Selection of Upholstered Pieces

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LOOK FOR...
Comfort
Construction
Outer Covering
Style & Design

PURDUE UNIVERSITY
Cooperative Extension Service,
Lafayette, Indiana
SELECTION OF UPHOLSTERED PIECES

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In buying a piece of upholstered furniture consider:

COMFORT  OUTER COVERING
CONSTRUCTION  STYLE and DESIGN

It would be hard to put these in the order of their importance because they are all important. Often it is impossible to get a style you want, the best construction, most comfort, and longest wearing fabric all in one piece of upholstered furniture. The buyer usually has to sacrifice a little of one of these. Consider what is essential to your needs and what you can afford to sacrifice.

Since price doesn't terminate quality, it is up to the buyer to inform herself so that she may detect inferior quality or a superior product. As a double assurance of a good investment, buy from a reliable dealer -- one who buys from reliable manufacturers who guarantee the quality of their products.

COMFORT

Chairs and sofas which are not comfortable are poor investments. Comfort is important, for if the piece is not comfortable it is of no value despite its excellent workmanship, lasting cover and good taste in design.

Most furniture is designed to fit a person 5'8" tall for average height. A standard easy chair has a seat depth of 22 to 24 inches and is 17 inches high in front, little lower in the back. An occasional chair is 19 inches deep, 18 inches from floor in front. Arm rests are about 7 inches above the seat. These are only average figures; chairs and sofas vary, so it is best to have the person sit in it who will use it most.
This

Or This?

A well-furnished living room needs a variance of sizes to take care of guests as well as the family. A good combination might be sofa, two easy chairs, a wing chair and an occasional chair or two. Some homemakers feel a need for straight chairs also.

With television, comfort should be considered in moving a piece.

CONSTRUCTION

There's more to construction than meets the eye! You can see very little, but the manufacturer has informed you through the label. A reliable dealer can help here. Inspect a half-constructed chair of the same make if the store has one.

Knowing terms and construction points to ask about and look for, will make you a better buyer.

Two pieces which may look exactly alike may differ in inner construction, to make one 3 or 4 times the value of the other.

Examine the frame base for springs. Read label for information about springs and padding.
Frame

1. Hardwood is preferable. Covered parts of frame are usually ash, birch or hard maple. Hardwood holds screws and tacks well. Cheaper and softer woods may give away under the strain; tacks holding webbing may pull out allowing webbing to stretch.

2. In better furniture, mahogany, walnut, cherry, maple or oak are used in exposed parts. In cheaper pieces, gum and birch are shined and substituted for these.

3. Blocks should be screwed and glued in corners to reinforce them.

4. Joints of cheap pieces may be nailed together. Addition of screws help some but are not sufficient.

5. Strong joints may be either doweled, or mortise and tenon.

A dowel is a wooden rod, grooved to allow air bubbles to escape when it is inserted, and covered with hot glue.

Mortise and tenon (glued in).

Base for Springs

Look at the bottom of the chair. Under the cambric, you will find either webbing made of jute, steel webbing or springs mounted on boards. They are listed in order of preference.
Webbing should be placed close together with each band stretched and tacked securely to frame of chair. You may have to feel under cambric to see if there are large open spaces between webbing to denote poor quality in other things as well.

Some manufacturers use steel webbing which has less "give" and makes the chair less resilient.

Springs can be attached to a board but this is found only in the cheapest chairs.

**Springs**

1. Double cone is more comfortable than single cone, which is often used in medium priced furniture.

2. Nine to twelve springs are needed in average size, five in small chairs, such as, dining or light weight occasional chairs. (You will have to feel how many there are.)

3. Springs should be placed where webbing crosses.

4. Read label to see how many times springs have been tied. Best construction has springs tied eight times. In cheaper pieces, only four times; these will soon break and cause the spring to slip, poke up and tear the cover.
5. No-sag springs are used in the least expensive chairs with conventional padding. Used with foam rubber, they give more comfort, but the cost increases.

**Filling**

1. Best grade stuffing is curled horsehair. Curled pig bristles are almost as good.

2. Latex, also called form rubber, is becoming popular. It is about one-third rubber and two-thirds water. It is mixed with chemicals, and whipped full of air, set in a mold, then baked. It is resilient, cool and durable. Pieces padded with this are more expensive. It should be labeled also, indicating new, reused or pieced.

