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Arranging Accessories in the Home

Michigan State University

Cooperative Extension Service

Home and Family Series

Dorothy C. O'Donnell, Extension Home Economist, Related Art

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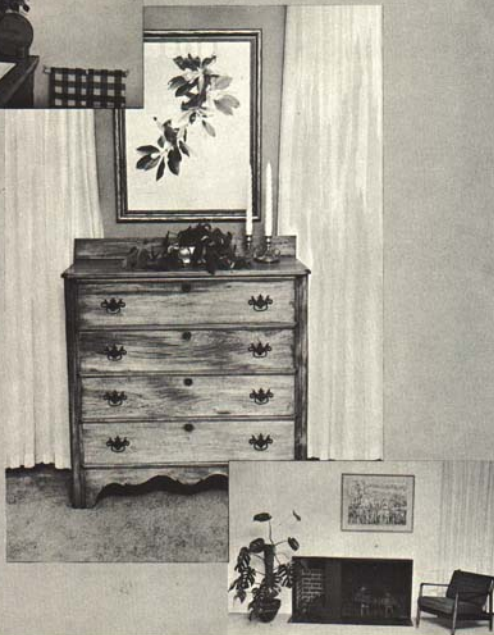
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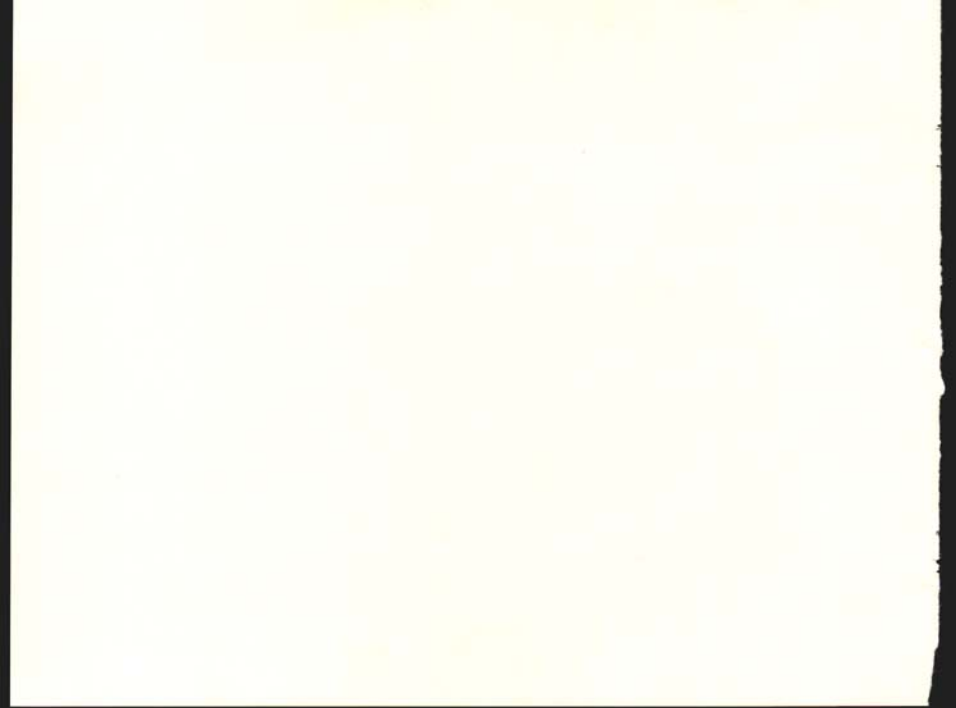
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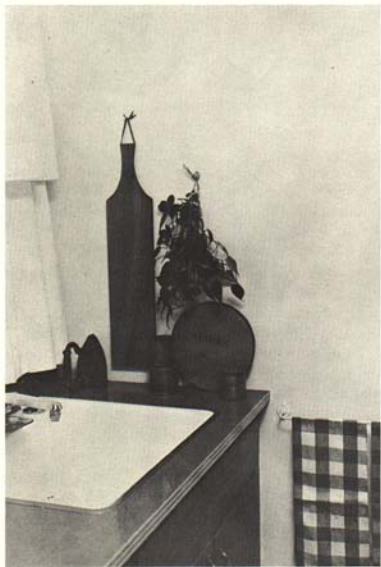
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Question: What is the best way to arrange accessories in the home?

Answer: Make the most of those you have.

It is as simple as that. Design laziness is the only real stumbling stone most of us trip over en route to good designing. This mental design disorder makes its victims feel that designing should take no work, no thought, no planning and that some people are magically gifted to produce beauty effortlessly. Those afflicted have the "if onlys"...if only I were wealthy and much-traveled...if only I had her pretty things...if only my house had nice smooth walls; I, too, could have a charming, well-appointed home.

