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## Selecting Upholstered Furniture

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## *Smart Shopping for Home Furnishings*



# Selecting Upholstered Furniture

*Dr. Leona Hawks*

Home Furnishings & Housing Specialist

1987

HI 11

Shopping for upholstered furniture? Shopping for upholstered furniture can be confusing, since there are so many different styles, construction techniques, and quality characteristics. To make knowledgeable decisions concerning upholstery, be able to answer these questions.

- WHAT'S ON THE MARKET?
- WHAT'S FOUND INSIDE?
- WHAT FIBERS ARE AVAILABLE?
- WHAT'S QUALITY FABRIC AND TAILORING?
- WHAT FINISHES ARE USED?
- WHAT'S A QUALITY RECLINER?
- WHAT'S A QUALITY SLEEPER SOFA?
- WHAT'S ON THE LABEL?
- WHAT'S ON THE WARRANTY?

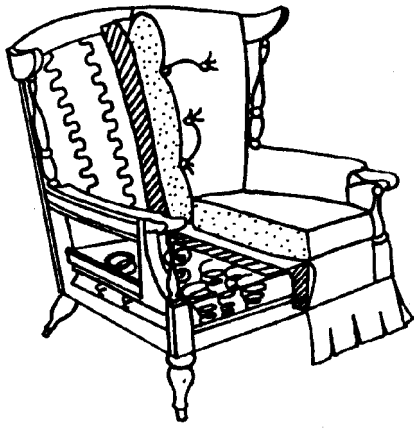
### **WHAT'S ON THE MARKET?**

There are many different types of upholstered chairs and sofas, and they vary widely in quality. Most of the quality characteristics are similar for all upholstered items. There are, however, a few home furnishing items such as recliners and sleeper sofas that have additional quality characteristics.

A high price tag does not necessarily indicate quality. High-quality and low-quality upholstered furniture can be found in all price ranges.

### **WHAT'S FOUND INSIDE?**

High-quality upholstery is difficult to evaluate because you cannot see inside the furniture. There are, however, methods of determining quality. High-quality upholstery is best evaluated by checking the inner frame, support foundation, padding, and cushioning materials.



**Figure 11.1. Upholstered Furniture Cutaway**

**Inner Frame.** Today, upholstered furniture frames are made of wood. Depending on the type, wood can be quite durable. A softwood frame, however, is of less quality because of its lack of strength. In some of the better quality furniture stores, you may see a cutaway of the furniture piece, which should show whether the frame is hardwood or softwood (see Figure 11.1, Upholstered Furniture Cutaway). If the cutaway is not available, you need to ask the sales clerk or read the manufacturer's catalog to determine the type of wood used for the frame. If you cannot find out what the frame is made out of, then use several of the following tests, and be gentle.

- While sitting in the chair or sofa, move side to side. If there is any side movement in the frame, the furniture piece may not be very sturdy.
- While sitting in the furniture, gently push with your back on the back of the furniture using your feet and arms for support. If the piece of furniture makes noises, do not purchase.
- Let go of your body weight and fall into the piece of furniture. Does it feel solid?
- Push on both arm rests to determine if they are sturdy.
- Turn the piece of furniture over and look underneath for corner frame reinforcement. There may be a thin piece of fabric attached to the under side that you can see through. If you cannot see the corner reinforcement, then feel with one of your hands for the corner blocks.
- Lift one side of the upholstered furniture. Does it make a noise? If so, it may be poorly constructed.

**Support Foundation.** The support foundation consists of steel made into springs, coils, or other types of support systems found inside the upholstered item. The steel used for the support foundation should be tempered to maintain resilience. To find this out, you have to ask the sales person or read the manufacturer's catalog.

You can check how well the support foundation will perform by setting on the furniture and gently bouncing. The support system should push you back up each time you bounce. You should also place your hand under the cushioning and press down on the springs. In a high-quality upholstered piece of furniture, you should not be able to feel the metal support system through the fabric. It should feel padded.

Also check the front edge of the upholstered item, which should give under pressure. Just push your hand down on the front edge of the seat to see if it compresses, then goes back to its original position.

