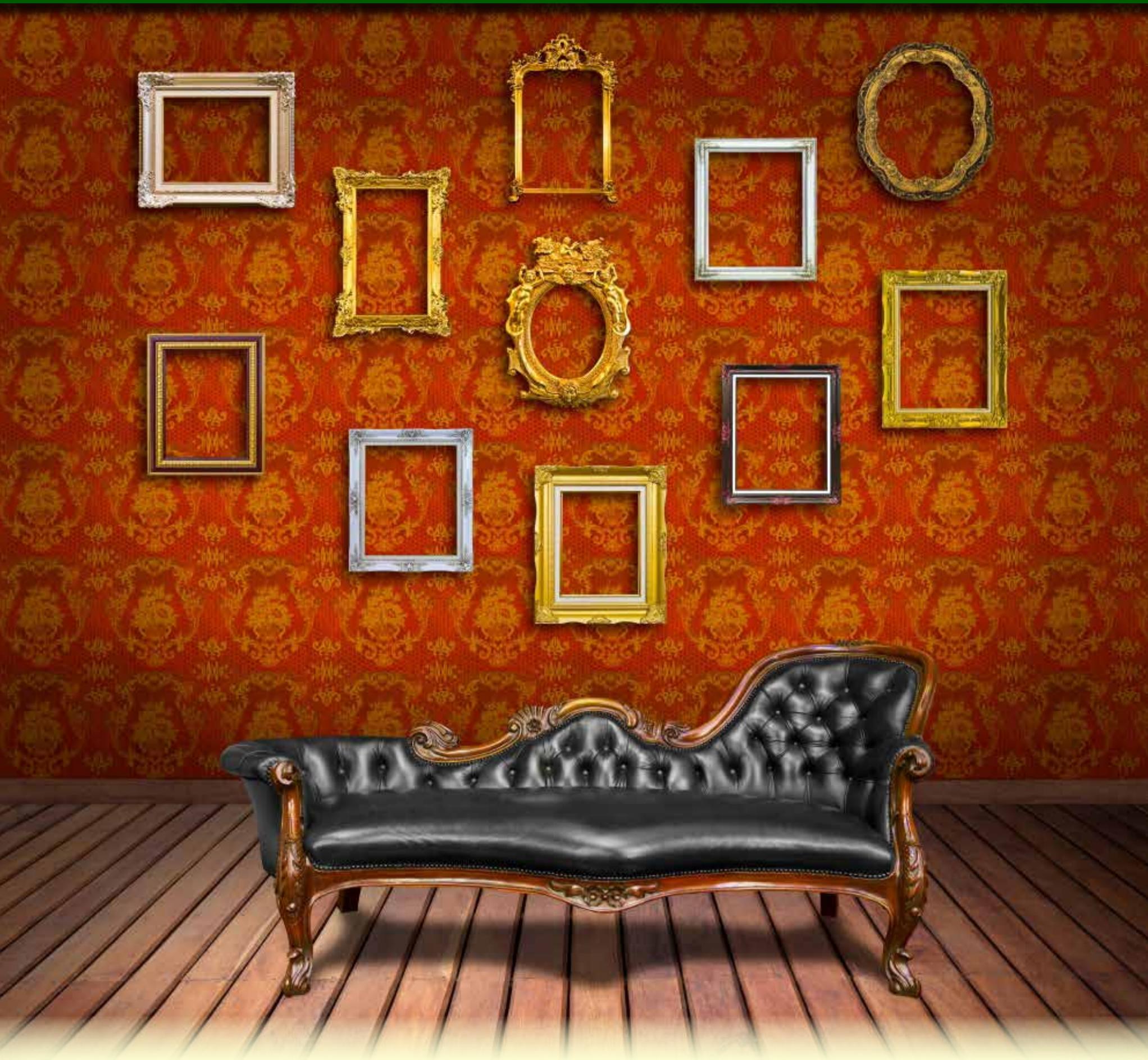


That Awkward Space: Above the Couch



Long gone are the days when a piece of anonymous art chosen for its ability to match the cushions was the only answer to that awkward expanse of wall above the couch. Designers and decorators from around the world show us ideas to make it interesting - and personal.

