

# How To Shop for Furniture

By Douglas Forman

Perhaps the simplest rule for buying furniture these days is first, shop around, and second, buy the best you can possibly afford. Fine furnishings, properly cared for, whether new or antique, can last many lifetimes, whereas money spent on the cheap and the flashy usually ends up in the garbage heap. Think of furniture, at least the basics, as an investment, and spend the time to make sure you are making the right one.

Though there is not enough space here to go through all of the various levels of quality furniture construction, there are a few things to look for to help you on your way. The first thing to check is how the furniture is put together underneath. So, look underneath pieces of furniture to make sure it is screwed, and/or doweled and glued together with mitered or best, mortise and tenon, or with dovetail joints (these are where the two pieces of wood are fitted together with interlocking teeth.)

The second thing to check for is the use of hardwoods. Buy a cheap chest of drawers and what you'll find is composite materials – boards made up of a combination of woodchips, sawdust and glue – often straight nailed or even stapled together at butt joints covered by some sort of laminate or paper or plastic “finish.” Drawers run on plastic strips that are either glued or shallow riveted into the soft material and they, too, are put together with staples and glue. This is a piece of furniture that, unless you're using it for throwaway storage in a child's room, is guaranteed to fall apart through normal use and be a constant annoyance until you set it out for the trash. A used chest of drawers, even if it needs refinishing or repair, be it made out of cherry, oak, maple or even pine, put together with screws and dovetail joints, has the advantage of being sturdier than the one you buy in the bargain basement. And, if it does fail, using the same techniques by which it was made can repair it. Re-fit or re-glue the dovetails, refill, re-drill and replace worn screws, refinish a damaged surface and it will be ready for another lifetime of use. If you're on a budget, many of the unfinished furniture stores in your area offer quality construction of simple pieces at bargain prices.

The same, of course, goes for upholstered furniture. You should look for properly constructed hardwood frames (often called “kiln dried hardwood”) with steel coil springs or other sturdy, supportive suspension elements in seating surfaces. The surfaces should be hand tied to the frame at eight points with zig-zag springs in seat backs. Cushions should be well proportioned and made of down, quality high-density foam or other natural materials used in quantity for comfort. Cushions should have both an inner and an outer cover and be attached to the frame with tacks, screws and nails rather than staples. For upholstery, look for straight seams, matching

patterns and heavy duty fabrics. Perhaps the best test of upholstered furniture, however, is to sit on it and bounce up and down a little. Do you bottom out (hit the frame or floor)? Can three people sit on a sofa without it sagging to its limits? And finally, is it comfortable, well proportioned?

Though such harsh tests may make it seem like finding quality furniture is an impossible task, there are actually a good number of major furniture manufacturers providing quality living, dining, bedroom and occasional furniture. Your local department, furniture and specialty stores carry well-known brand names and many names you may not have heard of but which are high quality nonetheless. You can even find well-constructed furniture at area antique shops and flea markets. The keys to acquiring good furniture are to avoid quick decisions, seek the best quality that you can afford and, if it's a great piece but you hate the fabric, remember that you can always have it reupholstered or buy a slipcover.

Finally, don't forget to apply the same standards to outdoor furniture. Buy cast iron or quality steel or weatherproof woods like redwood and teak which adhere to the same construction standards as you expect for your indoor furniture. Look for screws and bolts, not rivets and staples; look for classic comfort, weight and solidity, not flashy colors and complicated styles. Particularly with outdoor furniture, this doesn't mean it has to be expensive. Classic styles like the Adirondack chair come, well made, in wide price ranges. Even old fashioned cast iron and heavy steel chairs and tables are more comfortable and will last longer than the flimsy plastic and base metal pastel constructions that you see everywhere. With proper care, good outdoor furniture should last at least as long as indoor furniture and, particularly with woods like teak and redwood, gather the patina of time which imparts an elegance that no amount of money can replace.