**Padding.** For quality, the chair or sofa should have the right amount of padding. Try feeling the frame through the fabric with your hand. You should not feel hard frame edges, which would indicate lack of padding. Unpadded areas wear out quickly.

**Cushioning Materials.** Cushioning materials may include urethane sheets, urethane fiber-fills, polyester battings, springs, feathers, and down. You may find a cushion consisting of one or more of these materials.

**Urethane** (also called poly foam and polyurethane) is the most widely used cushioning sheet material, owing to its resilience, cost, durability, non-allergenic qualities,

and mildew and fungus resistance. Urethane comes in many different qualities. High-quality urethane contains a higher percentage of pure urethane, thus weighs more than low-quality urethane. One way to determine quality is by the weight of the cushion. Of you compare two cushions of the same size, the one that seems heavier is the better quality. Lightweight cushions do not last as long and “hollow out” faster than heavier cushions. Urethane is also shredded to make fiber-fills, which are small pieces of urethane. Fiber-fills are used in the back cushions because they give a softer feel than the urethane sheets.

Polyester battings are used to wrap cushioning materials so they will not slide around inside the cushion. Cushions wrapped in polyester battings indicate quality upholstered furniture (see Figure 11.2, Cushions).

Feathers and down are also used inside cushions because of their comfort. Feathers and down, once used extensively as filling, are now too expensive for anything but luxury items. The more down and feathers, the firmer and usually more desirable and expensive the cushioning. One hundred percent down is almost too soft. For cushioning, 80% feathers and 20% down is a good combination.

A high-quality cushion has an additional cover of muslin, which encloses the foam and polyester batting or the springs, foam, and feathers. This is easily checked. All you have to do is open the zipper of the cushion and check.

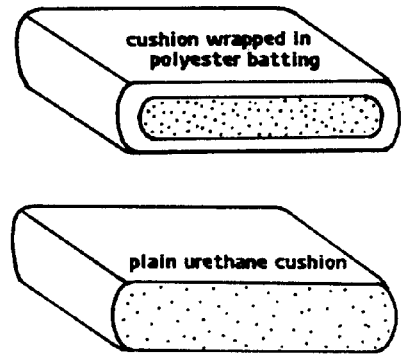


Figure 11.2. Cushions

## WHAT FIBERS ARE AVAILABLE?

The durability of the fabric is determined by the type of fiber used in the construction of the fabric. Each fiber has unique properties such as color retention, luster, sturdiness, cleanability, and pleasing touch qualities. Ask the sales person if you can see the fabric sample of the upholstery fabric you want to purchase. This fabric sample should be labeled with the fiber content. Fibers most often used in upholstery fabrics are acetate, cotton, flax, nylon, olefin, polyester, and rayon. Leather and vinyl are also listed because of their popularity, not because they are classified as fibers.

**Acetate.** The characteristics of acetate are: less fiber strength when compared with other fibers, low cost, resistant to moths and other household pests, a tendency to discolor from mildew and bacteria, and a tendency to weaken from prolonged exposure to sunlight. Cleaning considerations are: petroleum products used in drycleaning do not damage fibers; organic solvents such as acetone, phenol, alcohol, chloroform, nail polish remover, and some perfumes destroy fiber; and acids weaken fiber.

**Cotton.** The characteristics of cotton are: dyes easily; burns readily and quickly; exposure to sunlight causes the fiber to yellow; low resilience; and damaged by mildew and bacteria. Cleaning considerations are: resistant to alkalies in most detergents; strong acids destroy fiber; and resistant to most dry-cleaning solvents.

**Flax (linen).** The characteristics of flax are: strong fiber; wrinkles easily unless finished; weakened by sunlight; damaged by mildew when exposed to a humid environment; and dyes easily. Cleaning considerations are: resistant to alkaline solutions found in most detergents; and excellent resistance to dry-cleaning solvents.

**Leather.** The characteristics of leather are: heat sensitive; darker colors may bleed; and absorbs body oils readily. Cleaning considerations are: dry-cleaning solvents remove natural oils, disturb finish, and produce lighter-colored areas; should be cleaned with good commercial leather cleaner; becomes sticky when furniture polish, oil, and varnish are applied; and damaged by detergents or other stain-removal agents.