ALL ABOUT SCALE

“People make two basic mistakes in decorating their spaces,” says forty-year-veteran of the design trade, Able Miller of Scala Design.

The first mistake, he says, is “devaluing themselves” and forgetting that all those rooms they’ve liked outside their home were put together by people with a strong sense of self - and everyone likes something!

“Even when a designer is putting together a showcase room, which you would think is a generic sort of box filled with pretty things to appeal to the biggest slice of potential buyers, they have a singular person in their mind’s eye - often themselves!”

A showcase, says Miller, is “the room we build for our very specific imaginary friend.”

When designing for real clients, he says, “I don’t want to see your ‘idea book’ first. That tells me who’s work you like, but nothing about you.”

“Most people think they aren’t interesting enough to inspire their own rooms! That they are ‘too small’ to fill their own spaces.” Notes Miller, “They rush about madly trying to dropship instant character into a room - and then can’t figure out why their space doesn’t feel right!”

Which is why that generic print over the couch doesn’t work either.



“It’s just space filler,” he says. “When you walk into a room, do you want the first thing you see to be something that has no meaning for you? Better to leave it blank until the right thing reaches out and grabs you, demands your attention, and makes you smile!”

The second mistake, says Miller, “Is trying to force the round peg into the square hole!”

The thing that grabs you or ignites your passion may not “fit” your space - at least not if you just throw it at the wall without thought.

“One of my clients, he had this little sketch. A Dali! It was beautiful and, every time he saw it, or spoke about it, he got excited. But, to hang it above his seven-foot long, bright red leather couch? It was lost. It’s about passion - and scale. Scale is what keeps precious things from being lost in the room.”

Miller points to a project by Sharon Payer Design as a way to address scale.

“She’s layered smaller art work over some recycled slate tiles from an old barn. The texture and scale of the tiles suits the room and the couch beneath - and anchors the smaller art, which can be appreciated as a person moves deeper into the space.”



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An unusual form of mirror, this wall of mirrored tiles lets the room itself, particularly the reflection of the lovely chandelier, fill the space above the couch - a good reflection can double the impact of great individual objects.

"The key to that space above the sofa is to mind the scale, figure out what amount of space you want to use, and fill that with things that have meaning," he says.

It doesn't have to be traditional artwork either.

"If you are an artist, then show off your work, by all means - or, if you're passionate about a particular artist or period, by all means, surround yourself with those things," says Miller. "But objects that tempt your fingers with texture, or remind you of a special moment, or just delight your eyes with their sparkle are also art, the art of life."

Mirrors, in their many forms, certainly qualify as art.

"Yes, definitely, they are one of my favorite things in that space," says Miller. "A beautiful old frame, bevelled glass, gilt accents, a recycled object made into a mirror, a grouping of different types of mirror, or a single, huge "leaner" mirror provide mass on any scale you might need. And mirrors, of course, reflect light as well as whatever else is in the room, so, they illuminate and immediately give you 'more' of whatever other good things you have in the space."

He does have a few simple warnings about mirrors.

"Not all reflections are good ones. Before installing mirrors permanently, have a look at it from all angles. You don't want it showing off the dishes in the kitchen when you settle with guests for a drink after the meal. Open plan homes can be difficult with mirrors," he notes.

"Sometimes, you can 'fake' the reflection, though. A little ball of putty behind one side or the other can often tip the glass just enough to eliminate a poor reflection without being visibly odd when looking at the mirror directly."

"And, when possible, avoid having mirrors reflecting a television screen or another mirror. Both these things create visual confusion which can be unpleasant."

Miller suggests people bring out their collections when thinking about that important display space above the couch.

"Not perhaps the spot for salt and pepper shaker collections - though that would be cheerful in a kitchen! - but other collectibles do lend themselves to displays."

