

Catalog clever

Mail-order furnishings you can't live without

YOU'VE NO doubt let your fingers do the walking when buying a new shirt or toys for the kids by catalog. Today's home decorators are taking this idea a step further — they're creating a whole new environment for the home with a pile of catalogs, a credit card, telephone or order form.

If you need or want something that will make the house more comfortable, more efficient or charming, you don't have to leave home to get it.

Mail-order decorating isn't a new concept. Big-name department stores like J.C. Penney, Montgomery Ward and Sears have featured home furnishing sections in their hefty catalogs for years. Now companies like Spiegel and Bloomingdale's offer mini-catalogs featuring their home furnishings line.

It seems specialty is the name of the game in today's mail-order market. Most retailers focus on a certain theme or part of the home.

TAKE CONRAN'S, the Britain-based retailer. The company is known for its sleek, functional designs in bold colors at moderate prices.

If getting organized is your top priority, you'll need shelves, filing cabinets, closet organizers and stands for the VCR and home computer. All these, along with office chairs, rolling carts, stereo furniture, lighting and desk accessories are available through Conran's catalog. There are grids, hooks and shelves for organizing the bathroom and storage systems and racks for the kitchen.

City and country cooks can be gourmets with the culinary delights in the Williams-Sonoma catalog. Kitchen items, like bright blue bowls, add sparks of color while storage racks, wooden knife holders and a vertical paper towel holder may bring out your kitchen's potential. With the proper cookware, you can create serious food. Get the right pan, the right pot, the little whisk you've always wanted. No Julia Childs recipe is beyond you now.

MANY CATALOGS boast at least a few items for the bedroom. The Company Store of La Crosse, Wis., offers soft merino wool mattress pads designed as fitted bottom sheets and down quilts. Another catalog, Touch of Class of Huntingburg, Ind., offers an array of bedroom accessories with monograms in all the classic styles on sheets, pillowcases, comforters and

towels. No one will wonder which bedroom is yours.

Even L.L. Bean, the mainstay for hunting boots and outerwear, offers cool-weather bed items. A buffalo plaid blanket is available in red and black, white and black or green and black, and there's the Hudson's Bay Point blanket. Bean also offers all-cotton flannel sheets in solids or tattersall patterns.

Conran's offers bedroom items, too. Their sofa/sleeper is a convertible frame that is a couch by day and a double bed with a 2-inch-thick cotton batting mattress at night. A quilted sofa also opens out into a bed, and there are complete bedroom sets with storage units, beds, chests, wardrobes and nightstands. Add rugs and linens from other catalog pages for accessories.

For art by mail, try the Museum of Modern Art's catalog of calendars and posters, or check out the Metropolitan Museum of Art's catalog.

Serious home decorators might be skeptical about the end result of a mail-order room. How can you be sure you're really getting the look you see on the glossy pages?

To help its customers, Laura Ashley, another British retailer, groups the designs and colors used in its wallpaper, paint, fabric, borders, trimmings, tile and lights in a simple and easy-to-use system of color groupings. At a glance, customers can see how their choice of colors and designs will work together to complement each other.

HOWEVER, WITH no salesperson, the customer must assume much of the responsibility. Here's a checklist.

- Note exact sizes on everything from beds to borders.

- Find out if the furniture you plan to order comes assembled.

- If it's unassembled, decide if you'll be able to handle the job with your present tool kit and skills.

- Note the date the order is placed and projected date of arrival.

- How will the materials be delivered and is there an extra cost?

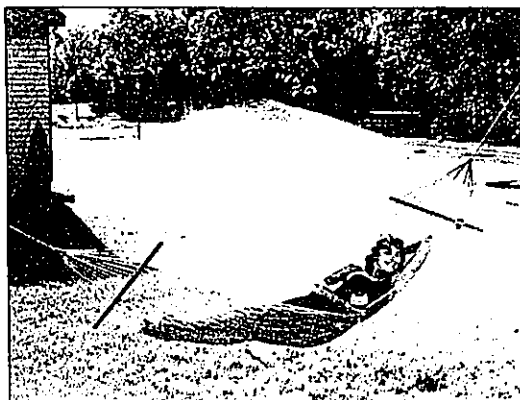
The best part of mail-order decorating, aside from placing the initial orders, is getting the goods. At best, everything will fit perfectly into your new scheme. At worst, you'll have to send it all back. But don't worry, many companies will even pick up returns at your door.

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