

## LIVING COLOR

BY LAURA FENTON

# BETTING ON BROWN

This earthy hue is having a moment.

The new brown look is organic, sophisticated, and thoroughly modern.

In the nearly two years that we've run our Living Color column, we've explored shades from blush to indigo (and even black and white), but we've never tackled nature's most abundant hue: brown. When it comes to decor, brown is often associated with outdated styles like the kitsch of the 1970s or the heavy, wood-filled interiors of the Victorian period. However, earlier this year, designer Justina Blakeney, who is known for her nature-inspired style, forecast brown's resurgence. "I think we're going to see a return of earthy browns in 2022—from cognac to burnt umber," she predicted to *Vogue*. There's a reason earthy browns are having something of a renaissance. Designers are revisiting brown for the same reasons that they have embraced all different shades of green in recent years: it reminds us of the natural world.

Brown is a color that immediately calls to mind the outdoors. It's the color of wood, nuts, feathers, and stones, and of earth itself. It is, literally, a grounding color. That rooted, earthy quality of brown is also perfectly suited to the organic minimalism that has been trending in recent years. Unlike the all-white interiors that we think of as "minimalist," organic minimalism is full of texture, contrast, and a wide variety of neutral, natural hues. Within this context, medium to dark browns offer visual contrast without the full harshness of black. Here's how to use walnut, chocolate, and umber in your home.

### Play up original materials.

In Maine, wood often appears in the bones of historic homes and barns as floors, beams, and siding. Rather than paint over or refinish these elements, consider layering additional shades of brown in your home for a rich tapestry of nutty hues. In a 150-year-old barn in the Boothbay region, Knickerbocker Group left the original materials to speak for themselves, adding a chestnut velvet sofa and a chocolate velvet ottoman. Julien Jalbert, the architect on the project, points out, "The majority of browns in this renovated barn are the original materials from the 150-year-old structure. The pine-board sheathing and the original wood have an inherent warmth."

### Create a memorable space.

When designer and blogger Julia Marcum of *Chris Loves Julia* painted her serene white bedroom in Farrow and Ball's London Clay, a rich brown, she covered the walls, mouldings, and ceiling in the hue. The result was a dramatic transformation of the space without changing a single piece of furniture. "It feels romantic, earthy, and memorable," she wrote of the change. "I know a retreat is typically bright and airy, but this is my kind of retreat—a romantic getaway from the rest of the house."



PHOTO: JEFF ROBERTS



PHOTO: COURTESY OF MC DESIGN



PHOTO: CHRIS LOVES JULIA



PHOTO: NISHTHA SADANA

### Give antiques a new life.

Brown-wood antiques can look dowdy in the wrong setting, but with the right room composition, they can look fresh. (Read about the return of "brown furniture" on the following page.) Designer Darryl Carter famously achieves this balance in his spare and elegant interiors. The trick, he says, is to place antiques among contemporary furnishings with simple, timeless silhouettes: say, a clean-lined sofa with a more classic antique chair. Carter also leans toward neutral-toned upholstery for a hushed, lasting look.

### Update your gray rooms.

Gray spent a decade as one of the most popular colors for walls, sofa upholstery, and cabinets. If you embraced the color but are now feeling ready for a change, don't repaint just yet. Try updating your room with brown accents instead. Nishtha Sadana, an e-designer, paired a gray sofa with a brown occasional chair and art that incorporates both colors for an of-the-moment design.

### Create a zen vibe.

Sadana is a fan of the calming "Japandi-style," which combines ele-

ments of Japanese and Scandinavian design. In a recent living room design, she created the look with a palette of brown and gray, but she notes that you must be careful "not to overwhelm the space with dominant browns." Instead, brown is used as an accent in the strictly neutral palette.

### Think nature-inspired colors.

"Brown is so prominent in nature that it plays well with other colors found in the natural world," says Andrea May, the founder of Andrea May Interiors in La Jolla, California. May likes mid and dark browns with saturated blues and greens (the ocean and forest), pastel pinks (sunset and flower petals), and what she calls "Jordan almond green" (spring leaves).