Many of this generation's influential artists have lent their talents to magazine covers, book jackets, and album covers, items Miller suggests prove perfect "art" for display in the home of a writer or musician, or just a lover of words and music.

"Depth is the only limitation to what can be displayed over the sofa," he notes. "Practically, you have to be able to sit down and stand up without bashing your head. Think of things less than five or six inches deep, that can be framed and hung, or collected on shallow shelving and, most likely, it can become an installation over your sofa."



**Photo by Alison Mountain
Project by
AM-ID: Alison Mountain Interior Design**



Scale Above the Couch



Photo by Veronika
Sarah and Bendrix
www.sarahandbendrix.com

“Mass doesn’t have to come from one large item,” notes Miller. “You can achieve the same scale with many smaller objects, as long as they are connected in space.”

A ‘gallery wall’ comes in two basic styles - formal or random - and two basic types - graphic and collection.

A formal gallery has a symmetrical layout; random galleries appears less planned and more asymmetrical.

“Random” groupings can be completely organic, built up over time and just growing across the wall. More likely, however, that randomness is well-planned to create a particular arrangement for a particular effect. Laying out your components on the floor first can be helpful in that step. Alternately, creating paper outlines that you can move about on the wall with some low-tack tape, can also make finalizing placement simpler.

The more similar your components are, and the more regularly they are installed, the more formal the finished installation will appear. There are four basic areas where you can up the formal factor of your grouping: the content of your components, the matting you choose, the frames, and the arrangement on the wall. If you pick subjects in similar tones, use the same color and width

matting, in identical frames, and install them in regular rows and columns, the result will be quite formal.

You can fall in between complete chaos and rigid formality by altering any of those four factors. If, for example, you take dissimilar items, but, hang them up along a visual line through their centre, you’ll have a more organized chaos. Play with those factors until you come up with a balance that works for you and your display.

A nice balance can often be achieved by installing shallow shelves and just standing your frames in layered groupings.

The shelves work particularly well for “collection” type groupings. A “collection” group will include unframed, three-dimensional objects. Graphic letters, a shelf-sitter doll, or an antique camera are all 3D objects that present best unframed. They add depth and texture and interest, and can all sit on shallow shelving, even layered with framed work, or in front of other hung art.

If you opt not to use shelving for your collection of 3-D objects, simply be careful to ensure they are securely attached to the wall. Couches can move, bump your wall, and bring down loosely hung objects!

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Another great trick for uniting smaller items creating the visual impression of one object is to employ a old-fashioned idea: install a picture rail.

"I really like picture rails," says Miller. "They've been around for ages, of course, so, you can use this technique in practically any home, period or modern. For renters, it reduces the number of holes you poke in the wall - and landlords don't usually mind if you add moulding-type things to walls, it's a value-added situation for them. You can likely get permission fairly easily."

Period picture railing is readily accessible and easy to install. You can use pretty ribbon or cording to hang the pictures. Again, the formal factor goes up if you use a single type of material for hanging and you hang everything at the same height.

You can lower the formality of the grouping by mixing up your hanging material, lining things up through an imaginary middle line instead of strictly by the top edges of the pieces.

"Varying the height of the pieces - or even overlapping the artwork as in the hallway installation by NB Design Group - maintains the cohesiveness of the grouping in a bit less formal way," says Miller. "The NB Design Group's picture railing is in a hallway, where it's impossible to step back from the images, so, the smaller image sizes are very intimate, again encouraging the observer to move close and engage with the artwork."

Pretty hardware - the clips for the rail especially - allow you to play up a period home or, you can use shiny chrome and chain link for your industrial loft.

"This type of installation, the picture rail, is also available as 'gallery display,'" says Miller. "In the Inna Zimina room, for example, it's a very modern fixture, with integrated art lighting. This not only gives your room that more modern edge, it gives the displayed work that extra bit of importance. It's an invitation to step closer and have a good look - which is certainly not an invitation you'd extend for 'space-filler-to-match-the-carpet' type 'art.'"