A shot of design awareness starts the cure. The homemaker opens her eyes on a completely new world. She sees possibilities for beauty where she once saw a dusty mantel filled with clutter. She stops forever being an ordinary homemaker and joins the magic and excitement of the design world. Wherever she turns, her kind greet her. They are other homemaker-designers who share with a look the pleasing designs in her home or theirs. They are the interior designers and furniture designers who talk with her from the pages of magazines and books. They are painters and architects whose works she sees around her. All think and speak a special language—that of design.



Line, shape, color, texture, space and light are the staples on every designer's pantry shelf. These design elements take many forms. For the painter, they are the colors in his paint tubes, the strokes the brushes make, and the shapes, colors and textures that finally grow on his canvas. For the architect, they are the bricks and boards and plaster planned to give a house and the rooms in it a special design. For the homemaker, the design elements are the colors, textures and shapes of the spaces that are the rooms in her house, the furniture she places in them and the trays, pots, bowls and plants she calls accessories.

Design effort is the second shot most of us need. With it, come the willingness and energy for the hard work it takes to plan and arrange good designs.

Question: How can the "ordinary homemaker" turn herself into a homemaker-designer?

Answer: For a start, she can learn and use the Principles of Arrangement.

These are the mixing methods all designers use when they put the elements together in an orderly arrangement. Good designing does have an orderly plan, whether it is the accessory arrangement on the hall table, the arrangement of doors and windows on a traditional house, or a modern abstract painting. Some people have a natural sense of arrangement and use the principles instinctively. Most people, even great designers, start with a study of them. Gradually, through practice, the principles become second nature and each person's own special design abilities start to develop.

Six principles of particular help to anyone arranging accessories are: Repetition and variation, proportion and balance, dominance and subordination. As they are introduced in this circular,



they are in bold type. Several other principles are important and they, too, are in bold type the first time mentioned.

Question: Which principle should the homemaker start with?

Answer: None of them. Start with the basic furniture pieces in a room. Then use some of your accessories and use whatever principles are needed to arrange a spot in your home that is pleasing to the eyes.

Accessories, as the very word means, do not stand alone. They are the "in addition to" pieces that complement and enhance basic furniture, the sofa, chairs, tables, chests, bookshelves, fireplace. In some cases, you will work with a single piece of furniture; in some with a grouping of furniture.

Mostly, arrangements are against a background and should be kept within the space and shape formed by the furniture. You find this by (in your mind) extending lines up on the wall from the outer edges of the furniture piece or grouping. An entirely different arrangement has been used to accessorize the old washstand, but both are kept within the wall shape and space formed by it.

Question: When an accessory arrangement is finished (by other people) it looks good, but how do I get from a jumble to an orderly arrangement?

Answer: You have a head start when you realize that there is a difference between clutter and order. In an orderly arrangement, all the separate pieces, including the furniture, are part of the whole design.

This means that each depends on the other to give the design completeness. Chair, commode and picture are the basic furniture



grouping to be accessorized here. Many nice old pieces of glass have been put on top of the commode but with no thought to the effect of all together. Everything is about the same height so that the things on the furniture are completely separate from the picture. The result is clutter. Order and interest are given the arrangement when all but the plant and glass balls are removed and replaced with a lamp that gives a **Variation** in height. Because the lamp reaches up into the space beside the picture, it relates the things on top of the commode to the picture.

A larger picture hung on the same nail gives an even better over-all design because it is in better **Proportion** to the scale of the commode. That is, it is large enough in size to look right with it.

Question: Which principle of arrangement is most important?

Answer: In arrangement, several principles work together applied to several elements.

For example, there can be variation of line, color, size, shape, and texture. But for a satisfying arrangement to the eye the companion principle to variation, **Repetition**, must apply to the elements. This mantel grouping of plates and candlesticks shows how the two principles work together. There is variation of size of the plates, but repetition of the round shape as well as the surface texture of pewter. The candlesticks, too, repeat the pewter texture, and vertical, or up and down line, is repeated in several ways; in the candlesticks, the andirons, the brick, the paneling. The round plate shapes provide a variation from an arrangement that is a vertical and horizontal line in one. As you study the whole arrangement, you see that the basic principle upon which it depends is repetition, with variation giving it a "dash of salt"!



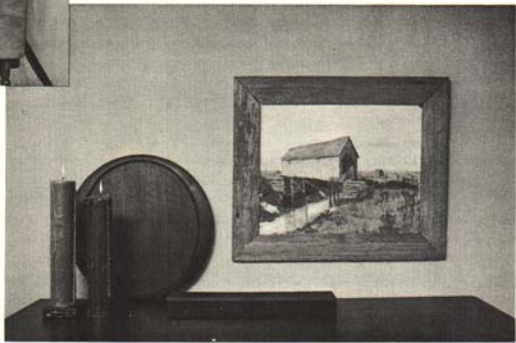
Question: What purpose has a principle, like repetition?

Answer: An effect is obtained in an arrangement by use of a principle.

By repeating an element again and again, a rhythm of design is obtained, much like the rhythm of waves breaking on the rocks, or of rain falling on the roof. Because rhythm is pleasing to the ear in music and to the eye in design, repetition is one of the most useful principles. Variation keeps the rhythm from being monotonous.