**Nylon.** The characteristics of nylon are: good resistance to abrasion; excellent strength and wearability; good recovery from creasing or wrinkling; low moisture absorption; accumulates static electric charges; damaged by sunlight; and water repellent. Cleaning considerations are: alkalies have little effect; acids such as formic, hydrochloric, nitric, and sulfuric cause immediate disintegration; and dry-cleaning solvents have little effect on the fiber.

**Olefin.** The characteristics of olefin are: resists soiling; retains oil and grease; low moisture absorption; heat sensitive; strong; light weight; hard to dye; degraded by sunlight; color-fast; abrasion resistant; long wearability; resists mildew and rot; and holds no attraction to moths or other insects. Cleaning considerations are: may be bleached; should not be dry-cleaned or machine washed; shrinks when exposed to warm temperatures; and highly resistant to alkalies and acids.

**Polyester.** The characteristics of polyester are: resilient; retains oil and grease; tends to pill; low moisture absorption; resists abrasion; damaged by exposure to sun light; unaffected by mildew and insects; generally resistant to wrinkling; and prolonged exposure to sunlight weakens the fiber. Cleaning considerations are: good resistance to weak alkalies and acids except for hydrochloric and sulfuric acids; not damaged by oxidizing agents or bleach; not damaged by chemicals used in cleaning and stain removal except for hot meta-cresol and phenol with trichlorophenol and tetrachlorethane; and not damaged by soaps and synthetic detergents.

**Rayon.** The characteristics of rayon are: dyes easily; tends to shrink; high moisture absorption; low cost; deterioration occurs when exposed to sunlight; and fiber weak when wet. Cleaning considerations are: resistant to household detergents and chemicals; resistant to dry-cleaning solvents and stain removing agents; damaged by chlorine and peroxide bleaches; and degraded by concentrated acids.

**Vinyl.** The characteristics of vinyl are: sensitive to abrasion such as heavy rubbing; oils from the body can cause it to crack and harden; melts when exposed to heat; and stretches unless another fabric is attached to the back. Cleaning considerations are: dry-cleaning solvents dissolve surface, cause stiffening and hardening; and unaffected by mild household detergents.

## **WHAT'S QUALITY FABRIC AND TAILORING?**

The following general concepts concerning fabrics and tailoring should help you select high-quality upholstered furniture that fits your needs.

- Polished and glazed cottons, when new, give a nice texture, but after some use, the finish wears off leaving dull-looking fabric.
- A fabric with a print hides light soiling.
- Tightly woven fabrics wear better than loosely woven fabrics.
- Pile fabrics, like plush or velvets that have deep and close pile, will wear well.

- Pile fabrics, with uncut loops, mat less than those with cut loops.
- Latex applied to the back of the fabric stabilizes the fabric preventing raveling and seam slippage.
- Knit fabrics tend to stretch out and snag.
- For better wear, fabric nap should run down the back cushion to the seat, not up.
- Fabric should have no wrinkles or puckers at the seams, unless they are part of the design.
- Cushions should fit tightly and evenly into the corners.
- Stripes, plaids, and patterns should be matched, which includes the cushions matching with the rest of the upholstery.



**decking fabric**

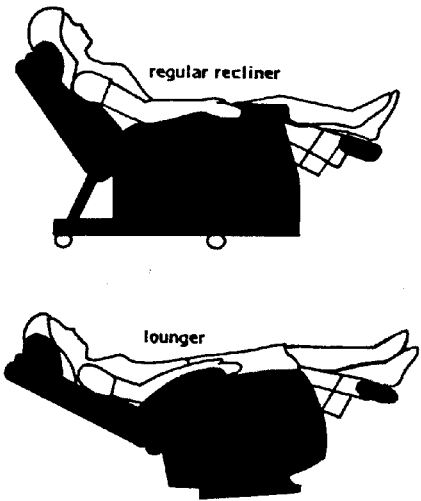
**Figure 11.3. Decking Fabric Under Cushions**

