

Decorators' favorite coffee tables

An indispensable part of any seating group, the coffee table is a recent invention that can present a design problem. Here fourteen decorators solve it

IF YOU ARE EVER HAVING LUNCH WITH AN

interior decorator and there's a lull in the conversation, try introducing the topic of coffee tables. We opened the subject with a few New York decorators and they had plenty to say.

"Coffee tables are the hardest thing in the whole wide world," said Mariette Himes Gomez.

"I hate coffee tables," said decorator Stephen Sills. "They're a silly twentieth-century invention."

"Coffee tables are a big problem," said David Easton. "Few antique ones are left on the market. But clients get miffed if I get them a mass-produced design and they see the same table at someone else's house."

"Oh, coffee tables," said Mark Hampton. "People are so hung up on them."

For some decorators, coffee tables, also known as cocktail tables, are difficult to choose; for others, difficult to love. But for all decorators, and their clients, the coffee table, or at least the coffee table function, is impossible to ignore. When you sit on a sofa or easy chair, comfort and convenience require a low table at arm's length. Mark Hampton says, "It's a table for drinks and books and magazines and your glasses when you get older and cigarettes for the few people who still smoke. And it's a wonderful low place for flowers, for candles, and for things you collect." That much everyone agrees on. But as to which table best fulfills the coffee-table function—how high? how long? square or rectangle? round or biomorphic? what

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For her home in Malibu, California, decorator Karin Blake cut a seven-foot-long fruitwood harvest table down to coffee-table height.



DECORATORS' FAVORITE COFFEE TABLES



Classic Parsons table

Watson says. Suddenly, women could begin moving more freely, adopting new postures like the “debutante slouch” of the Roaring Twenties. To capitalize on this turn towards comfort, furniture designers created lower, softer, more informal seating, such as upholstered sofas and chairs; with them came correspondingly low tables, coffee tables above all.

“I suppose it’s a bit odd that I’ve gone back to the old-fashioned tea-table height,” says Bunny Williams. But colleagues Stephen Sills, Bruce Gregg, Vicente Wolf and David Easton have too. Unfortunately the tea table usually doesn’t have a broad enough surface to be a truly satisfying coffee table. That is why Bunny Williams and David Easton choose tea tables with leaves.

Another strategy, practiced by Easton and Sills, is to supplement a tea table by accessorizing the sofa and armchairs that surround it with smaller, secondary tables, in the manner of “cigarette tables.” (Back in the bad old days when nearly everyone smoked, cigarette or occasional tables were standard furnishings, placed next to most armchairs.) Sills says, “Sometimes people ask me, ‘So, where’s the coffee table?’ and I show them how a tea table plus little tables works just fine and is more attractive.”

Interestingly, though the tea table is older than the coffee table many designers feel that this combination of a tea table and several secondary tables, rather than one big coffee table, creates a more contemporary look. “I think the idea of a giant coffee table in the center surrounded by a sofa and chairs is kind of old-fashioned,” says Laura Bohn. “It’s hardly something I do automatically, though people often expect it. Sometimes I use several smaller tables.” Mariette Himes Gomez, however, warns that such a design strategy can be a problem. “I believe in being practical above all,” she says. “It isn’t fair to make people poke around for a table to put their drinks on. Often it is simpler just to have a big coffee table in the center.”

But big coffee tables—say, four by six feet or larger—can create other, purely aesthetic problems. “When the coffee table gets big, it loses its sculptural quality and starts looking like part of the floor,” says David Easton. Stephen Sills, whose distaste for coffee tables is already a matter of record, adds, “The worst ones are the big ones. They’re ugly and vul-

such impractical garments to be relegated to the flea market of fashion history,”

gar. If you must have a coffee table, always underscale it.”

In addition, Van-Martin Rowe, the Los Angeles designer, sees social problems with big coffee tables. “I hate it when oversize coffee tables trap people, separate them by many feet of space, and produce dead pockets in a room,” he says. Bunny Williams agrees. “If the coffee table gets too big, people have to yell at each other,” she says.

Of course, there are considerations of proportion. In a big room, the tendency will be to choose a big coffee table. But there’s a limit. Mariette Himes Gomez says, “In a really big room, after a certain point, you have to consider breaking the furniture arrangement into two or more seating areas, each with its own coffee table.”

If you look at back issues of *House Beautiful* from the 1920s, you will see the coffee table appear in photographs quite suddenly around mid-decade; by 1930, it had become a sine qua non for informal seating areas. Since its birth, the coffee table has been reinterpreted by major furniture designers (even a few sculptors), though if the truth be told, it has never inspired the great designs the chair has. “For most designers, the coffee table has been an incidental piece of furniture, a utility item, really, designed to match other items, like end tables, as part of a group,” says John Pile, teacher at Pratt Institute in Brooklyn, New York, for almost a half-century, author of numerous books on furniture and a furniture designer himself. There has been only a handful of classic coffee tables by major 20th-century designers; Pile cites the Barcelona table by Ludwig Mies van der Rohe (1929), the Alvar Aalto cocktail table (1936), and Isamu Noguchi’s famous free-form sculptural table (1944), among others.

But America’s leading interior decorators prefer to leave these classic tables in design’s hall of fame, not in their clients’ living rooms—with a few exceptions. Mariette Himes Gomez, when asked her favorite coffee table, immediately mentions the Katryn cocktail table by Billy Baldwin. This elegant wood-and-glass design is an enlarged version of an earlier design known simply as the Billy Baldwin cocktail table. Gomez has used the Katryn many times: “It’s very plain and tailored, an asset in any interior, traditional or contemporary, because it’s a perfect transitional coffee table, somewhere between Chinese tables and modern ones in glass and steel.”

Also praised as versatile transitional pieces by Chicago’s Bruce



Billy Baldwin's Katryn table



Ragnetto table by Vittorio Livi for Fiam Italia



K'ang table from Naga Antiques



Reproduction English Regency-style tea table from John Rosselli