

Five delicious reasons to spurn imported caviar—and save on domestic **D5**



OFF DUTY



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Whose Taste Is It Anyway?

Some busy people let interior designers choose all their 'personal' objects. Timesaving strategy or shameful secret?

BY JEN RENZI

YOU'RE AT THE HOLIDAY PARTY of a friend whose home was just redone. You have to admit that the new sofa, upholstered in a subdued geometric print, was chosen well. Ditto the carpet, an antique Aubusson. But what really makes you envy her taste is the mélange of objects on the coffee table: a folk-art carving of a saint, a pair of straw marquetry boxes and, anchored by monographs on painters like Helen Frankenthaler, a little flock of bronze bird figurines that clearly didn't come from a catalog. When you mention your jealousy, she confides with a curious mix of embarrassment and pride, "Oh, my decorator bought it all. Even the books."

Most people expect interior designers to select furniture, flooring and finishes and to mastermind custom details, from bespoke lampshades to the drapes' pleating style. Less commonly known is that designers, if given the opportunity, will also purchase bibelots to bedeck every surface—from vases for the entry to soap
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BEDSIDE MANNERISM
An eclectic collection of nightstand accessories amassed by designer Matthew Patrick Smyth.

DESIGN & DECORATING

GET PERSONALITY—CARE OF A DECORATOR

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dishes over the sink. “We’ll even outfit the drawers,” said Pam Shamshiri, a partner in the Los Angeles firm Commune.

You may be asking: Do you really need a decorator to buy tchotchkes? Shouldn’t all these surfaces be dressed with personal possessions—framed photos of the morose basset hounds you grew up with, souvenirs from the trip to China you barely survived, the vintage Rookwood pottery inherited from your great aunt Daphne? Is it a cheat to outsource that task to a professional—especially in a cultural moment when authenticity is so prized?

Yes, perhaps, but people who hire designers find themselves deferring to the pros’ expertise for a variety of reasons, including the sheer amount of time and work involved in acquiring the details that finish off a larger home. And, typically, the designer is not importing every single artifact: Clients’ existing possessions usually find their way into the mix.

Still, for many clients, the idea of letting someone else outfit their bedside tables is highly alien. When Jeanne McFadden, a mother of four who hired Greenwich, Conn.-based designer Alexis Givens to decorate her Bronxville colonial, she thought she should be able to do her own accessories, until she realized she didn’t know where to begin. “It felt odd to hand off that task,” said Ms. McFadden, “even though Alexis

Some designers pick everything—down to the toothbrushes.

knows our sensibility so well.” Ms. Givens wasn’t surprised. “Accessories can be a hard sell for clients,” she said. “Some think it’s weird to have you buy their personal objects. They say, ‘Oh, I’ll just do it myself and it will look fine.’ And then it doesn’t.”

Among interior designers, this genre of home items has a name: smalls, an old-world decorating term for everything smaller than the furniture, both functional (napkin rings, wastebaskets) and purely ornamental (figurines, snow globes). Said Fritz Karch, a New York-based collecting authority, “Smalls refers to the atmospheric doodads for tablescaping and the organizing of everyday stuff—like where does the mail go, where do you hide the remote?”

Seemingly incidental, these accessories play a key role, bringing intimacy to a space; items like corkscrews—unlike, say, a wing chair—are held in the hand. “There’s a tactile element to it,” said Los Angeles designer Oliver Furth. “In our

SHELF LIFE // THREE WAYS TO MAKE AN ARRANGEMENT OF ACCESSORIES POP



1. Tell a story with a coffee table

New York decorator Matthew Patrick Smyth could lead an advanced class in accessorizing. “Here, three simple but elegant items complement each other because of their differences,” he said of this coffee-table tableau. The complex detailing of the Persian-Indian-inspired, gold filigree leaf—actually a tea strainer—contrasts with the smooth, polished surface of the midcentury dove figurine, he explained. The Crate & Barrel vase, meanwhile, introduces a texture between smooth and intricate. And, on a subliminal level, he added, placing “a vase holding branches, and a bird next to a fallen leaf makes it work as a narrative.” Books are used as display platforms to get the height of everything just right.

increasingly digital lives, it’s nice to pick up and commune with something. And the little things complete a room, making it feel more human and lived-in.” Without them, a space can look oddly spare (“like a generic hotel room”), and not in a minimalist-chic way, said Mr. Karch.

Many designers reported that they are getting more requests for smalls. Often, clients upsizing into a larger home just don’t have enough such things to make it look properly inhabited. “Say you move from a modestly sized Manhattan apartment to a sizable suburban house with tons of built-in bookcases,” explained Ms. Givens. “You don’t have a lot of books, or your family didn’t pass down items or you’ve relocated so many times you never really accumu-

lated anything. That translates to a lot of empty surfaces.”

In other cases, clients just want to start over. “For [them], smalls are about the fantasy of wanting a whole new completed environment,” said Mr. Karch. “They want to look cultured and up-to-date. And they may be insecure about their taste.”

