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COLLEGE OF AGRICULTURE

Adding Beauty In Homes Through Decorative Objects



A bookcase arrangement showing occult balance.

The University of Nebraska Agricultural College Extension Service
and United States Department of Agriculture Cooperating
W. H. Brokaw, Director, Lincoln

*The common problem, yours, mine, everyone's,
Is—not to fancy what were fair in life
Provided it could be—but, finding first
What may be, then find how to make it fair
Up to our means: a very different thing!*

—ROBERT BROWNING

Adding Beauty In Homes Through Decorative Objects

RIZPAH A. DOUGLASS

MORE BEAUTY may be obtained by paying careful attention to the accessories or useful objects in our homes. This circular attempts to give some suggestions on how one may arrange small things in order to receive the most enjoyment from them when used as decorative objects.

Much interest may be created and new pleasure can be had by working out new arrangements that will reveal hidden or unobserved qualities of beauty in the objects used. Even a slight change in the placement of some of the objects may improve or correct an otherwise unsatisfactory arrangement. A better use of the things we have about us every day will increase their intrinsic value and give new zest for daily living.

A homemaker needs to know what to choose and what to discard among her decorative objects, but she also needs to know how to arrange them effectively. Every successful arrangement involves all of the principles of art and design. Thus a study of these art principles will help one to determine how to place decorative objects for beauty as well as for use. Grouping of the objects should be done in such a manner that they will harmonize with the furniture on which they are placed, as well as with each other.

Some Easily Applied Art Principles

Harmony is the art principle which produces an impression of agreement through the selection and arrangement of consistent objects and ideas. In choosing articles to be placed together, select those that have some likeness in texture. A coarse textile will not be in harmony with a piece of highly glazed pottery, silver, or delicate glass. Such a textile should be used with plain pottery, dull brass, and flowers with large leaves and blossoms, such as zinnias, gaillardias, or dahlias.

The leading lines of the group need to follow the shape of the object on which it is placed. The vertical lines in the objects in Figure 1 repeat the vertical lines of the bookcase and are therefore in harmony. The leading lines in Figures 2 and 3 are horizontal. Note that the objects on the mantel and buffet are so arranged that the eye moves easily from one object to the next in a direction parallel to the lines of the furniture upon which they are placed, and therefore are in harmony with it. The lines made by the objects grouped together should guide the eye toward the center of the group rather than away from it. The plant in Figure 4 is so placed that when one looks at it the eye is led away from the group, whereas in Figure 5 the movement of the eye is kept within the group. Notice also the pitchers in Figure 6. The handles are placed to hold the eye within the arrangement. If the handles were turned around the attention would be directed outward.

Unity is the keynote to every successful arrangement. The arrangement shown on the cover and in Figure 7 gives the appearance of a single unit that is restful and complete rather than a collection of individual, unrelated items. Where several small objects are to be grouped together the "unit" appearance may be accomplished by simply placing a tray or plate back of them. The lines of the tray keep the eye within the group, making it appear as a unit. Many times a picture, textile, or mirror hung above a group serves as the unifying force for the arrangement, as in Figures 1 and 8. Since its purpose is to hold the group together, each is hung close enough to the shelf or piece of furniture to make it definitely a part of the group. The picture in Figure 1 is in proper position to be a part of the group standing under it. The textile back of the clock in Figure 8 makes the group appear as one. Remove it and a feeling of unrelatedness of objects is immediately created. The objects on the bookcase in Figure 4 are placed so far apart that they seem to be isolated and to have no relation with one another. Figure 5 illustrates how the same objects may be rearranged to give them a definite relationship to each other, giving the effect of wholeness.

Proportion.—The ability to recognize fine proportion is valuable to the homemaker. The selection and arrangement of every article of home furnishing involve the power of judging proportions. Proportion refers to relationships in size, shape, color, light, texture, space and pattern. The relationship of spaces is probably the most prominent application of proportion in home decoration.

Decorative objects should be large enough for the space they occupy. Many errors are made in using together articles that are out of scale.

