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WEEKEND JOURNAL; The Home Front: Decking the Halls, Designer-Style; Homeowners Open Wallets For Haute Holiday Decor; A Tree to Match the Sofa

By Amy Finnerty, The Wall Street Journal, 958 words
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SHEILA BAILEY'S latest decor project incorporates animal prints, lime-green hues and a recently acquired painting. But the items, all chosen to match her Houston living room, aren't new sofas and chairs -- they are part of her \$7,000 Christmas extravaganza.

The more traditional approach just didn't seem right this year, especially with the new trimmings available that complement home decor. "I have my plasma TV in a Chinese armoire, and the Christmas decor works with things like that," she says.

The Christmas home-decor industry is wandering an awful long way from the North Pole this season. In an attempt to bring haute design to the Yule season -- and lure in upscale consumers -- trimmings makers are turning out everything from Mission-style garlands to midcentury modern ornaments. Moving beyond cotton tree-skirts, retailers are pushing hand-felted Pop-art numbers in scarlet and plum. There are Mediterranean wreaths for people whose houses are done up Tuscan-style and rust-iron fireplace screens evocative of medieval church grates.

In this latest twist on disposable decor, Neiman Marcus now has ornaments in design styles ranging from "Cosmopolitan" -- a tiny zebra-striped handbag and cat's eye sunglasses -- to Byzantine. Garden purveyor Smith & Hawken is offering new, spare brown and neutral wreaths and transparent sphere ornaments that match Shaker-style homes, and even the Crate & Barrel holiday catalog is looking more like cutting-edge glass artist Dale Chihuly than Santa: Its cover features purple-and-blue martini glasses, while the inside is packed with Art Deco ornaments and beaded garlands that hit this season's crystal craze.

"The client I'm thinking of has changed from a traditional look," says Laurie Smith, a Chicago decorator. "She feels the need to update her holiday decorations."

The fact that the holiday-decor industry is dreaming of a Shaker -- or Tuscan or stainless-steel -- Christmas reflects an effort to catch up with the changing trends in the broader home-furnishings market. A decade ago, few homeowners thought of decking the halls with anything but holly. But as consumers have gotten more design-oriented, the \$8 billion holiday decorating industry has started to catch on, introducing colors other than red and green and now moving on to coordinating decor.

But with sales expected to rise 5% this year, the push might be working. In years past, Brooklyn, N.Y., mom Susan McLaughlin found it difficult to buy trimming that wasn't "garish red." With boutiques now offering more items that coordinate with the chocolate-colored floors and muslin walls of her brownstone, Ms. McLaughlin says Christmas-decorating is a breeze. Her theme: gold, frosted glass and pale pinks. "I don't think anyone can really handle green and red anymore. It's just too yuck!" Ms. McLaughlin says.

That is good news for decorators such as Regina Dorsett, owner of Twins Design Christmas in Houston. When she started her business a decade ago, Ms. Dorsett just used decor the client already owned, from handcrafted ornaments to red garlands. Now, she has a 5,000-sq.-ft. storage hall packed with pressed-cedar baskets for Mission-style homes and metal nativities for contemporary clients. With clients paying as much as \$50,000 for the full indoor-outdoor treatment, Ms. Dorsett says business is up 10% this year.

While consumers have been on a big anti-clutter jag in the past few years, Christmas is emerging as a moment to relax this austerity and pull out the stops. Consumers have plenty to choose from this year. Chiasso, the home-furnishings retailer, has doormats with "Merry Christmas" in '60s-psychedelic lettering (\$38) and a red-bulb wreath that doubles as an ultramodern centerpiece (\$58). Designer Kate Spade will deck her SoHo holiday shop with

reindeer tableware, while the Museum of Modern Art shop is displaying neat boxes of sculptural black-and-white ornaments and wire-mesh Christmas balls. At Seaport Flowers of Brooklyn, store owner Amy Gardella says her patrons want looks that are contemporary, minimalist, Mod and even Asian. "It's not so much about holly jolly any more," she says.

Buying fashionable decor, of course, just means it can go out of fashion, necessitating more spending next year. And some homeowners say chicness is beside the point of Christmas. "I have trouble with the contrived, all-pink, all-purple, all-bows, all-birds look," says Jane Chance, a South Carolina retiree.

There are plenty of traditionalists out there such as Melinda Dubow, who keeps her tree "like something out of Charlie Brown," with ornaments picked out by her son and an heirloom, paper tree-angel. "It's just perfect, if you ask me," she says.

Beyond Holly and Mistletoe HASH(0xa97c730) As holiday decor turns more fashionable, it becomes much easier to make fashion errors, interior designers say. Here, some tips from designers and party planners on how to deck the halls. HASH(0xa97ca00) -- Streamline the look. The biggest decorating mistake people make, says James "Ford" Huniford, partner in New York design firm Sils Huniford, "is trying to pack in too many things, using too many decorations and too many themes." HASH(0xa97cd84) -- Make children a priority. A too-finished look can ruin the holiday for kids, especially if they're not allowed to touch things or hang ornaments on the tree. HASH(0xa97d054) -- Coordinate each room. "Identify a theme and run with it -- from the front door, to the tree, to the table top, to the wrapped presents, all should be part of one gorgeous package," New York decorator Colin Cowie says. HASH(0xa97d324) -- Spending sprees are unnecessary. "Accumulating more stuff is the antithesis of what we should be doing during the holidays. Are 32 new Santas that you buy going to calm you down?" says Chris Casson Madden, author of a series of home-decorating guides. HASH(0xa97ef94) -- Be mindful of fire hazards. Unplug the tree, water it daily -- and don't decorate so early that greenery is dried out by Christmas Eve.

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