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Come in
Small Packages*

BUYING FURNITURE: INVESTING IN DURABILITY

The cost of furniture more than any other item purchased for the interior of your home is directly related to the craftsmanship, quality and durability of the product. A six hundred dollar sofa will only last three or four years before the fabric wears out, the frame splits or the filling and springs crush to an uncomfortable mass of lumps. A sofa that costs two thousand dollars or more will have double-doweled and screwed joints for strength, a kiln-dried hardwood frame that resists changes in humidity (avoiding warps and splits in the wood), eight-way tied springs for seating firmness and perhaps a fabric protector to resist surface stains and soiling. In other words, buy cheap and buy often. A wise investment in a piece of furniture that's exactly the right size and style for your home will give you a lifetime of pleasure.

What can you expect at different price points?

For \$200-\$300 a table or bureau will be mass-produced and machine made. Any finishes will be applied with a spray gun and blemishes in the wood or finish will be apparent. The surface will scratch easily when you slide a tray across the top or drop jewelry on it. Legs and sides are glued together or perhaps stapled. Changes in humidity which cause the wood to shrink or expand naturally result in a rickety unstable piece of furniture. Often pieces in the lower price ranges are constructed of composite wood or wood veneers rather than solid wood.

For \$800 or more the furniture will be handmade with attention to detail. Finishes will be applied in layers with careful sanding between applications to remove any surface imperfections. This deeper finish is more resistant to scratches. Stained woods develop a luster brings out the beauty of the wood grain and its coloration. Sides, drawers and legs are dovetailed, doweled screwed, and glued for maximum strength. Drawers and cabinets that are constructed in this manner are less likely to jam because the frame of the piece will not twist over time. Ball bearing glides on the drawers allow the drawer to be closed quietly with a gentle tap of the finger. (If the drawer doesn't have mechanical glides, try to jiggle the drawers sideways to see how much play there is in the drawer opening. The more lateral movement, the more likely the drawer will come out at an angle and jam.)



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Wood furniture priced over \$1000 usually has several custom finish options and the dimensions of the piece can be adjusted to allow for placement in a specific spot. These one of a kind artisan pieces are often enjoyed by several generations.

"What about upholstered furniture? Should I recover it or replace it?"

To make this decision ask yourself these questions:

1. If you were to see the same piece today covered in a new fabric would you buy it?
2. Are the lines or style of the furniture dated?
3. Does the furniture have the correct dimensions and proportions for the room where it is being used?
4. Are the arms a comfortable height?
5. How easy is it to get up after you sit on the piece?
6. Does this piece have antique or sentimental value that warrants keeping it?

Since the cost to reupholster is often very comparable to the cost of a replacement piece of furniture you also need to consider whether the quality of the furniture when it was new (often a direct correlation to its initial cost) warrants reupholstery or replacement. (Less expensive furniture, for the reasons mentioned above, has a shorter lifespan than a custom piece.)

Why does reupholstery cost so much?

Once you turn your piece over to an upholsterer, he will strip the fabric, padding and foam off of the wood frame. Next he'll replace any damaged springs or joints or webbing and basically re-build the furniture from the ground up. Labor costs for this highly skilled job will run \$700 to \$1000 for a sofa and will require 16-20 yards of fabric. If there is a pattern repeat, matching the repeat will require 10-30% more fabric than if the fabric was solid. A skilled upholstery shop can add or remove a skirt, refinish the legs, add casters and modify the silhouette of the piece.

When you shop for a replacement piece of upholstered furniture checking for these features will assure that you get good value for your investment. If the fabric has a pattern it should match on all four sides of the furniture.



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If there's a skirt on the bottom turn it over to see that it is hemmed and lined, not stapled or glued. Do the seat cushions lie flat on the deck of the sofa or do they bow up at the ends where they meet the arms? Is the wood finish on the arm and legs smoothly and evenly applied? How resistant is the wood to scratches? Ask the salesperson about the internal construction of the piece and whether the fabric has been treated with a protectant. Check the welting, buttons and other trims for loose seams or raveled edges. Sit on the piece the way you'll use it at home to see how easy it is to get up. Older people or persons with bad backs may prefer firmer seating and a tight cushion back rather than several loose back pillows. If you nap on your sofa, select one with lower arms. Faux down cushions are an option if you love the cushy relaxed seating of down but are allergic to feathers.

Most people keep a piece of furniture for ten to twenty years after they purchase it. Making a wise investment in the beginning will keep you from living with your mistake for many years to come.

**Written by Interior Decorator Jean Cary
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