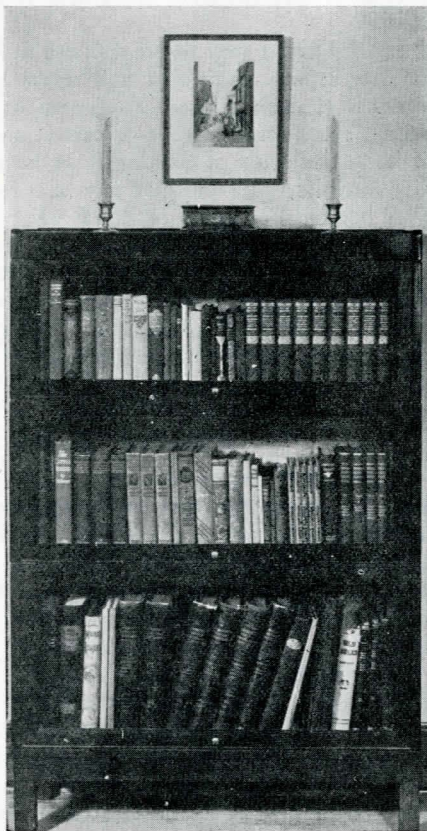


FIG. 1.—In this arrangement an effect of rhythm is obtained by using a horizontal shape between two verticals.

Some of the common mistakes are placing large lamps on small end tables, large pictures in small rooms, and tiny art objects on large pieces of furniture. If the objects are small, a number of them may be grouped together to gain the proper proportion in relation to the size of their surroundings.

Proportion is also expressed in a variation of heights and spaces. The placement of all objects at the same height or at the same level will make the room monotonous. Raising or lowering a picture so that it will not

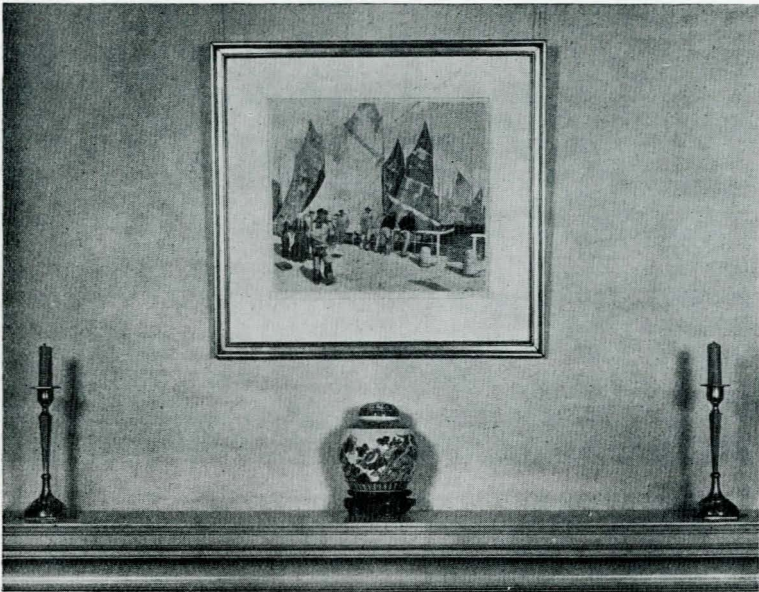


FIG. 2.—A mantel arrangement showing symmetrical balance.

be on a line with another object in the group may improve an arrangement. In Figure 1 the candlesticks and box are approximately the same height, but the candles extend the vertical line and prevent the monotony of a possible second horizontal line.

Balance.—A restful balance is obtained by grouping shapes and colors around a center in such a way that there is an equal attraction on each side of that center. When the objects are alike or attract equal attention, they are placed at an equal distance from a center. This is called formal or bisymmetrical balance. Examples of formal balance are seen in Figures 1, 2, 3, and 8.

If the objects differ in size, shape, or color, and thus are different in their ability to attract attention, they are placed at different distances from

a center. Such an arrangement is known as informal or occult balance. See Figures 5, 7, and the cover page.

In placing an arrangement in occult balance the smaller objects, or those attracting the least attention, are placed farther away from the center than are the larger objects or those with greater ability to attract attention.