Repetition of line and texture sets up a rhythm between the Oriental scroll and the vase of branches. And interestingly, the feel of the mountains in mist is repeated in the wood grain of the door. The diagonal lines of the folding camp stool used to hold the tray are in sharp **Contrast** to the other lines.

In this mantel arrangement, repetition and variation together play a subtle but important part. The shapes of candlesticks and color of tapers are repeated five times, with variation in color and size. The five candlesticks repeat the five windows in the painting, and their colors repeat the colors found in it. The plant introduces another principle, that of **Transition**. Transition bridges separated things. The picture hangs separate and the candlesticks stand separate, but the softness and aliveness of the plant are a connecting link. Its leaves reach up toward the picture and over toward the candles, **Overlapping** into each. Plants, branches and flowers often provide transition in accessory arrangements because they overlap so gracefully to pull together other accessories.



Question: Is overlapping a separate principle of arrangement?

Answer: Overlapping, like repetition, is used in almost every design. It applies mostly to line and shape, and in arranging accessories, can be considered a separate principle.

By extending lines or shapes into other lines and shapes within a design, relationship of parts comes about. They do not necessarily need to touch, but often give the needed relatedness by overlapping into space beside or around an accessory. It depends on the wall space the furniture and other accessories provide. Here, by placing the tray off center and also grouping the candlesticks and plant off center, an over-all rectangular arrangement has been obtained. The candlesticks overlap the space beside the tray to relate the parts; the plant is a transition between circle and line.

The usefulness of overlapping can be seen again in the arrangement on top of the chest. Candles overlap the tray on one side and the box overlaps it on the other. The picture overlaps into the space formed by the placement of tray and box, almost as though it were designed for it. As, in fact, it was.

Both of the arrangements are examples of informal **Balance**.

Question: How can I decide what kind of balance, formal or informal, is the best?

Answer: The kind of balance is your personal choice, but that an arrangement must balance is a design requirement.

Balance is having equal (to the eye) weight of elements on either side of center. In formal balance, the accessories used to give equal weight are exactly the same, as in this fireplace grouping with picture and plant centered, candlesticks placed one on each side. The effect of formal balance is staid and dignified. The more relaxed



look of informal balance is easily obtained by merely rearranging the same accessories. Both candlesticks on one side are balanced by the weight of the plant moved slightly to the other side. The picture remains centered.

Space is an element that plays an important part in successfully balancing accessories, because space can have weight. These three charming figures grouped around the lamp (note the overlapping) form a unit that could appear lopsided when placed at the table edge. But the small bowl is carefully set so that the space above it balances the weight of the lamp group.

Question: When does the plan for the accessory arrangement come into the mind of the homemaker-designer?

Answer: Remember, it's not that easy! Designs grow as you work, they usually don't spring into a designer's mind complete.

The plan develops as you move and place and shift and arrange. It grows as you work, rather than being something you think out and then do. Trial and error and often failure are accepted by designers as the forerunners of successful designs. Many of the accessory arrangements used as illustrations of principles here took hours of work by homemaker-designers before they achieved the easy, just right look many of them have. Others went together in minutes!

Here are three stages of growth in an accessory arrangement. A large oval brass tray is placed over an old chest. Why? Probably because these are two things the homemaker happens to own, and the tray is large enough to be in proportion to the chest. It is the biggest accessory, it is emphatic or **Dominant**, so she puts it in place first. Then she will try out smaller, less emphatic accessories that will be **Subordinate**. As she places a milkglass bowl of ivy and an ash-



tray of milkglass at one side, the separate plate and chest begin to draw together. The ivy branches are so placed as to overlap the space above the ashtray and below the tray. The completed arrangement comes when the brass candleholders, repeating the texture of the tray are placed to give an informal balance. The lines of the white candles, repeating color and texture of milkglass, overlap the shape of the tray, relating the parts. The transitional line of the ivy unifies the arrangement which fits the wall space above the chest.

There is no "one right accessory arrangement" for furniture. As many arrangements can result as you have time and interest for. Some may be imaginative and unique; others more ordinary. But once you get started, they should never be monotonous. The homemaker left only the candles, used floor-length draperies and gained an entirely different arrangement with a floral print and philodendren in an old ironstone bowl. But wise use of the elements of design and principles of arranging them are the basis of both successful arrangements.

When you, a homemaker-designer, choose to be a part of the world of design, you choose to join a special and wonderful one. Those in it seek beauty, not only in the fine arts of painting and sculpture, but in the day to day surroundings of the home. The most simple home and furnishings are as much a source of joy as is the most elaborate one filled with art treasures. Each designer appreciates and encourages the honest efforts made by his fellow designers. With whatever is at hand, the designer takes what is useable and design-worthy and tries his hand at the gift that is God-given to humans alone—that of expressing himself through his own designs. ■

