





[the furniture issue]

# The Case for CUSTOM

*Bespoke isn't just for suits. Tailor-made furniture is worth the splurge.*

by ERIC CHRISTOPHER COHLER

**T**oday there is no excuse for bad taste. Between online retailers and chain stores, almost everything is preprogrammed for the consumer. The difficulty, though, is knowing how to pull a room together while keeping it from looking like it was ordered out of a catalogue—the same one from which your best friend ordered her furniture. This is where custom work steps in. It may seem dauntingly expensive, but it really isn't. I should know.

My family was in the clothing manufacturing business for five generations, and when thinking of sartorial splendor—a made-to-order suit or an evening gown—the imagery that immediately springs to mind is London's Savile Row or the Place de Vendôme in Paris. When it comes to furniture I often find that custom is better. Why? Because with a chair

*Cohler used a custom yellow sofa, beige slipper chair, and black-and-white pillows to bring this room together.*



"A six-foot man will sit very differently than his five-foot-four wife. A **CUSTOM SOFA** can be built to accommodate **BOTH OF THEM.**" —ERIC COHLER

Among Cohler's designs for Lee Jofo are the Colin Chair, Charleston Button-Seat Sofa, and Dorchester Bench. **below:** The Greek Key settee he designed for Lee Jofo.

or sofa that is made for a specific room there is greater creativity with the final product. That's not to say that there aren't ready-made or "off-the-rack" options that work for me or my clients, especially at lower price points. However, depending on the particular piece, I often find that these selections can be limiting.

With what I refer to as "bespoke," the options are virtually endless. Bespoke fur-

niture allows me to design pieces that fit a client's particular needs and size. A six-foot man will sit very differently than his five-foot-four wife. A custom sofa can be built to accommodate both of them and can be upholstered in muslin beforehand, which allows me to sketch any proposed changes directly on the material. If one isn't willing to take the plunge, another option is "tailor-made" furniture. This is when for little or no up-charge a manufacturer gives the consumer several choices in terms of arms, legs, height, width, and depth. Tailor-made furniture costs a smaller percentage above pieces ordered from a showroom model. Here's a range of sofa prices in all three categories: "off the rack," \$1,200 on up; tailor-made, \$1,800 on up; and bespoke pieces are \$3,000 on up depending on size and design. Some grades of fabric are included when ordering at retail and others are available at an additional cost. Bespoke usually does not include fabric, but is inclusive of the upholstery labor. But when ordering tailor-made or bespoke furniture, both consumer and designer are empowered to let their imagination soar.

For example, my own imagination was set free several years ago when I couldn't find





a glamorous director's chair on the market. Here was the perfect opportunity to put my design philosophy into practice. I designed the chair in teak, woven leather, and nickel, and it was eventually made into a production model. To keep the chair in the realm of bespoke, it was offered with several options of leather, wood, and metal finishes.

From this followed an invitation by Lee Jofa to design other collections of fabric, furniture, rugs, and lighting to which I added custom pieces, giving me optimum creative control. And lest one think that I'm above ordering online or from a mass-market retail-

er, this isn't true. I always design spaces based on a high/low philosophy where the look is about the mix and not the formula. Adding personal art, antiques, and collectibles to a project is essential for success, just as it's equally important to include custom furniture with pieces sourced through e-commerce and catalogues. If a room looks too stylized or expensive I consider it an abject failure, while a room with layers of personality is a tremendous success. But no matter which route one follows, what's paramount is to express your individuality with pieces that make you smile as well as comfortable. **ah**

*He didn't get the title "The Mix Master" for nothing. Cohler pulls pieces from different eras, in a range of colors and textures, to make his projects truly custom-fit for each client.*