



# Pieces from the past

*A stylish and welcoming home doesn't have to leave a heavy eco footprint. Second-hand and vintage pieces can enrich your interiors without damaging the planet. We share our tips for scoring the best upcycled, uplifting pieces.*

Words JESSICA BELLEF

Stepping into Dannielle Fletcher's home is akin to taking a trip back in time, landing on platform shoes into the groovy 1970s. Dressed with shag rugs, mushroom lamps and varying shades of orange, sunny yellow and brown, Fletcher's home is a testament to her love of retro style and her dedication to collecting '70s vintage.

"I love the patterns and colours, and the brightness of it. It's such a happy era," she says. Fletcher has been drawn to second-hand since she was a young girl visiting garage sales and op shops. "I've got the collector bug and I can't change that," she says. The second-hand fossicker owns a popular vintage store in the Illawarra south of Sydney, jam-packed with retro homewares and fashion and frequented by a legion of fans who are as obsessive about throwback wares.

The success of Fletcher's business reflects a wider interior design trend that draws on inspiration from the past. In the face of fractured sociopolitical and environmental climates, there is a sense of nostalgia weaving through society, a yearning for the "good old days".

Janice Rieger, an associate professor at the Queensland University of Technology and a material culture theorist, design historian and interior architecture academic, has witnessed this refocus within Australia's health sector. "When we look at the design of our aged care homes now, we are seeing a shift towards nostalgia and a mixing of new and old pieces to create meaning and memories of days gone by," she says.

Pieces that evoke times gone by often hold a grounding power and allow

inhabitants to forge a deeper connection to a place. "Because we are a mobile society now, much more than in decades past, we create meaning in our lives not from the urban environment but from curating our home environments," Rieger suggests.

According to Gumtree's *Second Hand Economy Report 2020*, the total value of the second-hand furniture and homewares economy in Australia last year was \$3 billion — higher than any other year over the past decade.

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Some vintage collectors consider themselves "purists", connected to a specific era from which they will furnish their home floor to ceiling. "As a material culture theorist, the 'purists' who live in throwback homes fascinate me," says Rieger. "I think sometimes these people want to live in the past, but sometimes they are like historians and very dedicated to the details and materiality of these time periods."

Others prefer a more eclectic look, mixing pre-loved furniture from different eras alongside new pieces. Whatever the reason, those turning to the second-hand market not only save money, but keep furniture in circulation and out of landfill.

There are many upsides to incorporating second-hand pieces into your home, whether

you favour a purist's slice of time in history or a space that mixes eras and origins.

## Sustainability

Today's society has adopted a throwaway mindset, where low prices are lauded and longevity given little thought. Products are designed for disposability in order to increase consumption. "We are producing too much stuff and too much waste," says Rieger. "By including second-hand pieces in our homes, we are reusing and sometimes even upcycling."

For previous generations, well-made furnishings were expected to last a lifetime. Antiques are, by definition, over 100 years old; handcrafted with natural materials and solid construction techniques, they were built to endure. The modern-day cheap sofa or poorly made dining table is unlikely to become an heirloom that future generations will enjoy and pass onto their own children. In fact, cheaply made items often don't hold up after a few years' use, destined to end up as landfill. "I call this 'interim' stuff," says Fletcher. "It won't last. Vintage stuff lasts, like my 1950s Sunbeam toaster. I've had it for 25 years. I paid less than \$2 for it and it's still going!"

## Affordability

Decorating with pre-loved goods offers a wallet-friendly way to create a functional and beautiful home. Rare antiques and significant designs do have higher prices, but bargains abound when you shop pre-loved over new.

From the freebies found on the street at council clean-up time to the masses of stuff hiding in charity stores and online



Photo: Deborah Diem on Unsplash



marketplaces, other people's trash can quickly become your treasure for little to no dollars. In Gumtree's 2020 report, 48 per cent of Australians cited 'saving money' as a key reason they would buy second-hand for their home. Swapping unwanted things with your friends and family or finding a way to work a family heirloom into your home can also help to keep costs down.

### Character-filled spaces

Second-hand pieces have lived a previous life, and any scratches or imperfections tell a story of originality and provenance. Side-of-the-road finds and op shop goodies can sit alongside cherished heirlooms for an interesting patchwork of styles that enrich a space and can't be replicated with chain store goods.

Such interiors act as an autobiography of the homeowner, creating a nurturing space that affirms the inhabitant's sense of self and instils a sense of pride. "I believe the things we have in our homes tell stories — stories of the past, stories of our lives and stories of the future. We have strong relationships to the material things in our homes, and many of us curate our homes to be a reflection of this," says Rieger.

