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How to get clients on board with vintage furniture

BOH *By Laura Fenton*

Any designer worth their salt will tell you that every room needs something old. But increasingly, homeowners—especially the ones with a generous budget—crave brand-new things, including brand-new houses. While it's understandable to seek designs that are functionally up to date and working properly, part of a designer's job is to help their clients find the right balance of new and old by sourcing antiques, vintage or restored pieces that artfully complement more recently manufactured elements.

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Not only is this approach better for the planet, but it also creates an authentic, collected, layered look that can be customized to suit any style or taste. Plus, many high-quality older pieces were built to last, meaning they'll continue to stand the test of time (or can be restored to do so). Worried that it will be an uphill battle to help your clients see the beauty in well-loved furniture and accessories? Here are a few strategies to ease them in—before you know it, they'll be out-shopping you for vintage treasures.

GAUGE THEIR COMFORT LEVEL

“At the beginning of a project, we like to establish if the client is comfortable with us sourcing vintage items,” says architect Lisa Schwert, the founder of the [Connecticut-based Innate Studio](#). “We set expectations that it requires a bit of a leap of faith and that they likely won't be able to see a piece in person.”

SHOW THEM EXAMPLES

It'll be easier to persuade your clients to give secondhand treasures if you have some examples of how you've used them in the past. Cecilia Casagrande, the Boston-based interior designer and founder of [Casagrande Studio](#), doesn't have a hard time selling her clients on secondhand pieces because her portfolio is filled with vintage sofas and chairs reupholstered in fabulous fabrics—in fact, it's part of what her clients are drawn to.

SELL THEM ON CHARACTER FIRST

Before you lean into a sustainability pitch, lead with design reasoning. “Every room should have one piece that has a story—some history or something that is quirky and one of a kind,” says Casagrande. “That feels way more interesting.” If a client happens to have an old chair from their parents or grandparents that's ready for its second act, that's even better.

GO SECONDHAND FOR KIDS AND PETS

[Emily C. Butler](#), an interior designer based in New York, points out that secondhand pieces, with their baked-in patina, can be great for families worried that their kids and pets might destroy anything nice. “Secondhand pieces are *already* perfectly imperfect,” says Butler. Who doesn't want less stress?

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HIGHLIGHT THE VALUE PROPOSITION

“Sustainably renewing a vintage piece isn’t *inexpensive*, but you often get better value in terms of the quality of construction and unique character than you would get purchasing something new,” says Schwert. You’ll also get something one of a kind, which can give rooms that special feeling that adds value to the project.

MENTION THE SHORTER LEAD TIMES

For a recent project for a young family in Connecticut, Schwert sourced most of the case goods, accent chairs and rugs through 1stDibs, Chairish, and local vintage and antiques dealers. “The clients appreciated that we didn’t have to navigate prohibitive lead times,” says Schwert. Of course, if you are reupholstering, you will still have to wait for fabric and labor, but it’s still likely to be faster than a custom order.

DO NOT SHOW THEM THE LISTING

Sites like Chairish and 1stDibs make it easy to present secondhand pieces to clients, but for those Craigslist or Facebook Marketplace finds, you may need to get a little creative. “I am able to see through the horrible fabric,” says Casagrande. “But if you show a bad photo on Facebook Marketplace to most clients, it makes it hard for them to visualize.” The same goes for a perfect end table that’s unfortunately situated in an ugly living room—it can be hard to separate the two for someone who’s not a pro. Casagrande’s solution is to snap up the pieces she loves and reshoot them—in front of a white wall, in full daylight—so her clients never see the poorly lit images taken inside of less-than-lovely interiors. If you’ve got a digitally savvy team member, they may be able to crop and silhouette a digital photo instead to better show off the item.

START WITH A NEW PIECE THEY LOVE

Butler says that most of the time when she ends up going vintage for a project, it’s to replace a new piece from the scheme that is very similar in shape. “That way, it’s easier to imagine,” she explains, “since they’ve already approved something with the same look.”

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ROMANCE THEM WITH FABRIC

One of the reasons Casagrande loves reupholstering old pieces is that she can use luxurious, interesting fabrics at a lower cost than if she were ordering a new custom piece, thanks in part to the efficiency of going direct to your local workroom. “Secondhand frames can be a less expensive way to use really good, high-end patterned fabric,” she says. “Factories ask for a lot more fabric than a local upholsterer because they cannot stop their factory if there is any issue.”

HIGHLIGHT THE EXTENT OF REUPHOLSTERING

If clients are still hesitant about buying an upholstered piece secondhand, remind them that reupholstering is more than just swapping the fabric. “It is not just recovered, it’s completely rebuilt—taken down to the wood and redone,” says Casagrande. Her clients are often surprised by the extent of the work. “Sometimes even the springs are new,” she adds. “Nothing old is left over.”

CONSIDER KEEPING AN INVENTORY

Both Casagrande and Schwert maintain a small inventory of vintage pieces, snapping up a good deal on a piece they love as the opportunity arises. “If something doesn’t work for a client, we are glad to keep it for a future project,” says Schwert. That said, she hasn’t had to. Like Casagrande, she says she’s sold every piece she’s bought.