Rhythm, in art, means an easily followed path along which the eye may travel in any arrangement of lines, colors, objects, or lights and darks. Rhythm, then, is related movement. It can also be found in regular repeated movement and in irregular flowing movement. The eye moves from one similar line or shape to another, thus producing a rhythmic effect.



FIG. 3.—A suitable arrangement for a buffet.

In Figure 7 a rhythmic line is produced by the direction of the stems of the bittersweet. The stems are so arranged as to form a transitional pathway for the eye to follow from one object to another, and at the same time they repeat lines in those objects. Notice that the bittersweet has been so placed that the tray might be eliminated without destroying the effectiveness of the arrangement.

In Figure 1 the horizontal box between the two vertical candlesticks forms a pathway along which the eye travels from one object to the other.

Varied shapes and heights are used in Figure 8 to produce a rhythmic effect. The textile repeats the same shape as the small silhouette plaques; thus the eye travels from one to another easily. The candlestick, the edge of the textile, the plaques, and the clock all repeat a vertical line, also forming a pathway along which the eye will travel easily.

Color.—Accents of bright color may be brought into a room by means of decorative objects. In a room where warm colors predominate, decorative objects in cool colors may be used to overcome or to prevent monotony. Likewise, warm colors in the form of decorative objects are appropriately placed in a room predominantly cool in coloring.

A harmony of colors may be produced within the individual group by the repetition of various hues. With a picture or some other object in the group serving as a foundation for the color scheme, the individual pieces in the group are selected to repeat the colors in the main object. In Figure 5 the flower pot and lamp shade repeat a soft yellow color found in the picture. The brass bell is the same color but more intense. The green in the plant is also a repetition of a color in the picture. Thus the picture builds up a color relationship between the several objects in the group.

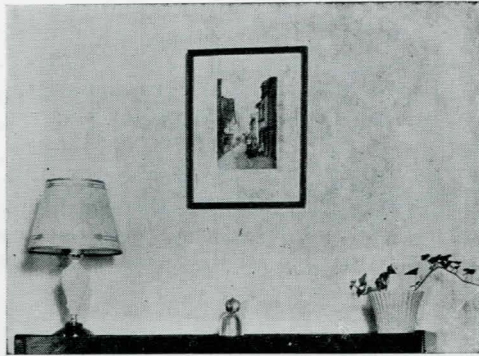


FIG. 4.—The objects in this arrangement on the top of a bookcase have been placed too far apart. They give no impression of unity. The lines of the plant carry the eye away from the center.

Selection of Decorative Objects

One should study carefully the articles that are to be used as decorative objects. Try them out on different pieces of furniture and in different groupings to see whether or not they add the right note of color and shape. The completed group should form a pleasing design and harmonize with the furnishings of the room.

Not all objects are suitable for decorative arrangements. While some have real art value, others kept for sentimental reasons or as souvenirs may have no artistic qualities. Well proportioned shape and simplicity of line are essential before an object can be said to be suitable for decorative use. After a study of the examples in Figure 10 it will be noted that Nos. 1, 2,

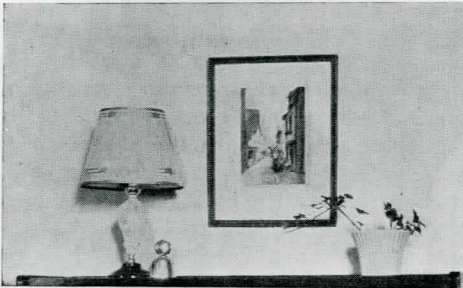


FIG. 5.—The "scattered" effect of Figure 4 has been remedied. The objects now appear to be balanced and belong together.

and 4 (from left to right) are simple in line and well proportioned. The decorative design on No. 4 has been made to follow the structural lines of the object. The pattern is conventionalized to fit the space it is to decorate and is subordinate to the shape of the vase. Vase No. 3 possesses none of the requirements of beauty. The decoration is an attempt to

copy the naturalistic form of a bird without regard to the purpose of the article. It has not been adapted to the shape of the vase nor to the flat surface on which it is placed.

Occasionally one side of the object is not decorated. The plain side may be nice in color and suitable for a decorative arrangement if only that side is seen.

