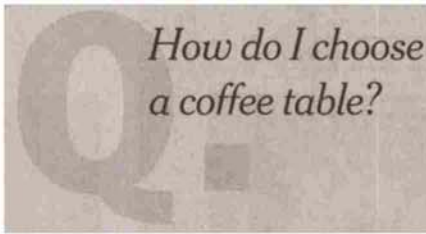


ROOM TO IMPROVE

Mitchell Owens



How do I choose a coffee table?

A. Coffee tables originated centuries ago in the Middle East as round brass-topped tables for serving coffee, tea and other beverages. By the time they came into use in this country in the late 19th century, they had become long, low tables with surfaces big enough to hold tea or coffee services.

Today, coffee tables come in many sizes and shapes. All that really matters is that the proportions and style of the table harmonize with the sofa behind it.

A table that is too small will look odd and be impractical, and one that is too large will look out of place no matter how useful its surface. Consider how a table looks with the other furniture in the room, including chairs and side tables.

Beyond that, selection depends on function. How will the table be used? Will you pile it with an artful stack of books, a chunk of quartz and a potted orchid? Or will you use it to show off a collection of decorative boxes? In that case a glass-topped display table or vitrine might be more practical.

If you plan to use the table to serve coffee, you might want a relatively tall piece, like James Dew and Sons' 27-inch-high handmade Boston tea table. A reproduction of an 18th-century American model, it has cabriole legs and a scalloped apron. It measures 37 1/2 inches long by 18 inches deep, and is \$1,800 in cherry and \$2,000 in tiger maple. For information: (800) 272-4546 or jamesdew.com.

If you prefer a lower table, some of the nicest around are Chinese in style. Chinese Antique Imports, a company based in

Medford, Ore., has a wide selection of tables, including one in elm with inward-curling ends and a surface painted with pale pink peonies and green leaves against a yellowish background. Reportedly dating from the late 19th century, it measures 11 inches high by 63 inches long by 15 inches wide and costs \$583. For information: (888) 284-2830 or chineseantiqueimports.com.

Another possibility is to assemble several tables, either lined up or grouped together. The Cross Contemporary coffee table comes in two sizes and three heights, in white, orange, red, black or yellow high-gloss lacquer mounted on a chrome-plated base. It is inexpensive enough that several tables in different dimensions and colors can be combined to satisfying effect. Made in Denmark by Innovations USA, it costs \$139. For information: All Coffee Tables at (800) 579-5874 or allcoffeetables.com.

Questions about décor may be sent by e-mail to room@nytimes.com. Unpublished questions cannot be answered individually.



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