

Love me, love my furniture

She can't stand his old recliner. He dislikes her art. How do couples in second marriages blend their stuff?

By Marilyn Gardner, Staff writer of The Christian Science Monitor / April 27, 2005

As an interior designer, Ronni Whitman sometimes helps couples in second marriages combine "his" and "hers" possessions into an artful mix of "ours." But when she married and began the same task herself, she faced a challenge: Her husband was firmly wedded to a large, unattractive chair from his previous home.

"He had the most awful faux leather recliner," says Ms. Whitman, interior design director for the Art Institute of California - Orange County in Santa Ana. "That was really tough for me to compromise on." But compromise they did, and eventually her husband agreed to have the recliner reupholstered.

In an era when remarriage is common and possessions are plentiful, deciding what to keep and what to jettison after saying "I do" can require diplomacy, patience, and perhaps a little friendly persuasion. Love may be lovelier the second time around, as the old song claims. But that doesn't mean the furniture, art, and bric-a-brac second-timers bring to their new nest always appear lovely to a new spouse.

Finding ways to integrate favorite belongings - and keep the peace - can be a delicate adjustment. "This is an important process," says Lisa Cohn of Portland, Ore., who remarried eight years ago. But with respect, flexibility, and inventiveness, she and others say, the results can be satisfying.

For Ms. Cohn and her husband, Bill Merkel, the process presented what she calls an "incredible challenge." Her young son didn't like Dr. Merkel's "scary" primitive art. She didn't like his 1960s-style orange-and-brown furniture. He found her simple furnishings plain.

As one solution, they created an "ours" living room with many new pieces. "We all shopped together for the furniture and some of the art," says Cohn, coauthor, with her husband, of "One Family, Two Family, New Family: Stories and Advice for Stepfamilies." They also established "his" and "hers" sections of the house, where each can display favorite pieces of furniture. The children's rooms include familiar belongings.

The couple also hired a moderately priced designer. "She took our very different styles in some of the rooms and was able to blend them," Cohn says. "Bill had a lot of bright color. We got rid of some of the orange. She found a way to mix his primitive artwork with my simple wooden furniture."

The designer also turned two empty walls into separate "museums," featuring old photos of parents, grandparents, and great-grandparents. Bookshelves display small objects, such as the silver elephants Cohn inherited from her grandmother.

Cohn, a self-described pack rat, has put some of her extra possessions in storage. "I didn't want him to tell me what to throw out," she says.

In her role as a designer, Whitman sees recurring patterns. "Usually it's the women who are attached to family photographs, family heirlooms, gifts from their children, and antiques that have been passed down," she says. Men keep artwork and objects they have collected in their travels - ceramic foo dogs or a Buddha they bought in Asia, for example.

Both sexes find it hard to part with furniture from their parents.

Whitman tells of a husband who inherited his father's bedroom furniture. His wife didn't like it, but he wanted to keep it. After having it refinished in a darker color with polished chrome hardware, the wife loved the new look.

As in many areas of life, a sense of humor proves invaluable as couples are deciding what stays and what goes. "Being able to laugh and keep the big picture in mind will help a lot in accepting his giant television with nine different remote controls and getting him to let you keep the antique chairs that look better than they feel," say April Masini, who writes an advice column called "Ask April."

She emphasizes the need for flexibility. "Agree to keep his lime-green recliner for 18 months, at which point you both go buy one together and give the old one to charity."

Or, "if you can't agree, and it's going to be a rocky road, agree to disagree and get rid of everything," Ms. Masini says. "Hold a giant garage or tag sale at both of your places on two consecutive weekends. You can even hire a company to hold the sale for you if you're too busy or too emotionally attached to your things. Use all the money to establish a 'Start Over' fund and buy new stuff."

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