Often appropriate and interesting articles that have been stored away and forgotten are really attractive and suitable for decorative purposes. An inspection of dishes, trays, glassware, textiles, and vases might bring to light some piece whose beauty might not otherwise be enjoyed. The



FIG. 6.—Either open or glass-doored cupboards may have a decorative quality, and should be arranged to create an attractive design.

articles pictured in Figure 9 were found in an attic. The milk-glass goblets and sugar bowl are suitable objects for an arrangement on a buffet. The blue plate and glass pitcher might be used as a part of an arrangement. The low glass dish filled with fruit would be most attractive on a buffet.

A consideration of the backgrounds against which the objects are to be placed is as important as the selection of the objects themselves. Any object will be seen to best advantage on a plain background or one of unobtrusive pattern, and of a color that is not too bright.

White is not satisfactory for a table cover in a living room. It is too light to harmonize with the dark colors used with it, and it soils too readily to be practical. The tans, grays, dulled blues, rose, or green make the most useful colors for backgrounds. The texture of the cover will depend upon the furnishings in the room. Furniture of fine finish and

delicate structural lines requires a fine-textured cover such as silk, pongee, or linen. Plain, more practical furnishings need a cloth of coarser texture, like monk's cloth, Osnaburg, or burlap.

The design on the table cover should be simple enough that it does not detract from the objects placed on it. It should be remembered that scarfs and covers are primarily a background against which other things are seen and should not compete with the decorative objects for attention.

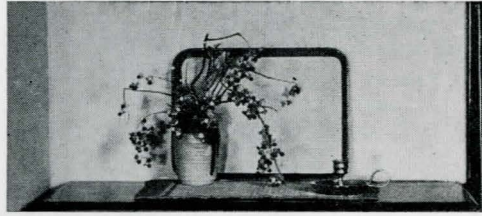


FIG. 7.—The horizontal tray placed back of the vase of bittersweet and the candlestick make the two appear as a unit.

Decorative Objects Meriting Special Mention

Books may be the most interesting and decorative of all the furnishings in the room. An open bookshelf containing varied colors and shapes of books creates a special cultural and home-like atmosphere. The few that are being read may be placed on the large table or on the end table. The rest should be on the book shelves. Place the largest books on the lower shelves, the darkest near the bottom and along the outside ends of the shelves, with the lighter colors toward the center.

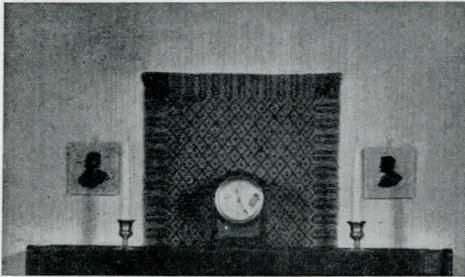


FIG. 8.—An interesting effect is obtained in this group by using varied heights and sizes in the arrangement.

Clocks are not necessarily decorative objects but since they are such an integral part of the household, they should be reckoned with to make them ornamental as well as useful. If the clock is a simple, dignified one of good structural lines and little decoration it will look well on a properly placed shelf, on the mantel, or on the top of the bookcase. A clock should not stand in front of and in competition with a picture. Often a textile either plain or with a very indistinct pattern makes an effective and well-shaped background for an arrangement containing the clock. See Figure 8.

Pillows for living rooms are best made of materials that harmonize in texture and color with the surrounding furnishings. Gay, gaudy pillows have no place in the ordinary living room. Their elaborate designs and intense color are disturbing, drawing attention to them unnecessarily. Use