### Create connections

Rieger is a firm believer in the emotional benefits of bringing second-hand into the home. "There is comfort in surrounding ourselves with history. Whether it is our

own history, like a Victorian highboy from my Grandmother Belle, or pieces from another era like the 1950s or 1970s," Rieger says. It can also influence our attitude to life in general. "Cherishing and caring for our things and their past histories incorporates an ethic of care into our homes and lives," she explains.

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Fletcher says that sharing her love of retro via her store has gifted her a connection to like-minded people and strengthened her own sense of self: "I feel this is my identity," she says. "I've made beautiful friends with people through the shop. That doesn't usually happen a lot later in life, so I feel very lucky."

### The thrill of the hunt

Many vintage and retro lovers effuse about the thrill of the hunt, where unearthing a prize among a dusty jumble of castaways garners an immense sense of satisfaction

and pride. That feeling of accomplishment is harder to come by when you are shopping at a large retail store where factory-made products are lined up on a shelf.

Second-hand shopping requires patience and a smidge of determination, but the emotional experience of finding something that speaks to you is worth the effort. "It's my happy place," says Fletcher, who admits that second-hand shopping has become a salve for her mental health, offering a distraction from her anxiety and giving her a purpose. She finds joy in the activity of rifling through old things. "Wherever I am, I am always looking. I can't help that, it's in my blood," she says.

### How to successfully inject the past into your present

#### Cast a wide net

Whether you are visiting stores, poking around a garage sale or shopping online from the comfort of your sofa, the trick to finding second-hand gold is to search widely and often. It can take time to find the perfect piece, but if you are checking in with stores regularly, you will increase the chances of success.

Op shops and charity stores are plentiful throughout Australia, as are smaller retailers that resell vintage finds. Antique dealers expertly curate authentic designs from all over the world, but you can stumble across equally unique designs at garage sales and market stalls. Auctions are no

longer just for the professional traders, and many auctioneers in Australia now run auctions online. The popularity of sites like Gumtree, eBay and Facebook Marketplace means easily accessible second-hand pieces abound. Wherever you shop, searching regularly will give you a better idea of the market value of pieces you have your eye on. Nab a bargain by comparing the offering and avoid overly inflated prices.

#### Mix old and new

Creating a unique space that reflects your tastes is about choosing what you love regardless of the year it was produced. There is beauty in contrasts. An antique worked into a contemporary home can make a strong style statement and will give the century-old piece a renewed energy. Similarly, a rustic farmhouse table surrounded by sleek mid-century chairs will create a striking talking point and draw people in to the space. The key to curating a harmonious grouping is to choose pieces that are correctly scaled to each other and the room's proportions.

#### Repurpose and rework

If you love the shape of something but the colours aren't quite right, consider reupholstering, refinishing or painting to

create a one-off piece that fits seamlessly into the look of your home. By keeping an open mind and using your imagination and a bit of elbow grease, you can reinvent furniture and extend its life cycle. A word of caution: some DIY jobs are irreversible, so if you are unsure you will get the finish you are looking for, reach out to a professional restorer before picking up an electric sander or paintbrush.

#### Create a focal point

Aim for a mindful curation rather than a jumble of garage sale castaways. While it's honourable to shop second-hand in order to save something from landfill, you don't want to live in a furniture graveyard. Clutter can have a negative impact on your wellbeing, so be selective with your additions and always buy with intention. If you're struggling to make the room look "right", there might be too many statement pieces vying for attention. Simplify the room by choosing one or two hero pieces and add elements that complement, rather than compete with, these shining stars.

#### Prioritise function

Ornate and highly polished antiques are things of beauty, but there is a chance

such a piece will clutter a room if it serves no purpose. Choose items you can use often and furnish according to your lifestyle. Your home may be lacking in storage or you need a larger dining table to host dinner parties. Whatever you require, there will be a second-hand furniture solution that boosts the functionality of your home while adding character.

#### Shop like the pros

If you're searching for something in particular, don't forget to bring a tape measure on your fossicking trips and a record of your space's dimensions. Measure your doorways at home and have a plan for getting bulkier goods into place.

Inspect items closely: check the stability of the legs, the quality of the stitching and the joints. If you have this basic checklist in mind each time you shop, you will be able to act quickly on a purchase. Time is of the essence in the world of second-hand — gems are snapped up quickly! 🍷

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