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Home, Lawn and energy

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Go ethnic with your interior designing

From time to time, the interior design world features a certain culture as a hot new item. Some are simply fads; others evolve into trends. There are few, however, that remain due to their timeless combination of color, grace and artistry.

The last 40 years or so has certainly seen several distinctive ethnic styles capture the hearts of decorators, apparently for the long run. But an unusual and unforgettable one is the earthy yet symbolic designs of Africa.

Although African art pieces have been collected for around 100 years, it wasn't until the 1960s that a true appreciation for the style developed on a sustainable level. Today, those early pieces, often bought at markets on the African continent, can fetch thousands of dollars; many are worthy of museum placement. While finding African antiquities can prove difficult, they are available, though often expensive. Luckily, there is a good deal of exported materials to enable a homeowner to feature this lovely decor at a reasonable price.

To start, textured wallpapers, resembling reed or rough fiber, are available. These are complemented by borders of tribal designs, often a black pattern over natural dyes of gold, brown and ochre. When working with the floors and walls, remember that they should only help carry the overall style, not dominate it. There are plenty of accessories to fill and define the space.

Masks are a natural form of artistic expression in Africa, and the choices are endless. From Cameroon, there are beautiful bronze masks with fine detail; those of the Bamileke people feature striking distortions of the human face, often with the addition of horns or ritual scarification. The Yacuba masks from the Ivory Coast are perhaps not as defined, presenting arresting images of the face with the additions of textiles or natural fibers. For colorful masks, the Bobo people of Burkina Faso make slender, geometrically colored masks in red, white and blue.

Masks are perfect for wall hangings, producing a textured effect against a flat wall. But African carvings and sculpture make terrific accents and centerpieces for any room. The carved statues of the Hembra are immediately distinguishable as fine African art, and a 24" stool makes a great accent piece for any decor. The wooden carvings of the Kongo people are rich in detail, many containing subtle tribal symbols. The Toma of Liberia also produce wonderful wooden and stone carvings of distinction, as do the Sanaka and Senufo.

For fine furniture pieces, check out the chairs, desks and armoires from Morocco. The skilled use of fine hardwoods is the signature of Moroccan furniture makers, and many of their pieces are inlaid with other exotic woods or mother-of-pearl. Due to the strength of the Moroccan industry and exports, a combination of fine furniture and other African decor is easy to obtain.

Whether you're going for a look in just a room or overall, look to the continent of Africa...there are thousands of years of artistic history waiting to transform your space into an exotic and unforgettable oasis.

—By Daniel Aspell, special



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