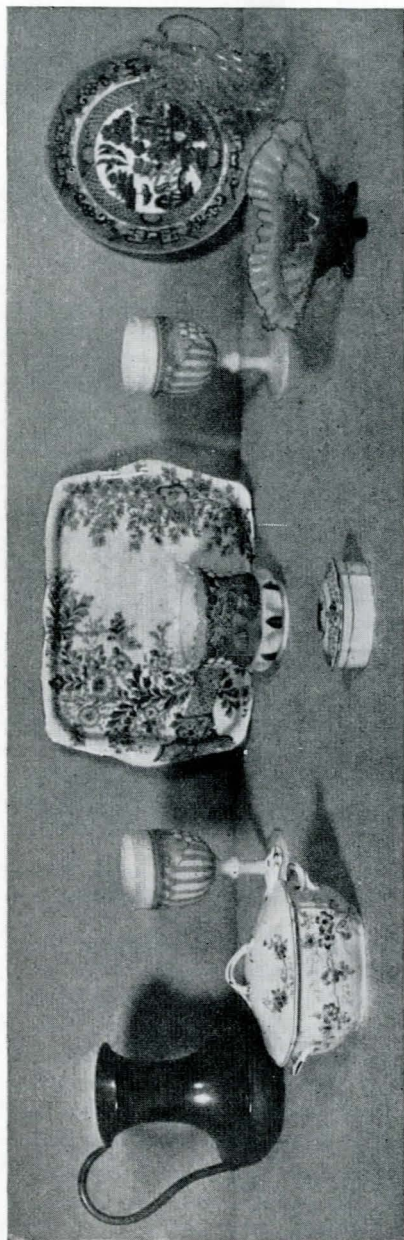


FIG. 9.—Objects suitable for decorative purposes may be found in almost any home.

pillows sparingly and only where they have some real use, as in a chair or on a davenport. Pillows that resemble an animal are suitable only in a child's room. In the bedroom, pillows may be lighter in color and gayer in design, but even here moderation should be used. Only a very few fancy pillows can be used successfully on a bed or in the bedroom.

Flowers are so commonly used as decoration in the home that they merit special mention. Select a vase that harmonizes with the flowers. It should be simple in line, well proportioned, and of a color that will not make it more conspicuous than the flowers in it. Earth colors—wood browns, soft dull blue, grayed greens, and dull black—are practical foundations for the usual flower arrangement. A clear glass vase is appropriate for delicate flowers such as bachelor buttons, sweet peas, petunias, and cosmos. The stems seen through the glass add interest to the arrangement. An opaque vase is better for flowers with coarse leaves and blossoms. The textures of the flowers and the vase are thus kept in harmony.



FIG. 10.—A collection of objects showing good and poor decoration.

The natural growth of the flowers suggests the type of vase in which they should be placed. Short-stemmed flowers should be put in low bowls, and long stems in tall vases. While short stems do not look well in tall vases, tall flowers may be used successfully in low bowls if the diameter of the bowl is large enough to give the impression of balance. Arrange the flowers in the container loosely, letting them follow their own graceful lines. Overcrowding and obvious balance are two of the most common faults found in flower arrangements. The blossoms should be at various heights and all of the colors distributed throughout. Avoid a great variety of colors and kinds of flowers in any one bouquet. About three different kinds of flowers in one arrangement are sufficient.

Pictures merit special mention, since they play such a prominent part in the decorative scheme of the home. They are seen at a better advantage if they are hung so that the center of interest comes at about the level of the eye. Sometimes it is desirable to have them lower than the eye level,

in order to form a group with a desk or table; or higher, as over a bookcase. See Figures 1 and 5. In these cases they are placed over the piece of furniture so that they will become an integral part of the furnishings of a room, rather than appearing to be isolated spots.

Small pictures are hung on a hook back of the picture so that no wire is visible. Large pictures sometimes need visible support. If a picture or mirror must be hung from the molding, it is well to use two hooks, one on each end of a long wire passing across the back of the picture. In this way the picture can be easily adjusted, and the ugly triangle caused by the use of one hook is avoided.

It takes two people to hang a picture, helping one another, to hold it in the space desired and to move it up and down or from side to side in order to determine just the right position in relation to the space and furnishings.

Mirrors and textiles may be used as effectively as pictures in a decorative arrangement, but whatever is used, whether it be a picture, a beautiful textile, or a mirror, it should be there for a definite purpose, and not just to fill a space.

The appearance of a home depends much upon the accessories. In selecting them there is an opportunity for creative expression. Adding beauty to our homes through the use of decorative objects is a fascinating study. Frequent changes in arrangements may be made which stimulate the interest of the family in their surroundings. Family living is thereby enriched by giving attention to the thoughtful choice and wise use of decorative objects.

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