An unusual form of "rail," it's actually a rod that hangs from the ceiling - just an inch or so off the wall - might also suit that more contemporary space.

"Two other advantages to picture rails," notes Miller, "First, if you have a tall wall, the rail



breaks up space, gives something horizontal for the eye to follow, especially if you paint the areas above and below different colours. Secondly, because of the ease of moving and changing images on the rail, you'll be more motivated to swap out whenever the mood takes you. No extra holes or fitting between other fixed pieces!"

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Many collected objects won't be easily squeezed onto the shallow shelf suitable for over-the-sofa use. That doesn't eliminate them from that valuable decorating real estate. It just changes how you work with the space.

The console table behind the couch in an open layout is a classic trick to break up space, provide convenient storage, and hold reading lamps. The same narrow table can also fit happily between your low-rise sofa and the wall. It doesn't even have to be a particularly pretty table!

What it does need to do is hold your precious objects at the right height for your couch - make sure you know the height of your couch back before you head for the store or the next yard sale.

Acting as a much more generous shelf, you can treat it as a larger version of the wall shelf, with fewer, but larger-scaled objects and artwork in your collection. This deeper space can accommodate much heavier items, however, so don't forget to think of the

possibilities for a single, large-scale object like a significant sculpture or architectural object.



"One of my clients spent forty years in the costuming business for theatrical films and stage," says Miller. "She put a half-mannequin on a table behind her sofa and regularly changed out the costume, adding set photos of the piece during filming or production, and autographed movie posters to the



wall behind. I don't think you could have a better ice breaker!"

Another client also took inspiration from his passion for his work as an industrial engineer. When his firm swapped out the workings for a hydro-electric project, he just couldn't send all the old gears to the scrap yard. He kept one of the "small ones," a massive seven-foot wheel of steel, and had it mounted on an industrial work bench behind the sofa in his man cave.

"There was no way you could ever have hung it from the wall or a ceiling - not without hiring another engineering company to redesign your residential construction," says Miller, "But, it was perfectly secure, and perfectly displayed, sitting atop a table the same depth and height as a

