Kansas City thrift-store find that stands across the way: a turn-of-the-century cast-iron coatrack with regal faces embedded within its winding arms. “Originally it was white and dingy with a scratched surface,” he says. “I knew that I wanted something for the mudroom, and when I saw this, it looked like it could be original to the house. I also love the idea that it held umbrellas.” So on went a coat of white paint and a brand-new mirror, now reflecting the reinvigorated Chesterfield sofa.

Jimenez admits to not having a meticulously laid out plan for his furniture purchases. But because he was accustomed to a fast-paced career in visual merchandising, requiring him to track multiple decorative details simultaneously and solve design dilemmas on the spot, he says he felt it all came together organically since he allowed his heart to guide him. “I just decided that if something really spoke to me, and I felt I could realistically bring it to life and the price was right, then I would buy it.” When a pair of Naugahyde-covered wing chairs, one blue and the other green for \$150 apiece at a Kansas City thrift store, begged his attention, he adopted them. “I loved the silhouettes, and the fact that they didn’t match exactly, but complemented each other.” Off came the 1970s veined Naugahyde and on went sleek white vinyl and a coat of black paint on the legs, enforcing the already established black-and-white theme. Eventually, he placed them on



the airy portico, where they reside, 365 days of the year.

Jimenez's burst of decorating was driven by a deadline he was determined to meet. During renovations, he lived in the carriage house, furnished with the midcentury pieces he brought from San Francisco. A representative of the Kansas City Alumnae chapter of the Kappa Kappa Gamma Holiday Homes Tour saw the carriage house and asked Jimenez to show off his at-the-time undecorated home during its upcoming event. Based on what she saw of his temporary décor, she didn't feel the need to see the main house complete. She made that offer in July, and Jimenez, who says he thrives under deadline, signed on. But soon the refurbishing started to drag, leaving him with only six weeks to stage and decorate four floors before the tours

ABOVE LEFT An hourglass and old industrial gears make for whimsy atop a Paul McCobb cabinet.

ABOVE The mirror placed in Jimenez's sitting room elongates the space and reflects his collection of art and photos on the adjacent wall.



ABOVE A vinyl-covered wing chair in one of Jimenez's guest rooms. Jimenez brought the vintage lamp from Palm Springs, where he owns two homes.

OPPOSITE The eye wanders through Jimenez's library, past Jonathan Adler and Williams-Sonoma furniture, to rest upon the alluring outdoor portico furnished with thrift finds.

began. He negotiated a deal with his contractors so that as they finished a room, he would start decorating. "Every day of the week, I would get home at five or six after a full day of work, put on the music, and have my delivery people bring over the furniture for the room I was going to decorate." He had seven sofas to place, and basically did it by trial and error, moving them from room to room until each one seemed to be in the right spot. A fine nineteenth-century Belgian armoire he spotted at a local furniture shop rotated throughout the house when Jimenez brought it home. "I fell in love with the color of the wood and the detail of the molding, but I really didn't know what I was going to do with it." Initially, he thought he'd find a space for it in the living room, but the proportions were too large. Three rooms and a floor later, he settled on his own bedroom, where he matched it with a thrift-store chair painted black and reupholstered, a French antique side table, and a mercury-glass lamp from a San Francisco thrift store. In six short weeks, Jimenez had fully decorated his home.

Now, when the jet-setter happens to be in town, he happily entertains in the home of which he is so proud. Certain affairs are known for traveling from room to room, maybe starting off in the dining area with martinis plucked from a chic black bamboo-motif server refashioned out of a yellowed, 1960s Thomasville thrift-store discovery. Then the crowd might migrate to the living room for a dishy gossip session on a glamorous yet subdued oversized sofa, which was upholstered in 1970s orange fabric when Jimenez found it at a thrift store. As the wee morning hours creep in, the gang might take a break from dancing to Latin music in the dining room and head upstairs to the sitting room, where they kick off their shoes and curl up on yet another vintage sofa. It's no surprise that guests frequently find it difficult to leave Jimenez's welcoming home, since the love and care that went into creating it is evenly spread throughout. "I had one guest say to me, 'David, I think we drank and danced in every room in your house.' And when I think of it, we did!"