Though most designers have soup-to-nuts clients for whom they’ve purchased everything—“down to the toothbrushes,” says Mr. Furth—that’s not the ideal scenario. Instead, they prefer to edit a client’s existing possessions and mix in new items that are somehow meaningful. “Even though you may be buying the smalls, the items should be something a client is interested in or emotionally attached to,” said New York

designer Matthew Patrick Smyth. “It’s our job as designers to draw that out, to help them articulate their tastes and then channel those tastes.”

Generally those items are purchased together during a series of shopping trips, or by the pro—but usually after back-and-forth via email or Pinterest boards. Often a designer will curate a collection based on a few existing pieces. “One client had a small array of vintage medicinal glass bottles that I expanded,” said Ms. Givens. “It was something started by her that I just helped complete.”

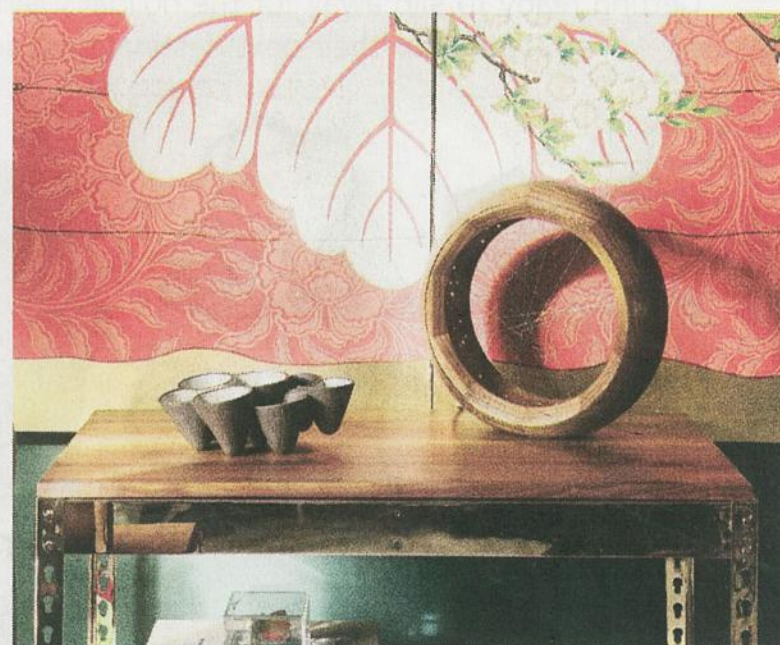
But many clients don’t have the stamina for the marathon shopping required—especially as a project winds down. “You start the design process with lots of enthusiasm,” said home-

owner Amy Freidenrich, a client of San Francisco designer Allison Caccoma. “But by month 10 you are spent. You do not want to see another light fixture, let alone choose knickknacks and coffee table books.”

Other clients lack the inclination—or time. “Smalls require so much effort and pounding of pavement,” said Ms. Caccoma. For the designer, it involves visiting the right stores, buying more-than-enough items and arranging for others to be borrowed on approval, coordinating delivery, unpacking each piece, and then staging the interior—which even for seasoned pros can require a lot of finesse. “And then we have to repack and return anything the clients don’t want,” Mr. Smyth added. “Many designers don’t

want to deal with it,” agreed Mr. Karch. “It is emotional and personal and difficult and time consuming. They are not interested in doing the coasters.”

Manhattan designer Bunny Williams is an advocate of homeowners supplying their own smalls—even if she ultimately wrangles them into perfect tableaux. “I think a decorator should only buy those things for clients who are really into the idea, or are not collectors.” In those cases, she’ll purchase a few bigger, simpler items to complement existing ones and add scale. “But I love a client who is confident enough to take ownership of their home,” she continued. “If you never rearrange or add anything new once I’m done, that’s kind of sad.”



2. Curate a console

Los Angeles interior designer Oliver Furth loves incorporating small artworks into a client’s décor, and a long, narrow console table is an ideal pedestal for display. Here he used a rose-gold-plated unit of his own design to showcase an LED light sculpture by Kalin Asenov and “Beehive,” a stoneware piece by Maryam Riazi—all backdropped by a 19th-century Japanese screen. “Sometimes you want to mix it up and go beyond the usual bowls, vessels and vases,” said Mr. Furth. “Take advantage of the emerging category of smaller artist-made objects—a nice option [if you lack] the space or budget for a larger piece.” If a nearby coffee table is dense with objets, he advises keeping the console spare. “You need a visual release. Otherwise, it dives a bit into Victoriana.”



3. Use bookcases to frame possessions

“Shelves are an opportunity to inject personality into a room,” said designer Roman Alonso, a partner in Los Angeles-based Commune. The ones in his sleeping porch “reflect whatever I’m interested in at the moment, like a 3-D mood board.” Current fixtures include a pair of antlers (“from God knows where”), an Italian ceramic horse from the Rose Bowl flea market (“one of the first things I bought when I moved to L.A.”), redwood bookends from Big Sur, a geode from Laguna and a Frédéric Malle cardamom candle (“never lit, but it keeps the nook smelling amazing”). “The books are a small selection from my library,” he added, “curated for guests who stay in the room.”