





DESIGN

# How Shipping Delays Turned Used Furniture Into a Hot Commodity

Interior designers and homeowners, fed up with endless waits for new purchases, are turning to antique, vintage and even contemporary resale furnishings for quicker delivery. Here, a guide to getting preowned pieces promptly.

*By Michelle Slatalla*

Feb. 4, 2022 6:00 am ET

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thrilled to announce that after many Covid-related false  
last ready to tie the knot. They had a date, an intimate guest  
as just one problem—the chairs.

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d 14 custom scallop-backed dining chairs a year ago. The  
about four months, by May. Which changed to June. Then  
July rolled around and still no chairs. Shipping delays, logistics, Covid, Covid, blah blah, the vendor said.

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*Have you found any hidden gems in your local resale market? Join the conversation below.*





needed new upholstery. But in today's chaotic, supply-chain-challenged world, buying vintage and tweaking it is as close as we're going to get to near-instant gratification.

"Really, what other choice is there these days?" asked Ms. Adler, who got the chairs shipped to an upholsterer, re-covered in miraculously in-stock leather and delivered to the clients a few weeks ahead of the celebration.

In short, old stuff is the newest trend in interior design. After a year of record-breaking, monthslong waits for new furniture, homeowners and pros are turning to preowned and vintage furnishings.



Interior designer Shannon Eddings re-covered a Craigslist swivel chair and her grandmother's sofa.

PHOTO: MOLLY CULVER

Once an afterthought for buyers, "secondhand furniture is becoming mainstream," said furniture-industry investment banker Timothy Stump, noting that the U.S. market for used home goods and furniture is projected to grow by 38% by 2025, from \$17.05 billion last year to



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And then there's always your own attic.

“Looking around for a little cabinet to go in my hallway and seeing the shipping delays, I remembered I had an old dry sink that had been in my childhood home,” said homeowner Sierra Hartley, who lives in Medfield, Mass. “I painted it exactly the color I wanted—it took about four hours—and now I have this piece in my home that has a story to it.”

Fueling the popularity of preowned purchases is an awareness of how much furniture is thrown out every year—12 million tons in 2018, according to the Environmental Protection Agency. “People are bringing me things that in years past would have gone to the landfill,” said furniture restorer Paul Casaccio of Paint and Rehab Designs in Nutley, N.J. He recently refinished a beat-up dining room table for neighbors. “It's solid wood, and after I stripped it down, it had a beautiful grain.”

The surge in secondhand chic, coinciding with the ascendancy of the so-called grandmillennial style that is fast turning “frumpy” into a synonym for “fashionable,” has also created a new, relaxed approach to decorating.





Interior design firm McGrath II has always favored sourcing antique and vintage furniture for projects such as this dining room in Rye, N.Y. Today this allows the Greenwich, Conn., studio to circumvent delays in international shipping.

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This 19th-century Irish elm dining table arrived from a Dallas, Texas, antiques dealer in two weeks. McGrath II's business model "has been a great advantage during this time," said Lauren McGrath, one half of the firm.

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Circa 1810 French Empire dining chairs, sourced from a shop in Stamford, Conn., were ready for installation in two weeks, including reupholstery.

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The 18th-century Welsh server with scalloped sides came from a dealer located in Manhattan. Shipping time: one day.

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“It’s almost bizarre the way people are breaking all the rules we used to have, mixing antiques with modern things, putting things from the 18th century in the same room with things from 1950,” said Al Ruschmeyer, an interior designer in San Francisco. “For a friend who was an art dealer, I combined her modern art with a Victorian chair and a teddy bear.”

Vintage furniture site Chairish, which posted 54% year-over-year revenue growth in 2021, has seen a surge in sales of jewel-toned Chinese Art Deco rugs, armchairs upholstered in nostalgic florals and roll-top desks. “People are interested in the warmth those pieces bring,” said co-founder Anna Brockway.

Also sought by shoppers trying to circumvent shipping delays are nearly new contemporary pieces, often still in production, found on resale sites such as AptDeco, Kaiyo and even Facebook Marketplace. For instance, Kaiyo, in New York City, promises to deliver a “gently used” RH Maxwell sofa (\$2,100) in as quickly as two days to the lower Northeastern states. Expected delivery of a new version (from \$3,695) is between June 23 and July 22, according to the RH site. RH said a company spokesman was unavailable to comment.

Although used furniture can be a quick solution—even with truck-driver shortages, most pieces can be delivered domestically in weeks—designers, upholsterers and restorers caution that it’s not always less expensive.





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buying a new table,” said Tina Ramchandani, an interior designer in New York City. “But for a different client, we are reupholstering her headboard and side rails, and the cost turned out to be cheaper than a new bed.”

Resale site Kaiyo says this “gently used” version of the RH Maxwell sofa can be delivered to the lower Northeast U.S. in as few as two days. Meanwhile, the RH site estimates that a new one would arrive between June 23 and July 22.

