

Autumn Trends

By Vivian Kistler, CPF, GCF



Box Furniture has embraced the popular filigree motif in its High Point introductions. This is the Jewel Mirror, shown with the East-West fusion style Kali chair.

The Autumn High Point Furniture Market in High Point, NC, was a key trend-watching venue as well as a primary buying show for the American home furnishings market, attracting more than 3,000 exhibitors and nearly 85,000 attendees. It included exhibitors from around the world, although the retailers and dealers are mostly North American. The exhibition has sprouted into a multi-billion dollar business, covering a wide demographic that goes covers every level of marketing from the bargain basement goods to the highest end merchandise.

Some analysts claim that “fear factors” like September 11 have encouraged consumers to cherish the safety of home more than ever. But “Home Sweet Home” has always had a powerful appeal—so why the current boost in home improvement?

One of the most important reasons for the increased interest in home decor is the ability to create a desired “look” with any budget. Most consumers have easy access to DIY stores, with products and even classes to help those on a budget create



These pieces from the Connoisseur's Collection by Henredon are examples of contemporary formal style. Notice the use of two styles of chairs, a typical practice in eclectic decor. The color is on the walls, not the furniture.

trendy decor. This is enhanced by an increasingly short trend cycle: affordable versions of the “fashion-forward” furniture and accessories seen on TV and in the shelter magazines are quickly available from trend-savvy mass market retailers. And many of these are not just designer copies—they are endorsed by renowned designers. A lot of credit for the home decorating boom also rests with the extremely popular HGTV cable channel, which now reaches 89 million households and receives more than 5 million unique hits on its website each month.

The “In-Motion” candleholder from Lam Lee features a figure in metal, marble, and silver leaf with a swirling ribbon of silver to depict motion.





The rich cherry veneer of this display cabinet from Bassett's Yaletown Collection is a typical example of the deep, warm wood colors that were popular at High Point.



Brown and black were the top leather colors at High Point, as shown in the curvy Roma Sofa and Ottoman from Casa Novalia in Analina Mocha color.

All of this makes the High Point Furniture Market even more important, as noticing and responding quickly to the latest trends becomes more critical than ever. In years past, buyers might have worried that some products were too “fashion forward.” Now there's a drive to get the latest products in front of the consumer as soon as possible—before they become overexposed and are no longer “fresh.” Of course, this is in pursuit of consumers who look for leading edge products. Many consumers need a

longer period of exposure to a trend before they will embrace it, perhaps noticing it in catalogs and stores for several months before it begins to appeal to them.

General Style Trends

“Mass Customization” continues to have strong appeal. People want to belong and yet still be unique at the same time. From cars to cell phones to living room furniture, many consumers want the most popular model, but just a bit different. This one comes in six finishes, that one can be monogrammed, you can choose from six styles of knobs or 100 different fabrics—customers want options that let them feel like individuals. At High Point, this is reflected in lots of versatile options for buyers, so there are many slightly different versions of each item in the marketplace.

“Luxury for Everyone” is another enduring trend. “It's okay to spend a bit lavishly here and there because I'm worth it.” This means that luxury items in home decor are likely to find a broader audience than in the past, when only the affluent were targeted. For example, Howard Miller's “Wine & Spirits” furnishings (more than 50 pieces) are made for the display, storage (with or without refrigeration unit), and serving (with electrical outlets for blenders or other small appliances) of wine and other alcoholic beverages. This may appeal not only to the wealthy but also to the 30-something apartment-dweller who prides himself on his knowledge of wine or mixology and feels he deserves to have “the best” in this one area.



Black and white is a popular high-contrast combination, as shown in table clock, serving dish, and vases from the Home Solutions accessories from Broyhill Furniture.

Mix and Coordinate

“Eclectic Style” is perhaps the best way to describe the trend in which many styles are combined in one room, coordinated by color theme or accents or by general design. Buying furniture in “sets” is too boring for this



The Zoe Collection of bedding from Mystic Valley Traders pairs yellow-green and brown with a cool beige and a warm beige to create an unusual color combination. Pillows remain plentiful in bedding collections but with less adornment.



A mixture of traditional and formal pieces from Pennsylvania House creates a comfortable room using neutral colors.

crowd. This was reflected at High Point with the Metropolitan Home Collection from Benjamin Noriega-Ortiz, which includes 60 pieces that coordinate with one another but don't necessarily "match." So the shape and design of each piece becomes important. Eclectic style is popular on many HGTV programs, so consumers get to see many examples that can help them when making their own choices.

But Eclectic can be tricky—it takes some confidence to coordinate diverse pieces into a cohesive design without looking like a disassociated mess. Many purchasers are overwhelmed and confused by too many choices and do not have the confidence or the desire to select a roomful of accessories piece by piece. To help these folks and make it easier for retail stores to create room displays, some furniture companies (such as Bassett) showed "accessory packages" at High Point that included a variety of coordinated accessories, including vases, lamps, decorative bowls, rugs, wall art, and even artificial plants.

