

# Furniture hides its virtues

(API) — Reputations of manufacturers and stores go a long way when selecting upholstered furniture because what you can't see makes the difference between what's merely beautiful and what's beautiful and durable.

"There's still no better way to make upholstery than the right-way hand-tied coil springs," says Bill Martin, advertising manager for Lane Furniture.

Invented in 1830, the coiled spring launched the upholsterer to a prominence previously reserved for cabinetmakers like Chippendale where the frame was everything. But unless you're buying a custom piece, these springs — the interior "bed" — cannot be seen, so consumers must rely on reputations of store and manufacturer.

Even in fabric, there's more than meets the eye. The industry has set up a numerical grading system that should appear on hang tags. Grading is not required by law, but it is provided by most reputable manufacturers who offer fabrics in most gradings. Ask your retailer what the numbers mean if they aren't spelled out.

When comparing fabric gradings, compare within the same field — a solid to a solid, a print to a print, a stripe to a stripe as well as fiber content to fiber content.

In New York, there's a precious handful of custom upholsterers who work only for museum curators and decorators. Baron Upholsterers, founded by the late Ted Urban who began custom work nearly 50 years ago, counts The Hiltmore Estate in Asheville, N.C., as well as the Metropolitan Museum of Art and the prestigious Cullman & Kravis Inc. decorating firm in New York. Custom sofas can start at \$15,000, or about \$6,000 if the frame has been drawn up to an existing Baron design.

Paul Urban, one of two sons now operating the business, offers these tips when looking for a quality piece of upholstered furniture. His standards are very high.

• Check the table of contents. The best ingredients for stuffing on backs, arms and seats — are horsehair, or horsehair and polyester blended. "Foam is not good except when in combination with down in the cushions," Urban says.

• Squeeze the back and arms. They should feel a little crunchy and spring back easily, not quickly. Foam, for instance, pops right back into shape.

• Lift the skirt. Is it stapled or sewn? Sewn is preferable. Feel back the cushion (the black fabric on the bottom of a piece) to see if staples were used to attach fabric to the frame. Tacks are preferred. Sometimes, manufacturers will hand-tack the cushion to cover the staples, or use gimp, a decorative tape, on decorative frames to cover the staples.

• On a good piece, the front edge underneath the cushion will give a little bit, as opposed to

having a hardwood edge. There are different methods for finishing the front edge, but it should have some kind of padding.

• Choose coiled springs, as opposed to zig-zag springs. Coiled springs are eight-way hand-tied, an industry standard. Zig-zag springs are springs attached with a metal strip in a zig-zag fashion. Ask which construction has been used.

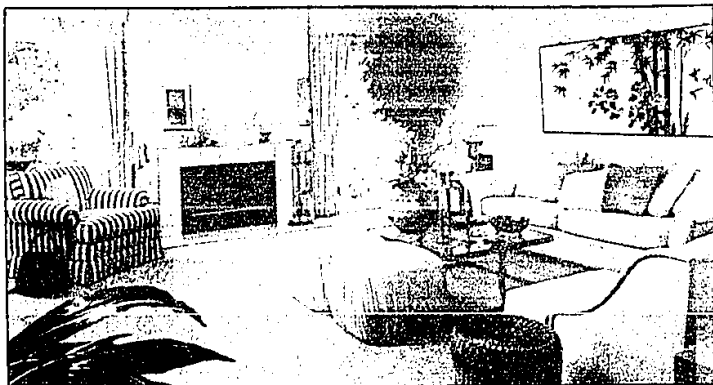
• On the bottom of the piece, natural webbing, versus nylon webbing, is preferable.

Buying an antique presents its own set of problems, Urban says.

"There's no real way to tell if it's authentic, because many reproductions are very close to the original pieces," he says.

To check the construction of an antique, like a side chair or open-arm chair, he says, "Take hold of diagonally opposite legs and gently move them to see if the frame is rigid or wobbly. If it's wobbly, the frame has to be rebuilt." On a sofa, "grab the arm and work the movement horizontally to see if it's wobbly."

Finally, remember that upholstered pieces frequently use materials that, if limited, can burn rapidly and emit toxic gases. The Upholstered Furniture Action Council is a voluntary industry association that conducts research into more fire-resistant upholstered furniture. The address is Upholstered Furniture Action Council, Box 2436, High Point, N.C. 27261.



**Quality check:** When it comes to furniture, shoppers must concern themselves with more than what meets the eye. A thorough examination of the piece's underside can offer a clue as to whether it is well made.

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