3. Rubberized hair is a new development. Shorter hairs from cows are utilized by mixing with latex.

4. Medium grade furniture is stuffed with Spanish moss from southern states and palm leaf fiber (shredded palm leaves).

5. Tow (from flax straw), coco fiber (shredded fibers from cocoanut husks, sisal (rope waste) and excelsior are found in medium and low grade furniture. They have neither the resilience, comfort or long wearing qualities of the others.

6. A layer of hair may be used with a layer of moss, cutting cost somewhat yet giving more resiliency than moss alone.

7. Label must tell you whether stuffing is new or reused.

8. A layer of cotton is placed on top of all stuffings, giving softness and smoothness and preventing coarse fibers from working through top cover.

9. In better furniture, the padding is covered with muslin to prevent slipping.
(Drawing through the courtesy of Household Finance Corporation.)

OUTER COVERING

Consider fabric for beauty and for durability.

- color
- weave
- pattern
- cleanability

Ask yourself about:

Color - Will it blend with the rest of my furnishings?
Will it do something for the room?
Make a study of color before shopping.

Pattern - Should it be a flower, stripe, plain or plaid?
Shall the design be large or small?
What is the rule of design?
Each room may have:
- One large bold pattern
2. One small all-over pattern
3. One stripe
4. Plaid may be substituted for one of the above three
5. The rest plain

What pattern is in the rest of the room?  
Wallpaper?  Rug?  Other upholstery or slip covers?  Draperies?

Weave - What kind of materials wear well?  
From what do I have to choose?  Common ones are:
Mohair - most durable fiber used.  Kid mohair is better quality than medium grade mohair.
Mohair Frieze - hard weave, serviceable
Boucle - made of wool.  Long loops are easily pulled.
Velvet - cotton.  Marks badly.  Used on antique pieces.
Doeskin - a pile fabric in cotton.  Newer than velour and more attractive.  Doesn’t compare in quality with wool or mohair.
Damasque - usually rayon and cotton.  High in looks, low in wearing quality.
Matelasse - cotton, or cotton and rayon.  Made of two thicknesses of material.  Has quilted appearance.  Wears well for cotton.
Rein - cotton.  Not very durable.
Leather - expensive but very long wearing if it is of good quality.
Plastic - reinforced plastic (fabric backed) is better for pieces which receive strain than non-reinforced (smooth backed).  Smooth backed, when once pierced may tear like cellophane.

How do I clean these?
Mohair, wool boucle, and tapestry can be shampooed. Try on small area first to be sure, however.
Rayon and cottons can be cleaned with cloth dipped in carbon tetrachloride. This is a slow process and often is not successful.
Leather - apply saddle soap following directions on can.
Plastic - soap and water.

**DESIGN**

Contrast the following sofas.

This one is really "overstuffed" and gaudy in design.

This has simple lines and is a good upholstered piece.
Let us consider good design in upholstering pieces. Many people confuse design with comfort. An overly padded chair may look more comfortable due to its bulk, but it isn't.

On the whole, it can be said that the plainer the furniture, the better the design. Simple designs are more attractive than some fancy ones which cheapen the piece.

Since chairs and a sofa are the important pieces in a living room, more variety can be had if no chair matches the sofa. Instead, twin chairs may be desired for easy arrangement and a less monotonous appearance. Chairs may match the sofa in style but need different upholstery fabric.

Unnecessarily Decorated  Bulky Poor Design

Just as comfortable  Better design

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TRENDS IN STYLE AND DESIGN

Lightweight pieces, simple in design, are popular. They are easy to move around and are in scale for smaller homes.

Homemakers are seeking:

Upholstered chairs which can serve as host and hostess chairs at the dining table and be equally at home by the fireplace or card table. This requires a higher seat than a lounge chair.

The influence of television on furniture is apparent by some of the newer models appearing mounted on swivels or with casters. The armless lounge chair is a result of television also.

Mr. and Mrs. chairs sized to fit the Mr. and Mrs. They appear to be twin chairs but the Mrs. is a bit smaller. A seat-height ottoman can be purchased to match. Together with the ottoman this can serve as a spare single bed.

Loveseats or regular sized two cushioned sofas are more popular than three cushion. Sofas are being purchased to serve a dual purpose, sleeping as well as sitting. Sectional sofas make varied arrangements possible.

Many stores have their show pieces made up in muslin so purchaser can choose fabric for outer-covering to fit into her situation. This is much better than having to select from three or four in stock. She need not sacrifice any workmanship, style, design, or comfort for a good outer-covering she likes.

Molded plastic and fiber glass chairs are available and give a modern accent to a room. These chairs are mass-produced, comfortable and good in design.

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