- The size of pattern should be appropriate for the size of furniture.
  - The grain of the fabric should run parallel or horizontal to the furniture piece.
  - Protective covers should be available for armrests.
  - Decking fabric should not be visible when someone sits on a cushion (see Figure 11.3, Decking Fabric Under Cushions).
  - Designs should be centered on the upholstery piece.
  - Welted cording should be smooth with no waves.
  - Seams should be securely stitched with appropriate colored thread.
  - Seams should be smooth and neatly tailored.
  - There should be no loose threads.
  - Cushions should be reversible.
  - Decorative stitching such as quilting or tufting should be secure, smooth, and of equal depth.
  - Buttons should be visually balanced on the furniture, drawn through the upholstered piece with heavy cord, and secure, not just tacked onto the fabric.
  - Some furniture stores have samples of furnishings that are on the sales floor. Ask the sales clerk if you can examine the fabric sample of the upholstery item you want to purchase. Here are a few tests you can use to determine the durability of the fabric.
  - Rub the back of the fabric sample against itself to see if there is any flaking. Flaking means that the backing is not firmly bonded to the fabric.
  - Check the abrasion resistance of the sample by rubbing the fabric sample surface with your fingernail. If the fabric is damaged easily, it will not last long.
  - Rub the fabric face against itself. If the surface print rubs off, do not buy the fabric.
  - Test for pilling by rubbing the fabric with your fingers; if bits of fabric appear to ball together, it may pill.
  - Check the shading on a napped fabric by brushing the fabric with your hand in several different directions. Shading can make the fabric look worn.
  - Check resilience by crushing the fabric sample in your hand. If the fabric bounces back into its original shape without a lot of wrinkles, it will look new longer.
  - Check the amount of sizing in the sample by rubbing the sample against itself to see if any dry powder sifts out. Once the sizing rubs off, the fabric looks old.
  - Check for colorfastness by rubbing a fabric swatch with a moist white handkerchief. If color comes off onto the handkerchief, it will certainly come off when cleaned.
  - Check to see if the fabric's raw edges fray or ravel easily. If so, the yarn may shift and pull away at the seams.
- Stretch the fabric diagonally. Does it stretch and then completely recover? If it does, it

will hold its shape. If it remains stretched out, cushions will wrinkle and not fit neatly.

### **WHAT IF FINISHES ARE USED?**

Two types of finishes help protect fabrics. Silicone (such as Sylmer) finishes repel water-based substances. Fluorochemical (such as Scotchguard, Zepel) finishes protect against both water-based and oil-based spills. Both types of finishes repel spills long enough to be wiped up, but they do not replace cleaning. These finishes are applied to the fabric surface and will wear off after extended use and cleaning. These finishes are applied to the fabric surface and will wear off after extended use and cleaning. In-store applications of these finishes should never be applied over factory application because chemicals may interact and destroy your fabric.

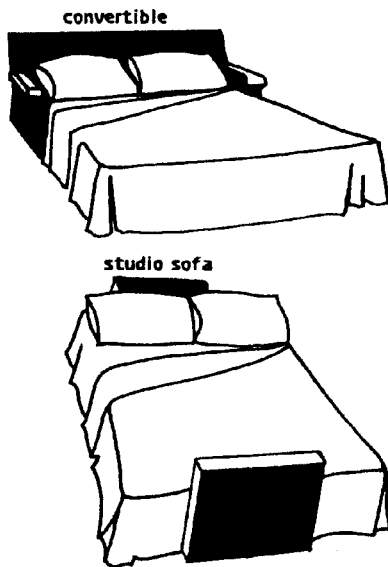


**Figure 11.4. Recliners**

### **WHAT'S A QUALITY RECLINER?**

There are two different types of recliners: the regular recliner and the lounge (see

Figure 11.4, Recliners). With the regular recliner, the angle of the top of the legs to the back stays at 90 degrees, even when the chair is fully reclined. The lounge starts at a 90 degree angle, but as the chair reclines the body changes to a flatter position. There are also recliners and loungers that can fully recline with the back of the chair 2 inches from the wall. As the chair reclines, it moves forward. There are also rocking recliners and loungers, which rock back and forth.



