

At Furniture Fair, Quiet Reflections and Slowing Sales

By BRADFORD MCKEE

FANTASY takes a furniture hunter only so far. In the vast maze of showrooms at the International Home Furnishings Market (12 million square feet in 188 buildings), which ended its fall run here yesterday, furniture makers spun sugary marketing reveries around their chairs, sofas or tea tables to make the merchandise seem desirable to the retail buyers passing through.

Mainstream furniture shoppers may need a little fantasy to loosen their wallets, but furniture makers themselves are staring at rude realities these days. Prices for raw materials such as foam and fabrics, not to mention the costs of freight, have risen sharply in recent weeks. Furniture sales are down this year, and retailers, who report big backlogs of products they can't sell, wonder where anybody finds a place to sit in such a hot housing market. The answer: Probably on the old stuff, which is looking good to consumers who may be mortgaged to the hilt and concerned more about the economy, the cost of fuel and vicious hurricanes than about redecorating.

Even before the storms hit, said Jerry Epperson, a furniture industry analyst with the investment banking firm of Mann, Armistead & Epperson, "2005 was a disappointing and frustrating year." Sales increased by 4.3 percent in the first half of 2005 over that of 2004, he said, compared with 7.9 percent a year earlier.

Margaret Russell, editor in chief of Elle Decor, noted the event's subdued atmosphere. "It was a quiet market," she said, "and given the state of the economy, I think that's perfectly understandable."

Slower sales and, as people here constantly noted, the competition from a big new furniture market that opened this summer in Las Vegas, may have contributed to the noticeably thinner crowds in showrooms and on the streets. Judy Mendenhall, the president of the High Point International Home Furnishings Market Authority, said attendance figures were not yet available, but said showrooms had reported traffic down by about 10 percent over recent markets. Some smaller retailers seemed to have stayed home to mind their stores. And furniture makers are left to think of what more they could do to attract business.

Perhaps they could do less — as in less fantasy marketing, for instance.

COCKTAIL HOUR

Clockwise from right: the Larkspur Bar Cabinet (\$1,450) by Martha Stewart for Bern-

hardt; a floating four-door cabinet with bronzed leather doors (\$8,000)

from the Fly collection by Arte Brotto;

Bolier & Company's flip-top Neos bar (\$2,400); Rachel Simon with

her Kimono lamps (\$180 to \$300) for Lights Up!



In a 12-million-square-foot universe, the stars are classics with a twist.



A number of new furniture lines at this market stood out by trading fairy escapist promises for sobriety, restraint and practicality in pieces that could speak clearly for themselves.

Of those pieces, not all came devoid of narrative, but they tended to be engrossing. Hickory Chair (hickorychair.com), an old North Carolina brand, went to a marquee name in American furniture connoisseurship, Albert Sack, and asked him to help derive a line from his favorite antiques. He did so with more sense than sentimentality.

The pièce de résistance of the collection, the Maryland High Chest (\$7,980), which towers at nearly 80 inches high, copies a classic work dating to around 1800. Its clean profile and geometric patterns suggest an early modernist rebellion in America against the more elaborate Europeans of the day. At a smaller scale, the collection includes the New York Candlestand table (\$1,050), which is 27 inches high with three legs, a minimally turned pedestal and a burst of striped mahogany on top.

Radically, and unlike most old-school furniture makers here, Hickory Chair no longer presents its new lines in neatly matching sets. "We've

started showing people you don't need to be modern or traditional, but you can mix them," said Jay Rearson, the company's president. Its showroom groupings combine pieces of disparate periods and personalities to offer more than a few ways to look at its product lines.

If customers are turned off by one piece of a matching line, the thinking goes, then they are likely to reject the line entirely. Matching suites work best when they have enough minor variations in details to show a family resemblance rather than monotony. A good example was the Fly line by the Italian company Arte Brotto (www.artebrotto.it), a sleek new line of wall cabinets, credenzas and tables that walk a studied line between classic and contemporary phrasing.

"The furniture flies on the wall," said Luisa Brotto, the company's representative, by way of explaining the line's name.

"Floats" might be more apt, but the woodwork's quality loses nothing in translation. With solid sides of golden European cherry wood (no veneers), the modular cabinets and shelves scarcely differ but for the bronze-ish leather covering one set of credenza doors, which also hap-

pened to have the most tenderly bowed fronts at this market. The prices run between \$7,000 and \$8,000 for that one and other large cabinets, but with the small, smoked-steel tongues as drawer pulls, the design was almost certainly one of a kind.

Quiet details are hard to find in the mass market — manufacturers seem to think the masses don't miss them. The slightest brass strips on a mahogany klismos chair (\$950) at Bolier & Company (bolierco.com) begin to decode a new collection by the designer John Black, called Neos, which supplies a modern answer to Regency lust.

to do, and with quality and prices that are on par.

At more populist prices — not to say cheap — there were shades of the mid-20th century creeping in, and some of it was convincing. At Lights Up! (lightsup.info), the designer Rachel Simon introduced a line of pendant drum lamps, called Kimono, in a patterned silk designed by Thomas Farnes. "It comes from an old kimono, and we blew it up," Ms. Simon said. The three-tiered drum version (\$300) has silhouettes that suggest classic Art Deco; table lamps in a companion set sit on delicate tripods (the large version is \$250; the smaller, \$180). Martha Stewart revealed a soft spot for casual early and mid-century design in a new line called Opal Point, her fourth with Bernhardt Furniture (bernhardt.com).

The collection's centerpiece, a bar cabinet called Larkspur (\$1,450) of dark primavera wood with doors inlaid with strips of nickel, looks far more glamorous than anything in Ms. Stewart's previous lines based on her homes in the Northeast. For one thing, it has a mirrored inside.

In a more modest mood, the Penelope desk chair (\$660) puts a mahogany finish on a rubberwood frame, with faceted, tapered legs topped by a dart detail that asks to be overlooked; it was shown upholstered in a gunmetal shade of velvet, and the seat was softly padded without fluff.

Fantasy took a holiday at the showroom of Mitchell Gold + Bob Williams (mgandbw.com). Every season, this design house turns out tons of new pieces with a seasoned pop sensibility and names many of them as if they were children — so many that they must surely live in a shoe.

So what to do? There are many possibilities. Messrs. Gold and Williams rolled out sofas with seats 45 inches deep for slouching. They had stiff-spined "conversation" chairs to promote good posture. And there was the deeply tufted leather library chair, the Earl (\$1,495), as cozy as sitting on someone's lap. The armless Brady sectional (\$1,495), 90 inches long, has a tight profile, almost no embellishment and it bends, but just barely, at its two-thirds point, like a boomerang. That sense of control extended to the company's lighting, especially the Sela glass table lamp (\$169), a 27-inch-high clear teardrop with a white drum shade. No words and no tickets to paradise. It's that

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