

# THE WALL STREET JOURNAL.

## Custom-Made Furniture Is Easier to Get Than Ever. Here's Why.

Interior designers cough up their source for bespoke pieces that don't require you to go through a pro, take out a second mortgage or even leave your house

BY MICHELLE SLATALLA | ORIGINALLY PUBLISHED ON FEBRUARY 17, 2023 | [THE WALL STREET JOURNAL](#)



HAVE IT YOUR WAY Small-scale fabricators have moved online, where interior designers hire them to make custom-specified furnishings—and so can you.  
KATIE CAREY

FROM THE MOMENT I set eyes on it, I adored the house I've been living in for the past 10 years. But it always had one glaring flaw—the first thing you see when you enter it. The foyer is so little that it could make anyone feel claustrophobic, even Lilliputians.

From a design perspective, this problem is easy enough to solve. Paradoxically, adding furniture can create focal points to persuade the brain that even a small, 8-feet-by-8-feet entryway is spacious and welcoming.

The hard part, however, is finding furniture that's perfectly scaled.

"I really don't want to hire an interior designer, but I would love to have a console table covered in grasscloth," I said strategically to my friend Stephanie, who happens to be an interior designer. After all, I can't afford to hire someone like, say, Stephanie, to draw an optimally sized console table and find a custom furniture maker to build it.

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Stephanie, who is used to my attempts to secure her services for free, said, “Have you ever considered Etsy?”

“Etsy?” I snorted, wondering why she was suggesting the online site I knew as a crafters’ tchotchke marketplace. “Are you suggesting I buy some DIYer’s macramé god’s eyes and suspend them from the ceiling?”

It turns out that Etsy, founded in 2005, has in recent years turned into the design industry’s best-kept secret.

Among the more than 100 million items for sale across its site, homewares and furnishings are the top-selling category, according to the company’s most recent SEC filings.

Etsy has become a place from which professionals and amateurs like me can buy high-quality, customized furnishings—everything from made-to-measure curtains to one-off pieces of customer-specified furniture—directly from the fabricator.

“I’ve used Etsy to source rugs—custom sizes are super easy with Etsy dealers—and carved-stone sinks in custom sizes and specialty metal items like ceiling-mounted vanity mirrors,” said Jessica Davis, an interior designer in Atlanta. “I love sourcing on Etsy for my interiors projects because it’s a great way to eliminate the middleman and work directly with overseas sources—and the price points tend to be much better.”

Etsy sellers represent a new generation of fabricators who have set up shop online to replace the dwindling ranks of bricks-and-mortar stores that once dotted small-town America.

“After the economic downturn of 2008, so many people went out of business. It was a struggle,” said Lynn Chalk, a window-treatment maker in Monroe, Conn. “So I went on Etsy, where nobody was selling window treatments. It’s been fantastic for me—now it’s 30% of my business.”

Ms. Chalk, who has made 2,814 Etsy sales since joining the platform in 2010, specializes in custom Roman shades and has created a multistep instruction sheet to give customers the confidence to measure their own windows.

“I usually have them measure three times and send me a photo of them holding up a measuring tape to the window,” she said. “I like to be sure.”

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Abigail Braden, a designer in Ridgefield, Conn., turned to Etsy seller the Pine Art to fabricate this wood-inlaid cabinet the exact size she needed.

*Abigail Braden*

April Gandy, a designer in Chicago, recently turned to Etsy for bistro-style shelving. “For a client’s bar, we used one Etsy vendor for industrial-type brackets and then had another Etsy vendor make the shelves,” she said of the glass-and-brass unit. “They even came out to the site to install them.”

The idea that you can get what you want—and not just the one or two sizes or designs that a national-chain retailer thinks you should want—is exhilarating, said interior designer Abigail Braden of Ridgefield, Conn. “I had a client who fell in love with an inlaid-wood media console at Anthropologie, but it was the wrong height because she needed it for a bar table,” Ms. Braden said. “I found an Etsy furniture seller who offered to make it in the right dimensions, for a lower price and to ship it for free. My client ended up getting the exact piece—the inlay was the same, and the drawers and the cabinets were the same—and we were both thrilled.”



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Interior designer Melanie Hay in Toronto relies on Etsy to buy digital downloads of photographs of original artworks directly from artist Dan Hobday, a British painter. "It's a really easy way to create large-scale art for not a lot of money," she said. For instance, she recently bought a high-resolution download of Hobday's Large Landscape Painting (40 inches square) for \$19.53. "I've created prints of both abstract images and landscapes. You can decide if you want it printed on canvas or if you want it matted, and you can print exactly the size you want. They look amazing on a wall."

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One of designers' most-cited Etsy hacks is throw pillows fabricated from luxury "to-the-trade-only" fabrics, the sort you could once only buy if you were a designer with access to showrooms that required minimum purchases in excess of the yardage one needed to make a pillow.



For less than \$20, Toronto designer Melanie Hay bought a 40-inch-square digital download of a photograph of a work by British painter Dan Hobday.

*Lauren Miller*



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On Etsy, you can purchase a throw pillow made from Kravat or Schumacher fabric for about \$100, hundreds less than a pillow of that quality would typically cost. Last month I spent \$120 on a custom-size, lumbar cushion covered in Rose Tarlow's Vicenza small-patterned linen fabric from Etsy seller Fancy Pillow Studio.

When the pillow arrived on my doorstep less than a week later, I was so impressed I phoned Fancy Pillow Studio's owner, Ortencia Cobarrubias to thank her.

"How can you sell designer fabrics at such low prices?" I asked Ms. Cobarrubias.

"I've been collecting high-end fabric remnants for years," said Ms. Cobarrubias, a seamstress in Los Angeles who, like 95% of the site's sellers, runs her Etsy shop from her home. She said most of her customers find her after performing a keyword search for a particular fabric. "They get exactly what they are looking for, and it's a good way for me to use fabric that would otherwise have been thrown away and wasted," she said.

Vendors say Etsy is also maker-friendly. Reaching a worldwide audience cost seller Oya Yalcin Zorlu 20 cents, the listing charge per item. (The platform also charges sellers a 6.5% commission on each sale.) Mr. Zorlu, based in London, sells custom lampshades and pillow covers made from handwoven fabrics produced in Turkey, Uzbekistan and the U.K. He said that 30% of his customers are from the U.S. "They get direct access to European and international fabrics," said Mr. Zorlu, who ships overseas orders above \$35 for free.

My search for a custom grasscloth-covered console table led to Etsy custom-furniture maker Liven UP Design, based in Encinitas, Calif. Owner Jennifer Ainsworth, who started the business in her garage in 2010, has sold 3,390 nightstands, benches, upholstered beds and daybeds on Etsy.

To help me commission the table, Ms. Ainsworth sent me a dozen samples of grasscloth and drew a mock-up of a 42-inch-long, 12-inch-deep hardwood table based on my (OK, Stephanie's) precise measurements. Liven UP also installed custom drawer pulls that I mailed to them.

The console table, which cost \$3,000 (including shipping), arrived fully assembled, and perfectly proportioned to fit against the wall between a closet door and the doorway to the living room.

It makes my front hall look huge.