**Figure 11.5. Sleeper Sofa**

Quality characteristics to look for in convertible sofas are a solid frame, thick steel in the frame, bed frame securely attached to sofa frame, and durable decking fabric. The wood provides the frame for the sofa and the steel provides the frame for the bed. The wood should be hardwood and the steel should be thick enough to support the movement in and out and the weight of people sleeping on the bed.

The way the mechanical parts of the bed are attached to the wood determines how well the convertible unit stays together. The greater the number of helical coils attached to the frame, the better the support of the springs. The better quality convertibles have each line of flat springs attached to one helical coil. In the poorer quality sofa sleeper, several flat springs are attached to one helical coil. In some inexpensive sofas, the flat springs are replaced with

### **WHAT'S A QUALITY SLEEPER SOFA?**

The most common types of sleeper sofas are the convertible and studio sofas. The convertible sofa mattress pulls out or folds out from the seat. The studio sofa's back drops down level with the seat, creating a sleeping surface (see Figure 11.5, Sleeper Sofa).

fabric and two lines of wire attached to the frame diagonally. The center bar, which supports the mattress, is called the stabilizer bar. This bar can be attached to the frame with helical coils or welded. The best method is to attach the bar to the frame with helical coils so that it gives under pressure. The less expensive method is to weld the bar to the frame, in which case it has no give. Someone sleeping in this type of system may feel the rigid bar through the mattress.

Another coil found in the convertible sofa is the rotation coil. This coil is found at the bottom inside of the sofa frame, which keeps the mattress in line with the bed frame. The best quality sleeper sofas have three rotation coils; poorer quality sleeper sofas have only one.

For quality, you should check the decking fabric located just below the cushions. The decking fabric should be made of tough and durable material to protect the cushions from being torn by the flat springs.

Other characteristics to consider are: does the mechanism work easily, smoothly, and quietly? Is the sofa well balanced in each position when the mattress is pulled out? Do all the moving parts clear the fabric? Are there any sharp edges on the metal parts? When the bed is pulled out, does it lock into position? Are the leg supports constructed so they will not damage your floor? When you lie on the mattress, does it support you comfortably? Refer to the fact sheet on mattresses for more information on mattresses.

## **WHAT'S ON THE LABEL?**

All labeling of upholstery is voluntary except the label attached to the cushion indicating materials used inside the upholstery item. This label, found just under the cushion, is headed with the words "do not remove under penalty of law." Listed on this label are the padding materials used inside, which are usually cotton batting, polyurethane or urethane, and polyester batting. The cotton batting is used to cover the upholstery frame, the polyurethane and urethane foam are used for the cushioning, and the polyester batting is used to wrap the urethane cushion. This label also includes the kinds of materials used for the back cushion, which are urethane, polyurethane, or fiber-fill. This mandatory labeling provides you with little information, because varying qualities of materials may use the same term. Additional labeling, which is voluntary, may provide consumer information concerning fabric testing, flammability, care, and fabric grade.

**Fabric Testing Labeling.** This type of labeling was initiated by National Association of Furniture Manufacturers. Members that conform to the association's construction and warranty guidelines are licensed to display a "Seal of Integrity" insignia: two bronze interlocking circles bearing the license number of the manufacturer. The fabrics displaying this insignia are run through 15 tests for quality including colorfastness, pilling, yarn slippage, surface abrasion, wear, color transfer, and tear strength. Fabrics are then categorized according to durability: heavy duty, medium duty, light duty, and delicate. Participating manufacturers include the durability ratings on fabric swatches and product tags, which are:

- **hhh** (green color code) means heavy duty and is suitable for normal use by an active family with children.
- **mmm** (blue color code) means medium duty and is suitable for use by adults in a household where the furniture is not in constant use.
- **lll** (yellow color code) means light duty and is suitable for use in an adult household where furniture is selected for its aesthetic value rather than for its performance characteristics.
- **ddd** (red color code) means delicate and is suitable for use in an adult household



where furniture is decorative and seldom used.