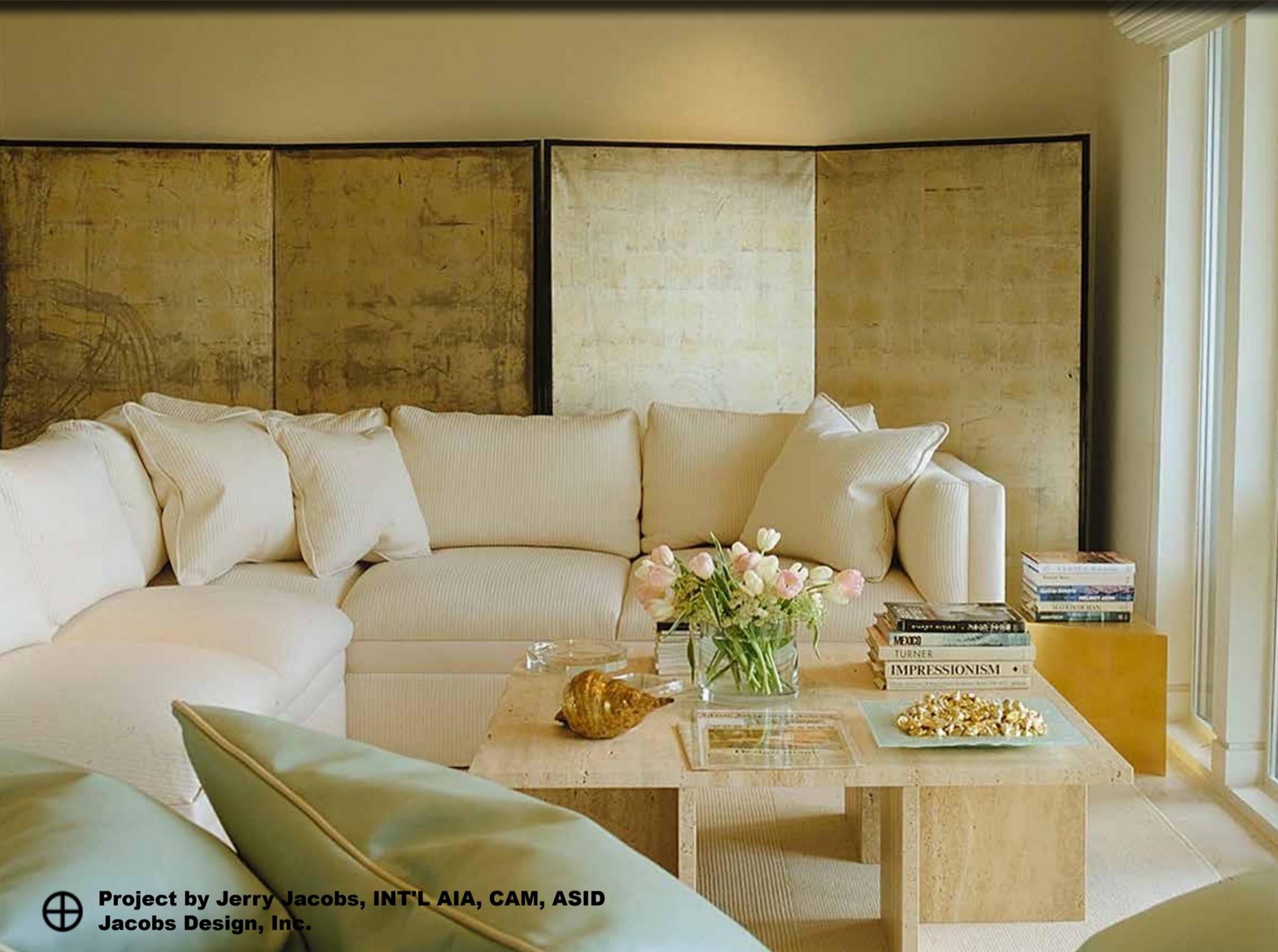
typical console table."

The scale is perfect as well - the "man cave" is a cathedral-ceilinged multipurpose room above the garage with 12' walls on two sides and an 18' peak on the opposite walls, giving them a soaring 15 feet of open wall above the leather couch that was a manly 8 feet long, but only 30 inches high at the back.

The client and his wife had been staring at that wall for a long time.

"Of course, not everyone has something that dramatic sitting in their backyard," notes Miller. "But, if your work is your pleasure, why not celebrate it with a significant display? Hunt out something that reflects your work or lifelong hobby and make it part of your home."

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⊕ Project by Jerry Jacobs, INT'L AIA, CAM, ASID
Jacobs Design, Inc.

This pair of authentic Meiji screens aren't an off-the-rack item, but do illustrate how it can be worth the wait to find the thing you love. Their beautiful "tarnished silver" surfaces will never go out of style, providing texture and presence - even coziness! - to this tranquil space by Jerry Jacobs Design. If something completely different is your goal, drop notes to designers, antique store owners and curators, and full-service supply or restoration firms whose product and work you like. Most keep a "want list" and are willing to keep you in mind if they stumble across that unique item. Be as specific as you can, and have a firm budget figure, so you won't waste one another's time with inappropriate finds.

Like the leaner mirrors and console tables that actually sit on the floor, other tall standing items can create focal points that are both interesting and uniquely yours.

"In this room by Jerry Jacobs Design, gorgeous Meiji screens have no obvious 'ornament,' but they lend warmth and create a snug room-within-a-room atmosphere. They provide a human scale while filling a considerable expanse of space," says Miller. "They're beautiful in the light from the windows, and would be

equally gorgeous illuminated at night. In this instance, the authentic ageing and texture are the decorative focus."

Other, more traditional screens, can fulfill the same function.

