

DESIGN & DECORATING

Not Every Acquisition Is Exquisite

Design professionals reveal the smartest décor buys they've ever made, and the most regrettable

ASKED TO NAME their best design buy, many people single out a gem they scored at a gloat-worthy price, like the original Josef Hoffmann bistro chair Justin Colombik, of design and consulting firm Puccini Group, nabbed for \$1.50 in a Chicago consignment shop. Another kind of "best": finds that cost dearly but keep on giving. Bay Area designer Chloe Warner, for example, sprang for \$7,000 worth of a botanical-print Lee Jofa fabric to cover a 1960s sofa that's followed her from apartment to house. "It's been shockingly versatile," she said of the piece. When it comes to foolish purchases, some sting financially, like the commercial oven in Rick Shaver and Lee Melahn's Catskill's country house that could be lighted only with a blow torch. Others just sting the ego. The handle of the chrome tea kettle architect Andrew Wilkinson bought gets too hot to hold, a regular source of mirth for his wife. Here nine more designers share their wins and failures. —Catherine Romano

BEST "I scored four midcentury dining chairs on Craigslist for \$50 when I lived in Chicago," said New York designer **Mikel Welch**. "The guy just wanted them out of his house. I swapped out the white vinyl for forest-green velvet."

WORST "I was super excited when I got an authentic Moroccan leather pouf for \$100 online," he said, "but it had the most vile odor, like I was running a circus out of my one-bedroom apartment. I donated it to a local thrift store."

BEST "At a charity event, I bought a huge piece of abstract art that's a crazy mix of mint green, electric orange, red, bright pink, and yellow, with a shot of black and white," said New York interior designer **Courtney McLeod**. "It's followed me to five apartments. I use it as an example for my clients to buy what you love and you'll inevitably make it work."



bookcase was modern and cool," said Ms. Langdon. "It had funny juts and odd-shaped openings and no back or doors. Nothing stayed standing up no matter how many bookends you used. It failed miserably."

BEST ▲ "I bid on and won a 16-piece porcelain coffee set for \$200," said **Max Humphrey** of a decades-old collaboration between Richard Ginori and Gucci. "I lived in a basement apartment in Los Angeles, with no real furniture, so 'status' items like this were a big deal," said the Portland, Ore., designer, who still enjoys morning coffee from the logo-graced cups.

WORST "In L.A., also, I collected foo dogs, and most were little ceramics that fit under the seat of my Vespa," said Mr. Humphrey. "One day I spotted a waist-high pair I had to have. After haggling for them, I discovered they were cast concrete and unbelievably heavy. I made it halfway back to my apartment with the pair balancing between my legs before having to abandon them on the side of the road."

BEST "For the longest time, the only piece of furniture I had was a Chinoiserie coffee table I bought in a vintage shop for under \$100," said **Rob Polacek**, chief creative officer at San Francisco's Puccini Group. "It was rough around the edges but had great lines, and I still have it."

WORST ► "I paid more than I should have for a donkey-tail succulent, and I knew it would be difficult to take care of with my travel lifestyle. It died."

BEST "I had to stretch to buy my walnut George Nakashima console, but seeing the craftsmanship and de-



CANVAS WITH A PAST Charlotte, N.C., designer Catherine M. Austin happily discovered after buying this painting locally that it was originally sold by a highly reputable New York gallery.

tail every day is an inspiration," said New York designer **Stephanie Goto**. **WORST** "In a frenzy for one more chair for an evening of entertaining, I bought a black Philippe Starck Ghost Chair and brought it home in a cab. It's made of polycarbonate, and in the end, is too much the opposite of the timeless Nakashima. It's in storage now."

BEST "I made over my dining room inspired by the colors and textures I saw when looking into the water of Lake Tahoe," said Bay Area designer **Cynthia Spence**, who said that both the lake and the room evoke serenity.



WORST "When I moved into a California ranch, I added arches to it reminiscent of those in the Spanish-style house I had moved from. All it did was make me miss that house, and looking at them every day made me hate them."

BEST "In 2002, I bought a sofa for \$6,000 off the floor of Holly Hunt, Chicago," said Larkspur, Calif., interior designer **Alison Pickart**. "Upholstered in an incredible giant-format black and cream plaid, it's the ultimate statement piece. And it is one of the most comfortable and well-made pieces I have ever owned."

WORST "So I could host a dinner party, I ordered 10 dining chairs online because they were available immediately," said Ms. Pickart. "Impatience is a weakness. The 'leather'



was like plastic, the legs made of an awful veneer, and the chairs were just devoid of personality. I had bought into the convenience of mass-produced design. The chairs were left in the apartment when we moved."

BEST ◀ "When we remodeled and I got a closet I didn't share with my husband, I was able to go over-the-top girly and put bold floral wallpaper on its ceiling," said Dallas designer **Abbe Fenimore**. "Something I've wanted to do since I was little." **WORST** "I couldn't talk my husband out of buying a pitiful knockoff of a modern Italian leather sofa," said Ms. Fenimore. "We argued about getting rid of it for so long, we both laughed when our new puppy shredded the back cushions."

FAST FIVE

Get a Good Night's Sip

Especially after an evening of dehydrating indulgence, a bedside water carafe is just what the doctor ordered. Forgo plastic with one of these handsome vessels, and get a crowning drinking glass in the bargain

Cabana Carafe and Glass Set, \$700, modaoperandi.com



Night Carafe, \$106, heathceramics.com



Ribbed Glass Carafe, \$30, CB2.com



Kati von Lehman Bedside Carafe, \$112, totokaelo.com



Off Pitcher + Cup, \$220, esque-studio.com

