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The Beauty Lies in Stylish Fakes

Make Your Rental Look Like a Dream Home by Adopting Some Affordable Tricks of the Trade

By HELEN KIRWAN-TAYLOR

When Pamela Ferrari still needed a few key pieces of furniture for a 14th-century farmhouse in Florence she was renovating in the late 1970s, the New York-based designer came up with the perfect solution: fake furniture.

"I longed for a few antiques, especially a 17th-century painted secretaire," she says, "so I bought some plywood and cut it out, and painted my own version. I subsequently made screens and flat vases to decorate our house, all moveable." These fake pieces are now commissioned for £2,300 to £6,400 (www.pamelaferrari.com).



Amy Murrell

Sitting room in the Old Walls cottage at Thyme at Southrop Manor

As a painter, ceramicist and textile designer, Ms. Ferrari is accustomed to creating a mood wherever she goes. The challenge, she says, isn't when you have a blank canvas on which to paint but when you have limitations, either because of budgets, or, as increasingly is the case across Europe, because the house isn't yours. "Rentals, by their nature, are usually quite sparsely decorated," she says. "Whenever we rent houses in Greece, Canada or Corsica, I come loaded with my tablecloths and pillow covers, several pareos and a large shawl to throw over couches, beds and tables to achieve an instant effect of home. I also look around and get rid of anything offensive and rearrange the furniture. Actually, the more modest the place, the more effective the transformation. I buy candles, and put them in odd drinking glasses and decorate the

table with bowls of vegetables."

Such styling, as opposed to decorating, has become a kind of art form that clever designers use to great effect. Whereas interior design is intended to be permanent, styling is all about optical illusions and visual tricks that get the same result, generally at a fraction of the cost. Styling is by its sheer nature flexible and creative and far more in line with fashion, she says.

London designer Louise Holt, of Cloud Studios, recently designed a rental flat in Notting Hill in off-white and slate tones to bring out punchy accent colors like orange. The trick, she says, is to go for visual impact. "You can so easily create the right mood if you work with accessories," she says.



Pamela Ferrari

Fake wood secretaire by Pamela Ferrari

She recently styled a farmhouse in Oxfordshire using geometric cushions, a purple pouf by Arcade Avec, small occasional tables by Pinch and sheepskin throws. It went from ordinary to funky in a few moments. One of Ms. Holt's favorite styling tools is the wide stair-stepped Wall Bookshelf in white (£140, www.conranshop.co.uk), which is light enough to carry yourself and allows you to mix books with knick knacks, propped paintings and photos. Many such items started their lives as built-on-the-spot props for magazine stylists and eventually were incorporated into collections by established retailers, including Ikea—the No. 1 source for stylists, she says.

Designer Jonathan Adler, a former ceramicist, who recently opened his first European showroom in London, believes it's all in the accessories. "I think you can create any amount of interesting compositions by mixing things like patterned tapestry cushions up," he says. "By grouping objects together, you create a kind of montage that the eye is drawn to." For example, placing objects in a simple white lacquer tray (£150, uk.jonathanadler.com) on a coffee table creates a neat visual effect, he says, while putting his Nelson platinum lamps (£595) on either side of a composition of books and ceramics creates drama and height.



Jonathan Adler

Room styled by Jonathan Adler

Where set design ends and styling begins is increasingly hard to pin down. At a dinner for French crystal maker Baccarat last fall, British designer Suzy Hoodless created a Scandinavian chalet complete with wooden trellis tables and chairs covered in sheepskin. She used waney edge pine mounted on the walls on a temporary supporting frame. The trestle tables were designed to look like George Nakashima creations and came with removable tops so they could be mounted onto different bottoms. "The structure was meant to be temporary but the clients keep asking if they can keep it," she says. Whereas wood paneling is a lifelong commitment, this structure can be changed at a fraction of the cost.

Set and costume designer Robert Jones, who works both in New York and London, often styles the corporate apartments he rents for work. "I always move the furniture and bring candles and throws to create an atmosphere. I am one of those sad people who have winter and summer cushions that I rotate. I first got the idea when I saw a Park Avenue apartment, where the owner had several sets of slipcovers that she periodically changed. I thought that was brilliant. We don't wear the same clothes every day. Who wants to look at the same sofa?"

The trick to styling is to accept that it is temporary. Cox & Cox, an online company founded by stylists Fiona Cox and Lizzie

Thornton-Allan, is all about objects thrown together effortlessly. Among their best sellers is Gorgeous Deer Head, a laminated graphic hunting trophy originally designed for children but long since hijacked by stylists. It's ideal for anyone renting a bare chalet as it flatpicks away easily (£35, www.coxandcox.co.uk).

Styled rentals work so well that Caryn Hibbert of cookery school Thyme at Southrop Manor in the Cotswolds, England, has reproduced for sale virtually every component of the manor's five rental cottages, from the wool-covered sofas, cushions and throws, to glass and ceramics. Clients kept asking if they could buy the furniture. To oblige, Ms. Hibbert and partner Hannah Rippon in 2007 started Teasel England, a fabric and furniture company also based on the estate (www.teaselengland.com).

Stylist Alexa Vere Nicoll of ARP Interiors has calculated that whenever she styles a rental property, 33% of takers end up buying all the temporary furniture and props. "It's all about how you put things together," she says. "You can give four people the same objects and they will create a totally different interior. The actual fact is that the right styling makes a house appear much larger." Ms. Vere Nicoll will start neutral and then add the key touches at the end, she says. "I will put in some shocking pink lampshades and tartan cushions and suddenly the space comes alive."

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