"Japanese paper screens, a well-worn painted piece in the French country style, or sheet metal joined with some heavy hinges for your industrial loft," suggests Miller. "The focus is the texture. Just bring your personal aesthetic to the material, whether bought or created, and you will add to the personal feel of your

space. It will give you pleasure."

One of Miller's clients salvaged the shutters from the family's seaside cottage. They'd been sitting in the garage for nearly a decade when he discovered them and created a screen to fill the space behind their sofa.

"It renews pleasant memories even in the middle of winter."

For another client, it was an opportunity to utilize a small amount of outrageously expensive wallpaper.

"She'd walked away from this particular silk wallpaper twice, just

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too far beyond her budget, but, she loved it," recalls Miller. "She'd just about decided to live on noodles for a month when it was bought up by someone else. She bought this one roll that was left in the remainder bin - even though it wasn't enough to do any room, or even a wall, in her home. She figured she'd use it on an old trunk or hatbox."

Instead, Miller swiped it and covered three hollow-core doors which he then hinged together with beautiful hardware.

"It's a punch of luxury that, now, she says makes her happier than if she'd had that silk room," says Miller. "She has that pop of beauty and it cost her less than \$100. No noodles."

With a little creativity, those hollow-core doors can become almost anything.

"You can create a changeable background for photographs, cover them with a beautiful fabric, have a favourite image blown up and wrapped around the panels, or, if you're an artistic person, work your own magic on these big canvases and share your talent."

Don't overlook other types of found objects.

"In this room, by ColePrevest, a twig screen has been created behind sofa," says Miller. "Here, it is being used as a divider as well, but, its visual interest is strong enough to stand as a decorative piece between the furniture and a normal wall."

This particular screen was created by the designer, and you can make your own version with local twigs collected on a walk, with bamboo from a nursery, or even dried grasses.

"Bark is a wonderful texture to add to rooms," says Miller. "There's a good reason why birch trunks are so often the subject of photographers - they're beautiful."

Some other tricks for great behind or above the couch displays may require a few extra DIY skills, even the attention of a contractor, but, they do add permanent value to a home.

Says Miller, "Wall niches are incredible display spaces but, in general, you will have to own the walls if you want this classic way to showcase your favourite art."

In many cases, narrow wall shelving is perfectly adequate, but, if sculpture - or any other 3D objects - are your passion, a niche may be a better way to show it off.

"First, the niche itself can be a classic marble or faux-finished plaster installation - which is great in a formal or period home, the niche itself is a great decorative addition," notes Miller. "Practically, it is a very safe space for objects,



and easy to illuminate, both of which may be important considerations for delicate pieces."

Miller advises this solution only if you're reasonably handy.

"You can buy the niches to install, and that's easy actually, but, where you may run into trouble is with the systems of your home. Do you know where the vents, electrical, and plumbing fixtures are behind your walls? If not, get someone in to find out before you open up walls," he advises.

"Another classic way to use that space behind the couch is with a tall bookcase wall," say Miller. "You can do it dead cheap - every student has! - with masonry stone and ordinary lumber. If you're in a man-cave space, in temporary digs, or just like that salvaged look, by all means, go for that. If your home is a rental, more contemporary, or a period property, investing in quality bookcases that can be mobile is also a great option. If, however, this is your forever home, you're a real lover of actual books, or you want the shelving to blend seamlessly into your existing woodwork, you'll want to have them built in place."

Miller is a fan of real books, and says, "There is little that says more about a person than their choice of reading material. Whenever I visit people with bookshelves, I browse. It is, perhaps, the most personal statement in your home, why not make it a focal point in the most visited room?"

While a large percentage of his clients hate that space above the couch, Miller loves it.

"Done well, it lets you share what you love! No downside to that!"

Where's the "Awkward Space" in Your Home?

That corner kitchen cabinet that nothing fits? The tiniest powder room on the planet?

The basement workroom-cum-exercise-room-cum-poker room-cum-kids' playroom?

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