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Books take center stage in these rooms



Or take inspiration from artist John Salvest's arrangement of 4,000 paperback romance novels at Crystal Bridges Museum of Art in Bentonville, Ark.

Some people love the look of a bookshelf stuffed with books, and what that represents. Others see books as clutter, and wonder why anyone owns them in the digital era.

But the "well-chosen book," or an artfully displayed stack of books, "can be as powerful as any other design element," said Pablo Solomon, an artist and designer from Lampasas, Texas, near Austin. Books not only create a mood, they make a personal statement, he added.

And even when books are used primarily for aesthetic effect rather than to show off a collection, the very act of displaying them celebrates them, according to Meredith Wing. "Repurposing books honors them," said Wing, a third-year architecture student at Columbia University who has her own company, Meredith Wing Design.

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Because many readers consume literature digitally these days, physical books also evoke nostalgia — not unlike displays of other authentic objects that originated in earlier eras, like wagon wheels or dashboards. "These are the things we now kind of worship," Wing said.

But on a practical level, books offer a "relatively inexpensive way to decorate on a large scale," Wing said. She's bought books by the foot, covered them in white paper and created a "minimalist library wall." She's stacked them in nonfunctioning fireplaces and used them as pedestals for photos. And she's removed dust covers to reveal book spine colors "for dramatic effect."

In Tulsa, Oklahoma, The Tavern restaurant stacked books along a room divider between the dining area and bar in a colored geometric pattern. The pattern echoed the art deco architecture Tulsa is famous for.

And it's a technique that's easily adapted in home decor: Instead of lining books up vertically, break them up with horizontal stacks. You can arrange them by size and color, or keep them organized by topic. But use some of the horizontal stacks to display "accessories, photos or travel knickknacks," advised Liz Toombs, an interior decorator.

For a "stylized look," Toombs buys old book collections at estate sales. "If they have that worn patina, it's more interesting," said Toombs, who keeps a set of old black-bound encyclopedias in her office at Polka Dots & Rosebuds in Lexington, Kentucky. Sometimes she turns a book on a shelf around so that the pages, not the spine, face out, to add "a little funky spin to it."

Meridith Baer buys old books by the bin for her work at Meridith Baer Home, a home-staging company. She covers the books individually in solid-color butcher or craft paper — or sometimes even old architectural house-plans — then arranges them in various ways. If there's an art book she loves, "I leave it on the coffee table open to that page."

Solomon, the Texas designer, also likes displaying individual art books. "We have every art book that ever was," said Solomon. "My wife will pick her favorite artist of the month, put that book out on display, create a dinner and have friends over for Picasso night."

And don't be afraid to judge a book by its cover. "Book covers are some of the best art ever done," said Solomon. You can even digitally scan a book cover and have it printed in a variety of materials — aluminum or canvas for example — in any size to hang on a wall.

Ron Marvin, a New York-based interior designer, uses stacks of books to create "little moments." "I'll stack four or five books on a cocktail table and put a vase on top," he said. "I have an antique chair I didn't want anybody sitting in. I put a stack of books in the chair and on top of that a glass bowl and it looks like a little sculpture. It's a moment. But it also says, 'Please don't sit here.'"

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In his office, he stacks his collection of design books horizontally by color and size, largest to smallest, creating little pyramids.

On Pinterest and other sites, you can find photos of furniture made from books — including a much-posted picture of a bed that doesn't look very comfortable (imagine sleeping on a mattress of books!). But Marvin has made more practical furniture from stacks of books, including a nightstand next to a bed and a side table next to a low chair.

John Salvest used a solid wall of 4,000 paperback romance novels to spell out the word "FOREVER" in an art installation. Red-spined books formed the letters on a backdrop of white-spined books. The installation was a notable part of "State of the Art," a major contemporary art show that just completed its run at Crystal Bridges Museum of American Art in Bentonville, Arkansas. Salvest said there was an "underlying sadness" in finding hundreds of discarded books in thrift shops. He chose the word "FOREVER" because it often popped up in titles, presumably a reference to love or the absence of love. But in the age of the e-book, a wall of books that spells out "forever" can also signal that for some readers, books remain an important part of the culture.

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