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How to Find Well-Made, High-Quality Furniture

By Jay Johnson



A custom furniture maker reveals the tell-tale signs of quality furniture.

In a world of flat-boxed, assembly-required furniture, how can an interior designer detect a quality piece from an inferior, poorly made item? My design partner Irwin Weiner and I went to custom furniture maker Diane Paparo for help. Her NYC [dp studio](#) business launched in 2005 with bespoke furniture that combines stainless steel, exotic woods, and stones. You'll find her "international modern" furniture everywhere from Las Vegas mansions and interior design books and magazines to the executive suites of Revlon's headquarters. We asked Diane about finding the right furniture for clients.



Williams-Sonoma Home Presidio Settee

• **Impeccable Quality.** "Every designer should begin with the wants and needs of the client, what they prize or what they need to reuse – and then we create within that framework. But what underlies the design is very important to me. I look for quality first; beginning with sourcing suppliers whose craftsmanship is impeccable. Nothing gets presented strictly on the basis of aesthetics. Don't just design a home; build a long-term relationship between the client and their furnishings."

• **Quality Levels.** We asked Diane if "built-to-last" was a silly notion for today's design client. "Today we're a transient and impatient society. We don't like to wait, so levels of product have emerged to suit our differing lifestyles and timelines. Good furniture is readily available and good enough for the present. Better furniture is semi-custom with a lifespan of ten to fifteen years. Best furniture is totally custom, heirloom quality, and built-to-last. There's a reasonably well-made product to satisfy every client's

patience quotient and budget. If your clients prize originality and craftsmanship, look for Best quality, but point out the levels that are available and help your clients choose the right mix for their project."

• **Comfort and Stability.** "Two hundred years ago couples slept in three-quarter beds. Now we're a taller, heavier population, and we need more space. As a designer, I look for furniture from the standpoint of comfort and stability. Dining room chairs: look for single-piece wood backs and legs or opt for a more substantial metal leg; a cross bar between the legs also adds strength and stability. Specify broader seats to accommodate extra girth. To avoid 'sinking' in a sofa, ask for extra webbing or a padded deck that reinforces the frame and supports the cushions. Dacron seats offer more support than down or feathers. Deeper seats or higher backs will provide better neck support if your clients like to pitch back and watch their widescreen TVs. But make sure large custom sofas will fit through access doors!"



west elm Klismos Dining Chair

• **Solid, Harder Woods.** What raw materials should you seek out and what should you avoid? "Every wood piece is a living thing, and it will shift and move over time. I'm partial to harder woods like the fruit woods – cherry, maple, walnut, and mahogany. I avoid pine because it's soft, but I use oak on occasion. I select solid woods as often as possible and veneers as little as possible. Many of my own pieces are a mix of exotic and domestic woods with a bit of steel or acrylic thrown in for interest."

• **Good Care.** "Preserve the beauty of your client's fine furniture by avoiding common mistakes. Never use a spray polish. Just dust. Remove spots with mild dishwashing liquid and a soft cloth. Keep your furniture out of direct sunlight. Wood bleaches out and fabrics fade. Solar film on your windows will help protect your furniture, rugs, and upholstered pieces."



west elm Martini Side Table

Detect Shoddiness. Diane gave us a few tips to detect shoddy workmanship and steer towards quality.

- Pick the piece up; if it's light, be wary. Well-made furniture feels substantial. Turn chairs over and inspect the joints. Seat frames, at each corner, should be reinforced with wooden blocks. Look for dowels, not glue.
- Look for good carpentry: tongue-and-groove joints, pegged drawers, dovetailed drawer fronts.
- Beware staples and gauze on the bottom of chairs. Staples can be hiding a disaster.
- Bounce on sofa cushions. If they don't move, the cushion is solid foam and may settle over time. If there's a slight give, there is supportive webbing that will increase sofa life. When you sit, make sure you can't feel the hard frame edge on the bottom of your thigh.
- Check the seams on the upholstery. The stitching should be straight and there should be no puckering

on the fabric. Are the corners executed finely?

- Inspect the bottoms and legs of all furniture to be sure that adjustable glides are present. Adjustable glides will help you level furniture. Frames may warp over time if furniture isn't level.
- Run your hand over the length of any exposed wood. Check for smoothness and look for even finishes. Roughness and changes in color indicate shoddy work.

Diane admires [west elm](#) for "offering consistently well-designed and integrated furniture collections." Skewing modern, they freshly reinterpret the classics. Cases in point: "They recently added a fun and affordable [Klismos Dining Chair](#) to their line. I'm always partial to small blast of color, and the [Martini Side Table](#) in persimmon suits my fancy at a great price. I've also sprinkled some of the Williams-Sonoma Home upholstered seating into my projects, like the [Presidio Settee](#). Williams-Sonoma Home upholstered seating offers many fabrics, and pieces can be easily integrated with other lines. As elite designer Albert Hadley once noted, "Nothing comes cheap, though the educated eye will always spot very nice things for the least money."

Top image: [west elm Dunham Sofa - Box Cushion](#)

In November 2006, Manhattan-based blogger [Jay Johnson](#) and his partner [Irwin Weiner](#), ASID applied the popularity of watching videos on the Internet to the house-and-garden arena. The idea for [Design2Share](#) was born. On D2S, they share their insight, tips, and strong opinions about how people design and decorate their homes, entertaining over 300,000 visitors a year; their syndicated original videos had over 22 million video views in 2010.