

How To Recognize Quality In Upholstered Furniture

Shopping for quality upholstered furniture requires X-ray vision. Often, an expensive fabric covers a poorly constructed frame, leaving furniture that looks terrific, but will not last.

A trained eye can detect the true value of a sofa, wing chair or ottoman by examining key elements beneath the upholstery.

"Upholstered furniture should be inspected from the inside out, and valued the same way," says Walt Hamilton of Pennsylvania House, makers of fine furniture.

"Most consumers concentrate on the overall appearance of upholstered furniture, often overlooking basic construction features." If the piece isn't properly constructed, it is not a good value, says Hamilton.

The frame should be made of kiln-dried hardwood and have corner block reinforcements. Joints should be glued and double doweled. The legs should be extensions of the frame, not attached to a metal plate.

To test overall strength, lift the piece. It should be sturdy and should not creak or wobble. Apply pressure to chair arms and sofa backs to test for stability.

The spring system and cushions are other keys to the overall comfort and quality. A properly crafted spring system will ensure a resilient seat while maintaining the piece's shape. Eight-way, hand-tied construction provides exceptional durability.

Properly constructed padding will prevent springs from being felt through the upholstery. Cushions should be properly fitted into the deck of the seat. Look for polyurethane or latex foam padded cushions for ultimate comfort.

Good tailoring, like good construction, is also a sign of quality and value. Upholstery seams should be straight and tight with no puckering or loose threads. Since cushion covers should be approximately one inch smaller than the cushions, zippers ensure a tight fit.

A careful examination of the fabric is the next step. "Many consumers are persuaded by pattern or color without considering practicality," says Hamilton. "The overall style of your home and your family's activities should be a prime consideration when choosing upholstery."

Depending on the usage, certain fabrics will be more suitable than others. A heavy-weight fabric with high stain and abrasion resistance, such as wool, is a good choice for a family room. Delicate fabrics are best used on accent pieces.

Different fibers and fabric constructions have different advantages. "The fibers present in the highest concentration will indicate the strongest features of the upholstery," explains Hamilton.

Synthetic fabrics such as polyester and nylon provide durability, so they're good for pieces that must withstand pets, children or other excessive wear. Na-

tural fibers dye better than synthetics, but offer less stain and abrasion resistance.

In general, tightly woven, "dense" fabrics wear better than lighter weight ones, according to Hamilton. However, lightweight fabrics can be quilted for added strength and durability.

Patterned or medium-colored fabrics show less dirt than solid, light-colored fabrics, although today most fabrics have specially treated protective finishes for added soil and stain resistance.

"Since furniture represents a major investment, shopping should include more than squeezing cushions and sitting on sofas," says Hamilton.

By evaluating your particular needs and family lifestyle, and by following Hamilton's tips, you can choose suitable upholstered furniture that is not only good looking but a good value.



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