**Care Labeling.** The furniture industry has adopted a voluntary standard care-label coding, which indicates the proper cleaning method for a particular fabric. This code may be printed on a label under seat cushions, on hand tags, or on fabric samples.

- **W** means that the upholstery should be cleaned only with water-based cleaning agents or foam.
- **S** means that the upholstery should be cleaned only with water-free dry-cleaning solvents.
- **W-S** means that the upholstery should be cleaned with either of the above methods.
- **X** means that the upholstery should only be vacuumed or brushed lightly to remove soil.

**Flammability Labeling.** Look for the UFAC (Upholstered Furniture Action Council) hang tag, which means that the furniture, and fabric are constructed to be more resistant to smoldering cigarettes and safer than untagged furniture. In addition, various upholstery components must withstand the cigarette ignition test to be included in UFAC tested upholstered furniture. These upholstery components are welt cords, padding materials, decking material, and cushioning materials.

**Fabric Grade Labeling.** Many manufacturers offer a selection of different fabrics for their upholstered pieces. The fabrics are graded for pricing, not quality. The grades begin with “A” or “1,” which is least expensive, and continue up to “H” or “7,” which is the most expensive. A higher price does not necessarily mean the fabric wears better. Pricing has to do with weave, design, and the type of yarn.

## **WHAT'S ON THE WARRANTY?**

If a warranty is offered, make sure you save the sales slip as well as information on the warranty. You should also record the date of store purchase. Keep all this information in case you need it later. If the manufacturer does not offer a warranty, find out if the store will assure responsibility for defects, poor workmanship, or damage during delivery. Always get warranties in writing; oral warranties are worthless.

Also check to see if there is a warranty on the fabric or fibers. Some warranties apply only to furniture construction and not to the fabric, while others may carry a limited warranty on the fabric. Manufacturers of high-quality fibers have warranties on fabrics made from their fibers. These warranties state that the manufacturer will replace or refund upholstery fabric if the fabric fails to provide normal wear for the period of the warranty, such as 1 or 2 years. Specifically excluded from the warranty are burns, stains, cuts, oiling, and pet damage.

## **✓ QUALITY CHECKLIST**

After each question, answer with a yes\* or no.

1. Is the frame made of hard wood?
2. Is the chair or sofa frame sturdy?
3. Is the support foundation sturdy?
4. Is the support foundation well padded?
5. Does the front edge of the chair or sofa give under pressure?
6. Is there enough padding that you cannot feel the wood frame underneath?

7. Did you compare several cushions the same size to see which was the heaviest?
8. Are the cushions wrapped with polyester batting?
9. Do the cushions have an additional inside cover of muslin?
10. Do you know which fiber or fibers are included in the upholstery fabric you want to buy?
11. Did you select a fabric that fits your needs?
12. Did you check the tailoring for quality?
13. Did you obtain a fabric sample and conduct a few tests to determine durability?
14. Is there a stain-resistant or soil-resistant finish applied to the fabric?
15. Did you read all labeling?
16. Is there a warranty?

### **Recliners**

17. If you are buying a recliner, does the chair move easily from the sit-up position to the fully reclined position?
18. If you are buying a recliner, are the moving parts made of thick steel?
19. If you are buying a recliner, is the metal frame bolted, not screwed, to the wood chair frame?

### **Sleeper Sofa**

20. If you are buying a sleeper sofa, are each of the flat spring lines attached to a helical coil?
21. If you are buying a sleeper sofa, is the stabilizer bar attached to the frame with helical coils, not welded?
22. If you are buying a sleeper sofa, is there more than one rotation bar on each side of the sofa frame?
23. If you are buying a sleeper sofa, is the decking fabric made of durable fabric?
24. If you are buying a sleeper sofa, does the mechanism work easily, smoothly, and quietly?
25. If you are buying a sleeper sofa, do all the moving parts clear the fabric?
26. When the sleeper sofa is pulled out, does it lock into position?
27. If you are buying a sleeper sofa do the legs have protectors or rounded ends so the floor is not damaged?
28. Did you test the mattress of the sleeper sofa for comfort?

\* If you answered all these questions with a yes, you can be assured of getting high-quality upholstered furniture.

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