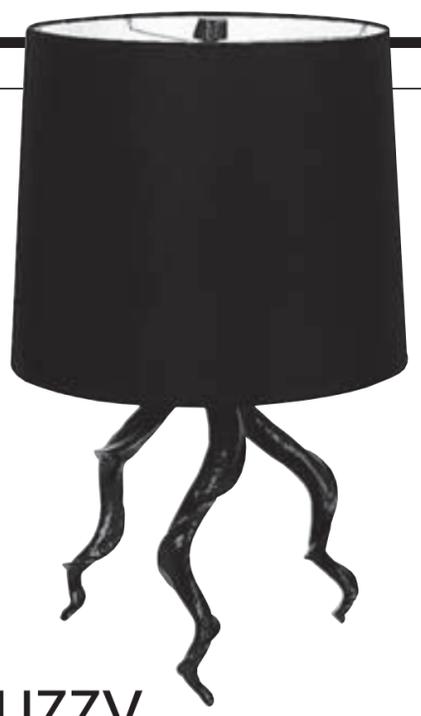


TRENDS » BUILDING A BETTER NEST



Houseware designers get warm and fuzzy

The buzzwords at this week's New York International Gift Fair were cozy, comfortable and organic

BY TIM MCKEOUGH

Consumers may be watching their wallets these days, but the homey, comforting decor they are likely to buy in trying times is inspiring a full-blown nesting trend.

Witness the New York International Gift Fair, which was held this week in Manhattan. The gloomy economic climate was on the minds and lips of most of the vendors. But while they may have been nervous about their own prospects, they nevertheless showcased a variety of products and housewares to help weary homeowners weather the recessionary storm.

Tellingly, the ostentatious luxury and ornamentation seen just last year had largely disappeared. Instead, there were soothing items such as blankets, pillows and nature-inspired tableware.

Here are a few of the top strategies seen at the show for building a better nest.

BACK TO NATURE

This year, designers want to help you get back to your roots with shapes and graphics borrowed from the natural world.

Vermont's Laura Zindel, for instance, presented creamy ceramic dinnerware emblazoned with black-and-white images of farm animals and insects (warm guests before serving), while Michael Aram, an artisan who splits his time between New York and India, showed serving dishes shaped like twigs and leaves, polished stainless-steel bowls resembling pomegranates and side tables and lamps with oxidized copper legs that look like vines.

Patch NYC, meanwhile, offered pillows printed with woodblock-style images of endearing bears and owls as well as needlepoint art (handmade by the two designers' moms!) featuring mushrooms and deer.

SOFT SHAPES

Gently sculpted objects with organic shapes were omnipresent at this year's fair. The designers at Brooklyn's KleinReid, who had previously worked with Eva Zeisel, the grande dame of sensual ceramics, demonstrated what they had learned from her with a collection named Applied, a series of shapely containers made of bright white porcelain.

California glass-blower Caleb Siemon, on the other hand, offered Happy Kiss Lights, free-form glass pendant lamps that resemble oversized Hershey's Kisses (albeit ones that had been melted in a lava flow). Edmonton's Loyal Loot, meanwhile, showed off its Prairie House vase, which has a gently undulating top that mimics a field, a Monopoly-sized house on top and a small hole for a single stem.

Even the exuberant Italian housewares company Alessi introduced a surprisingly streamlined set of earthy dinnerware – named Tonale – by British architect David Chipperfield.

ESCAPISM

Ever feel like you just need to get away from it all? Numerous products are available this year to help you build a retreat at home.

The oversized wall decals from Paris-based Les Invasions Ephémères, for example, allow you to easily add two-dimensional spiral staircases, fireplaces and mirror frames (or trees, flowers and grasses) to any room, while Brooklyn-based Razortooth Design offers those looking for more of a cocoon a range of DIY hanging screens made by hooking its laser-cut tiles together.

Los Angeles-based Artecnic, meanwhile, took more of a surrealist approach to decorating with its Wonderland candlesticks (which appear to be made from toy-like figurines haphazardly placed on top of each other) and drippy-looking one-piece Piqué candles (which spiral out at the bottom so the wax provides its own integrated base).

Finally, women who really want to get into their music can check out OhMiBod, a line of iPod-powered vibrators. Just be careful when playing Metallica.

REFINED UTILITY

As the many exhibitors giving new life to everyday objects demonstrated, getting back to basics doesn't require a return to boring.

Design House Stockholm, for instance, introduced the Work Lamp, a thoughtful reinvention in gold or chrome of the cage lights normally seen on construction sites, while AreaWare unveiled an appealing wood flashlight by Jonas Damon that still has a sturdiness and weight that feels good in the hand. A new California outfit named Alice Supply Co., meanwhile, offered a full range of tools in poppy colours, including a tangerine garden hose, a camouflage toolbox and a vibrantly striped toilet plunger.

» Special to The Globe and Mail

Above left: Brooklyn-based KleinReid's Applied line of sinuous porcelain containers reveal the influence of mentor Eva Zeisel, the grande dame of sensual ceramics.

Above right: Michael Aram's Impala table lamp features twiggy legs and has a striking silhouette.

Below: Razortooth Design's DIY hanging screens are made by hooking laser-cut tiles together.



Right: L.A.-based Artecnic's surrealist Wonderland candlesticks appear to be made from figurines haphazardly placed on top of one another.

Far right: Vermont designer Laura Zindel's creamy ceramic dinnerware is emblazoned with black-and-white images of spiders and beetles. Warn guests before serving!



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ADVICE

Personal pics are fine at work, but minimize cubicle kitsch



RUSSELL SMITH
ASK MR. SMITH
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Dear Mr. Smith: I have been working in an open-concept office for the past three years. Appearance is important here and I don't have much space on my desk or cubicle walls for personal items. Five months ago, I lost my beloved mother to cancer. How appropriate would it be to put a small framed photograph of her in my space? Would this be sweet and acceptable or awkward/creepy for my co-workers and clients?

The only office I have ever known to ban all personal items from cubicles was a fictitious one: It was the White House on *The West Wing*, where a senior staffer sternly warns a newcomer that the place is too serious for domesticity.

Unless you are working with your finger on the nuclear button, however, an image of one's mother is hardly offensive or even noticeable in even the soberest of environments. I have been in government offices arguing about international tax law and hardly noticed the cute kids' drawings on the partition and the holiday snapshot on the computer screen. (I'm sure they were bumping up against regulation there, but who cares?)

It's true that cubicle decoration can get out of hand, especially in those creative industries (advertising, video production) where an exaggerated love of kitsch seems to proclaim a greater hipster status.

Too many plastic water guns and animé toys make me feel as if I'm walking through a daycare. And obviously you have to be careful with artistic images that are risqué – cool it, for instance, with the Egon Schiele reproductions – or jokes that are contro-

versial. (I recently worked with a radio producer who had a portrait of Slobodan Milosevic tacked to her wall; at first I was scared to ask if it was ironic or not.)

But who could object to one small pic of a mom in your own space? And why would it be creepy just because she has passed away? For one thing, visiting clients don't have to know that and, second, it is perfectly traditional to display photos of the past – including ancestors and other departed relatives – in one's home. No one need feel awkward about death and remembrance.

» Ask Mr. Smith a question, or view the complete archive, at Russell Smith's online advisory service, XYCanada.com.