In furniture and accessory collections at High Point, three previously featured style trends remained strong: Coastal or Seaside Living, with white furniture and seashell accessories (although less prevalent than a year ago); Comfortable Cottage, with a sophisticated country attitude; and Urban Retreat, with sleek lines, hard surfaces, and metal accents. Asian design continues to be a significant influence in furniture design, often using the traditional sleek, simple lines to complement minimalist contemporary decor.

Playing It Safe

The real trend, however, is less about a theme and more about a color or a lack of it. Neutrals represent the largest segment of color in furniture and accessories. Consumers are playing it safe, and so are manufacturers. The manufacturers may exhibit a yellow sofa on the trade show floor but will be taking orders for the same sofa in a neutral color scheme. Color is visible in accessories—the throws, pillows, candles, and wall decor. Even accent tables and carpets are available in a wide range of fun colors. Accent colors are easy for a consumer to change; a set of spa blue pillows on the sofa can be replaced with a set of orange pillows tomorrow.

Formality has a strong presence. Ornate or stately, the formal look has a dignified, "Old World" character. The furniture is often large and substantial, while accent pieces may be ornate. Several companies at High Point market to this market. Classic Design sells "quality antique reproductions," such as tall, imposing four-poster canopy beds. Louis J. Solomon offers "history, craftsmanship, and heritage" in its distinctly European (French and English) 18th and 19th century reproductions. There is also a contemporary version of formal: chic and modern, very sophisticated, with lots of glass, metal, and glossy wood finishes. Often represented at High Point by such Italian lines as Casa Novalia, many classic American companies like Henredon also offer this style. Formal accent pieces, such as large period frames or elaborate chandeliers, are also used in contemporary style room settings.

Colors

Yellow-greens are still strong. Lime, sage, and olive continue to be used with other colors. Sage is often used with tan in a subtle nature palette. The nature palette also includes neutral browns and tans and sand/sea/sky striped combinations in both blatant and subtle forms. This is part of the “stability” color trend, simple and understated, using neutral or mid-value colors that feel strong and secure. The still-popular brown and blue combination generally fits into this category.

- Red remains a key accent color. It is extremely versatile, adding spice to dark or neutral decor, and continues to be very popular in current art images, often used with golden colors. Orange is not used much, although it is still seen as an accent for “color punch” in neutral decor. Yellow is rare, although rich goldenrod and subdued variations like dijon are often used in multicolor designs.
- Blue—especially cool pale blue, rich French blue, and muted aqua blue—continues to be on the rise. Purple, which has been a significant accent color for several years, was given little importance at High Point this past fall.
- Black and white is a hot combination: Used together, the high contrast of black and white offers striking visual impact that can be playful, modern, or traditional. Look for black and white with red accents to increase in popularity. Gray is increasingly stylish, especially in color combinations with pink, orange, or black and white.
- Neutrals, such as champagne, tan, gray, eggshell, and mushroom, are being used together to create low-contrast but interesting patterns on textiles. The wide range of neutrals provides the foundation of room decor, allowing the accent colors and unusual exhibit pieces to be noticed.

On the bright end of the color spectrum, true multicultural colors are used in vibrant combinations, not subdued or altered to make them more “middle-market.” Otherwise, brights



Red seems to be holding its position as the most popular accent color in room decor. This sofa and recliner are from Lane Home Furnishings.

don't seem to be an important part of the current color story.

The favorite leather colors at High Point were classic brown or black or perhaps soft tan. There may be colorful pillows on the sofa, but the furniture itself is “traditional” leather.

Wood colors are mid-tone and warmer compared to the cool, intense dark browns of recent shows. That dark brown remains in the furniture company product lines and continues to be a category leader but is now well-established and is no longer shown as “new” at High Point. Although painted wood colors did not seem as prevalent at High Point as in the past few years, solid black and solid white remain strong. Hand-painted and stenciled decoration was shown by several exhibitors, but there was not much distressed furniture. And when it was, it was less extreme.

Bamboo is still popular, especially in natural brown colors or black. Environmental concerns for “green” products are increasingly important in the furnishings industry, and bamboo fills the bill—it takes only about 60 days to replace a 60-foot stalk of bamboo compared with as much as 60 years to replace a 60-foot hardwood tree (according to the Network for Bamboo and Rattan.)

Motifs

There is a general emphasis on organic forms: rounded corners instead of crisp squares, undulating stripes rather than straight lines, textured rather than smooth. Ribbons and filigree designs continue to flourish, used extensively in furniture, textile patterns, and accessories. There is increasing use of architectural elements as wall art, also incorporated into art images, collages, and dimensional art. Seashell images are less prevalent, but shells and coral are still featured as accessories. Leaf motifs continue to be popular in textiles like rugs and bedding fabrics. Bare trees and branches provide the silhouette against a solid background for a wide variety of fabrics. Solid lines, silhouetted shapes, filigree, and streaming ribbon shapes were often seen in textiles. There are lots of lively patterns, with busy designs, sometimes feeling retro, often using just two or three colors. ■

Vivian Kistler, CMG, a senior chairholder of the Color Marketing Group, reports on trade shows around the world. She has authored *Color Names Resource*, 37,000 color names for product lines, and a video *Color Impressions*, which illustrates how colors sends emotional signals. She can be reached at vivian@viviankistler.com.