PHOTO: KAIYO



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Rachel Fletcher of Knox Upholstery in Knoxville, Tenn., and president of the National Upholstery Association. “When Covid hit, we all thought we’d go out of business. Instead, I’m expanding out of my house into a commercial space. My dogs will miss me.”

Reupholstering costs vary widely. Extras like nailheads, welting, buttons, fringe and multiple cushions add up. “If you buy a vintage or antique sofa, new upholstery will probably cost half the purchase price,” said Lauren McGrath, a Greenwich, Conn., interior designer. “The rule holds true for a fully upholstered chair, like a wingback.”

Don’t expect perfection when buying secondhand furniture, said Chloe Kalk, an interior designer in Los Angeles: “It’s a little riskier because it might need a screw or a sealant or even help from a handyman, but in the end you can say, ‘I’m the only one in the world who has this 1930s coffee table from France.’”

Buyers also should check delivery costs before clicking to buy. Shipping internationally is much more of a challenge than a year ago, both because of delays and the increased expense, said Ray Allegrezza, executive director of the International Home Furnishings Representatives Association in High Point, N.C. “There are a record number of ships waiting for berths in the harbors and the cost of a shipping container that used to be \$2,000 a year ago now is over \$20,000.”

Most in demand? Furnishings you can refashion for a new purpose: demilunes as desks, vanities dragooned into duty as console tables. “These things may have lasted for a century or more already, [and are] suddenly getting another life,” said Anthony Barzilay Freund, editorial director at online antiques seller [1stDibs](#), where sales of dressing tables rose more than 35% last year.





Pieces like this Swedish vintage dressing table, which can do duty as a desk or entry table, are prized for their flexibility. \$2,005, 1stDibs.com

PHOTO: 1STDIBS

Also enjoying a renaissance are 20th-century, solid-wood “brown furniture” brands manufactured in the U.S. and known for silhouettes in traditional styles like Regency, Georgian and early American. At Kaiyo, prices of Drexel Heritage and Ethan Allen increased by 13.8% and 9.9% respectively last year, said founder Alpay Koralturk. “It makes sense. They are old brands, with a lot of high-quality product out there, and people now are willing to mix and match anything.”



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kitchen project where a client has a pie safe her grandfather built. Her initial reaction was ‘It doesn’t fit with what we’re doing and I’m going to get rid of it,’” said Tabitha Mahaffey, a designer in Fort Worth, Texas. “But we had a discussion: ‘It’s right here right now, so what if we paint it and put new hardware on it?’ And now it works in the space.”

The year has given many shoppers an appreciation for the human stories behind their new, old furniture. Consider the experience of Shannon Eddings, an interior designer in Austin, Texas, who wanted an inexpensive swivel chair for her sitting room.

“I found the perfect 1980s chair on Craigslist, and I wanted to re-cover it in a checkerboard fabric I loved,” Ms. Eddings said. When she went to seal the deal, she found “the chair belonged to my neighbor two doors down.”

## **No Pro Necessary**

*Six quick ways to perform a facelift on flawed used furniture, if it isn’t worth the time or money to pay someone else to do it.*



Minor wood scratches and marks can be corrected with pigmented wax sticks.

PHOTO: F. MARTIN RAMIN/ THE WALL STREET JOURNAL



For case goods, touch up or minor repair is generally easily resolved with furniture pens, said Highlands, N.C., interior designer Jamie Elliott McPherson. Try Mohawk's Fil-Stiks, \$32 a 12-pack, [Amazon.com](https://www.amazon.com).

## 2. Strip Show

"Use Easy-Off Oven Cleaner to strip furniture if you love the look and feel of raw, unfinished wood," said Hillary Kaplan, an interior designer in Westfield, N.J. Leave a coat of it on for an hour, then scrub it off with warm, soapy water.

## 3. Flute Music

Embellish a plain-Jane dresser or sideboard with detailing. "You can add fluting to a piece easily with Pole-Wrap, a trend I'm seeing on Instagram," said Denver, furniture flipper Leslie Jarrett. The pliable sheets of decorative wood were originally designed to spruce up basement columns. \$70 for a 96-inch-by-16-inch sheet, [HomeDepot.com](https://www.homedepot.com)

## 4. Cover Story

Throw a beautiful vintage rug over the back of an imperfect chair or sofa, said Ms. Kaplan. "It gives a lived-in-but-elegant look."

## 5. Finishing Touch

Swap in sleek hardware to instantly give old furniture a new look, suggested designer Ashley DeLapp, of Charlotte, N.C. "The piece will look more cohesive in a modern room," she said.

## 6. Shape Shift

Remove stylistic frills to declutter the lines of an old piece, said Paul Casaccio, of Paint and Rehab Designs. The Nutley, N.J., restorer recently removed a sea-themed medallion from a coffee table. "Without the shell motif, the table was a simple shape and an easy fit in any room," he said.



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The Covid pandemic has strained global supply chains, causing freight backlogs that have driven up costs. Now, some companies are looking for longer-term solutions to prepare for future supply-chain crises, even if those strategies come at a high cost. Photo Illustration: Jacob Reynolds

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