

TREND WATCHER DANIEL DROLET

The underrated coffee table

The flexible, multi-use table can be a workhorse, a design star or shift from food server to foot rest



There are two things that define a coffee table: style and function, says New York-based furniture retailer Lenny Kharitonov. 'A good coffee table will be able to provide adequate support or space to meet the needs of each individual owner, while looking stylish,' he explains. The table below left is available at EQ3 in Ottawa and the others are online at [CSN Stores](http://CSNStores.com).



I clearly remember my first coffee table. It consisted of two milk crates supporting a cupboard door rescued from the kitchen.

It wasn't the sleekest thing in the world, but it served its purpose. And the purpose extends way beyond providing a flat surface to set a cup of coffee or a smart drink.

The coffee table is, in reality, the functional heart of any living area.

It is the focal point for seating. It's a display surface for magazines, books and artwork. It's a play surface for kids, and maybe an extra place for guests to sit. And it's a place to set cups, glasses, snacks and electronic remotes. Because the coffee table is such a workhorse, it's worth giving some thought when you're planning your living space.

There are two things that define a coffee table: style and function, says Lenny Kharitonov, a New York-based furniture retailer and a member of the executive of the Greater New York Home Furnishings Association, an industry trade association.

"A good coffee table will be able to provide adequate support or space to meet the needs of each individual owner, while looking stylish," he explains. In other words, it's got to work, and it's got to look good while doing it.



The first thing to consider is what kind of work you want it to do. It may be primarily a place where people can set drinks, maybe even sit.

If it's in a TV room, it's got to work for holding popcorn, feet and paraphernalia.

And if there are kids in your household, you will want to take into account the fact that the low height of a coffee table makes it particularly attractive to children. Toddlers will grip it when they're learning to walk, and older kids will use it as a surface on which they can colour, draw or turn into a speedway for toy cars.

There are two basic kinds of coffee table: simple tables, and tables with storage.

Sarah Donner, a category manager and buyer for tables with [CSN Stores](http://CSNStores.com), a Boston-based Internet retailer, says the proportion of coffee tables on the market that offer storage is increasing.

"It's now over half," she says. "There's always going to be the demand out there for something that's very sleek and simple. But we're seeing a lot more storage tables out there now with shelves and drawers and even hidden compartments."

Also increasing is the number of tables that can adapt to multiple uses.

Donner, whose company runs allcoffeetables.com, a web boutique devoted to coffee tables, says some have pull-out boards that extend into shelves. Others have storage cubes that slide underneath. Some have reversible tops that allow them to function either as tables or seating. And increasingly popular, she says, is a coffee table with a mechanism that lifts the surface up higher.

The coffee table can be turned into a table for a television dinner or a regular dinner table. These multipurpose tables are particularly appealing to people who live in tiny condos.

After function, you can consider the style. There are coffee tables in pretty much any style and at many different price points. So when it

comes to style, you should answer the following question: Is the coffee table going to be the star of your living room decor, or is it going to play a supporting role?

If you've got particularly stylish sofas and living room decor, your coffee table should probably not stand out. If your decor is neutral or simple, you can buy a coffee table to give your living area some design punch.

New looks come out regularly. For 2010, Donner says to watch for upholstered coffee tables that can function as ottomans. Watch also for coffee tables in metallics, bright colours or reclaimed wood.

One mystery, though, remains: Why is it called a coffee table, and not a tea table, or a cocktail table? No one seems to be quite sure, but the best explanation seems to be that the name has American roots, and since Americans drink more coffee than tea, the name stuck.

Kharitonov adds that you can also, quite correctly, call it a cocktail table.

Daniel Drolet is a freelance writer and regular contributor to Homes.