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Painted furniture never passe

Margi Vorder Bruegge and George Snead Designing Duo

The room: Any place in the house. Just remember the old adage, every room can use a little black. How about adding a piece of painted furniture to that scenario? The challenge: Tired of lots of heavy wood stain on the legs of your furniture and case goods (end tables, chests of drawers, etc.)? In the trade, antiques are known as "brown furniture," with good reason.

Afraid of painted furniture? Too beachy? Feels like it belongs in a cottage or second home? Afraid it will chip? Many of us of a certain generation also cringe at the very idea of painted furniture -- it reminds us of all that painted French Provincial when we were growing up.

The solution: Don't be afraid to mix and match the wood finishes on your furniture. You may have an antique "brown" finish mixed with a more transitional black/brown so popular today. Or even a painted wood frame on a Bergere chair or small end table. It's actually OK to have an eclectic look. As a matter of fact, it's not a bad idea to repeat things in a room. So instead of just one black piece or one piece of painted furniture, you might want to balance these pieces in a room so it doesn't look like you had one leftover item that you threw into the mix.

Although we love painted furniture at the beach -- it can have a very casual look -- it can also be very sophisticated, transitional, even modern. Think of all those art deco Fred and Ginger movies with all the white Hollywood furnishings. If you take a sleek, non-distressed surface and paint it, you get a very sharp, clean current look.

If a paint finish has been applied by the furniture manufacturer at the time the piece is built, chances are the finish will wear like iron.

For those of you who are avid readers of shelter magazines, you'll be familiar with the name Barbara Barry, branded with carpets, furniture, fabrics, etc. Many of her furniture pieces are shown in a painted finish and can blend in almost anywhere.

Resources: Of course, you can always have your decorative painter turn a wooden piece into a whimsical one -- probably most appropriate for children's rooms. In the last several years we've had good luck with three companies which offer incredible paint options.

Hickory Chair is well known for its traditional wooden pieces, but recently has expanded into cleaner, more transitional lines. Almost any piece of its wooden furniture can be painted and the selections are endless -- striping, gold or silver accents, almost anything you can imagine. Hickory White -- not to be confused with Hickory Chair -- also makes a great painted product. Somerset Bay offers a more casual look in its furniture and its color palette is perfect for the shore or second home.

So if you're trying to shake things up a bit, perhaps update a more traditional look, try adding a piece or two of painted furniture to a room. If you do it right it won't feel like you've gone back in time, but more like you've taken a step into the future. Happy painting!

Fairfield County and Palm Beach, Fla., interior designers Margi Vorder Bruegge and George Snead wowed "The Oprah Winfrey Show" audience with their room makeovers in a day. Contact them by phone at

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