

REAL ESTATE | DESIGN

10 Decorators' Best and Worst Buys

Design professionals reveal the smartest décor purchases they've ever made (midcentury finds on Craigslist), and the most regrettable (a stinky ottoman). What you can learn from their admissions



CANVAS WITH A PAST Charlotte, N.C., designer Catherine M. Austin happily discovered after buying this painting locally that it was originally sold by a highly reputable New York gallery. PHOTO: DUSTIN FECK

By Catherine Romano
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ASKED TO NAME their best design buy, many people single out a gem they scored at a goat-worthy price, like the original Josef Hoffmann bistro chair Justin Colombik, of design and consulting firm Puccini Group, nabbed for \$1.50 in a Chicago consignment shop. Another kind of "best": finds that cost dearly but keep on giving. Bay Area designer Chloe Warner, for example, sprang for \$7,000 worth of a botanical-print Lee Jofa fabric to cover a 1960s sofa that's followed her from apartment to house. "It's been shockingly versatile," she said of the piece. When it comes to foolish purchases, some sting financially, like the commercial oven in Rick Shaver and Lee Melahn's Catskill's country house that could be lighted only with a blow torch. Others just sting the ego. The handle of the chrome tea kettle architect Andrew Wilkinson bought gets too hot to hold, a regular source of mirth for his wife. Here nine more designers share their wins and failures.

BEST "I scored four midcentury dining chairs on Craigslist for \$50 when I lived in Chicago," said New York designer Mikel Welch. "The guy just wanted them out of his house. I swapped out the white vinyl for forest-green velvet."

WORST "I was super excited when I got an authentic Moroccan leather pouf for \$100 online," he said, "but it had the most vile odor, like I was running a circus out of my one-bedroom apartment. I donated it to a local thrift store."

BEST "At a charity event, I bought a huge piece of abstract art that's a crazy mix of mint green, electric orange, red, bright pink, and yellow, with a shot of black and white," said New York interior designer Courtney McLeod. "It's followed me to five apartments. I use it as an example for my clients to buy what you love and you'll inevitably make it work."

WORST "I fell for a porter chair, a classic design with a high back and domed hood," said Ms. McLeod. "It just wasn't me, but the style had become trendy and I fell for it. Lesson learned: Trust your personal style and let trends come and go."



ILLUSTRATION: ZOE MORE O'FERRALL

BEST "I found a tall, shallow glass cabinet that fit an impossibly sized nook in our family room," said New York designer Libby Langdon. "It feels airy and open, and the interior lights illuminate a peculiar corner that would otherwise be a dark hole."

WORST "I thought this asymmetrical bookcase was modern and cool," said Ms. Langdon. "It had funny juts and odd-shaped openings and no back or doors. Nothing stayed standing up no matter how many bookends you used. It failed miserably."



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BEST "I bid on and won a 16-piece porcelain coffee set for \$200," said Max Humphrey of a decades-old collaboration between Richard Ginori and Gucci. "I lived in a basement apartment in Los Angeles, with no real furniture, so 'status' items like this were a big deal," said the Portland, Ore., designer, who still enjoys morning coffee from the logo-graced cups.

WORST "In L.A., also, I collected foo dogs, and most were little ceramics that fit under the seat of my Vespa," said Mr. Humphrey. "One day I spotted a waist-high pair I had to have. After haggling for them, I discovered they were cast concrete and unbelievably heavy. I made it halfway back to my apartment with the pair balancing between my legs before having to abandon them on the side of the road."

BEST "For the longest time, the only piece of furniture I had was a Chinoiserie coffee table I bought in a vintage shop for under \$100," said Rob Polacek, chief creative officer at San Francisco's Puccini Group. "It was rough around the edges but had great lines, and I still have it."

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BEST "I had to stretch to buy my walnut George Nakashima console, but seeing the craftsmanship and detail every day is an inspiration," said New York designer Stephanie Goto.

WORST "In a frenzy for one more chair for an evening of entertaining, I bought a black Philippe Starck Ghost Chair and brought it home in a cab. It's made of polycarbonate, and in the end, is too much the opposite of the timeless Nakashima. It's in storage now."



ILLUSTRATION: ZOE MORE O'FERRALL

BEST "I made over my dining room inspired by the colors and textures I saw when looking into the water of Lake Tahoe," said Bay Area designer Cynthia Spence, who said that both the lake and the room evoke serenity.

WORST "When I moved into a California ranch, I added arches to it reminiscent of those in the Spanish-style house I had moved from. All it did was make me miss that house, and looking at them every day made me hate them."

BEST "In 2002, I bought a sofa for \$6,000 off the floor of Holly Hunt, Chicago," said Larkspur, Calif., interior designer Alison Pickart. "Upholstered in an incredible giant-format black and cream plaid, it's the ultimate statement piece. And it is one of the most comfortable and well-made pieces I have ever owned."

WORST "So I could host a dinner party, I ordered 10 dining chairs online because they were available immediately," said Ms. Pickart. "Impatience is a weakness. The 'leather' was like plastic, the legs made of an awful veneer, and the chairs were just devoid of personality. I had bought into the convenience of mass-produced design. The chairs were left in the apartment when we moved."



ILLUSTRATION: ZOE MORE O'FERRALL

BEST "When we remodeled and I got a closet I didn't share with my husband, I was able to go over-the-top girly and put bold floral wallpaper on its ceiling," said Dallas designer Abbe Fenimore, "something I've wanted to do since I was little."

WORST "I couldn't talk my husband out of buying a pitiful knockoff of a modern Italian leather sofa," said Ms. Fenimore. "We argued about getting rid of it for so long, we both laughed when our new puppy shredded the back cushions."



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BEST Ritu Nagpal and Chetna Baveja put two swivel chairs by Mitchell Gold + Bob Williams in Ms. Baveja's great room. "These Nico chairs are an unusual square shape, with arms and an open back, and we covered them with beautiful blue-green fabric," said Ms. Nagpal, who with Ms. Baveja helms San Francisco's Blue Lamp Interiors. "They became the perfect solution for watching TV or conversing with people on the bay-window bench or the adjacent sofa."

WORST "Buying a sofa for my living room in an ivory color, I thought the slip-covered option would be easier to clean," Ms. Nagpal said. "While the high-performance fabric is highly durable, if you dry clean or wash the slipcover, it will shrink!"

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