### Try a spin on black and white.

A foolproof way to play with deep shades of brown like chestnut and burnt umber is to pair them with whites. "It's a softer alternative to black and white and brings a natural element without being too crunchy," says May. Look for clean whites that skew a little warm to keep the softness but maintain the contrast.

(Opposite, from top) Reclaimed antique pine beams lend warmth to the great room of this home designed by Knickerbocker Group; a pair of chocolate brown leather armchairs grounds the seating arrangement by the granite-clad fireplace. For a home situated among lush trees Los Angeles-based interior designer Megan Dufresne, principal designer at MC Design, used brown to enhance a color connection to the outside; against the white walls, the brown accents create contrast and add warmth. In what was once a white-walled space, light-colored lamps, art, and bed all pop against the brown walls of design blogger Julia Marcum's moody bedroom.

This Japandi-style living room designed by Nishtha Sadana shows how browns and grays can pair in a thoroughly modern way (above).

## LIVING COLOR

### Is “Brown Furniture” Back?

If you’ve ever heard anyone use the phrase “brown furniture,” you’ve probably intuited that the phrase is derisive. You also likely knew what “brown furniture” meant: antiques made from wood (think walnut, rosewood, and mahogany) that, frankly, have been out of style for decades. But grandma’s breakfront is becoming a hot commodity.

Designers have been speculating about a return of “brown furniture” for years, but it’s only more recently that this has come true. Online marketplace 1stDibs has seen an uptick in the sales of early-twentieth-century reproductions of nineteenth-century furniture. Brown furniture’s newfound popularity is at least in part because these pieces are affordable (having been out of fashion for so long). Additionally, younger consumers, in particular millennials who are now furnishing their family homes, crave the solidity and patina that antiques lend a room (IKEA furnishings they are not).

If you’re reconsidering heirlooms that have been gathering dust, designers recommend using brown furniture sparingly and selectively, one piece or two per room, not a whole room full of wooden antiques. Pair them with contemporary furnishings, art, and architectural elements, and you’ll be seeing your brown furniture in a whole new light. **MH+D**



PHOTO: AMY OWEN

“When I walk into a home, I want to see brown furniture,” says Georgia-based interior designer Lauren Robbins. To keep it looking fresh, Robbins styles antique chests with modern lamps and contemporary mirrors.

**Words for the color brown often come from drinks. In the eastern Mediterranean, the words for brown are derived from “coffee,” and in Japan, the character for brown means “the color of tea.”**

### Palette Picks



**Farrow & Ball London Clay**  
A deep, rich mahogany brown with purple undertones



**Clare Coffee Date**  
Bold and complex, a dramatic choice



**Benjamin Moore Clinton Brown**  
Part of the Historical Collection, a classic chocolate brown



**Benjamin Moore Middlebury Brown**  
A cool, dark brown with lots of gray in it



**Sherwin-Williams Black Fox**  
A deep gray-brown that has a hint of black in the undertone

## Color Curated

*You'll get serious decor brownie points for these nine chocolate finds*



**Always There Lounge Chair in Natural Oak Rum, \$1750**  
Sundays // [sundays-company.com](https://sundays-company.com)



**Easy Edge Media Unit in Brown Oak, \$1250**  
Sundays // [sundays-company.com](https://sundays-company.com)



**The Core Set (16 pieces) in Canyon, \$240**  
Year & Day // [yearandday.com](https://yearandday.com)



**Cacao 100% French Flax Linen Sheet Set, \$240 and up**  
Bed Threads // [bedthreads.com](https://bedthreads.com)



**Wild Ginger Throw, \$225 and up**  
Bunny Williams Home // [bunnywilliamshome.com](https://bunnywilliamshome.com)



**Wire Frame Bin, \$199**  
Schoolhouse // [schoolhouse.com](https://schoolhouse.com)



**Rotolo Espresso Brown Velvet Daybed, \$1799**  
CB2 // [cb2.com](https://cb2.com)



**Marlow 1-Light Woven Rattan Shade Pendant, \$89.99**  
Globe Electric // [globe-electric.com](https://globe-electric.com)



**Egg Chair & Foot Stool, price upon request**  
Fritz Hansen // [fritzhanzen.com](https://fritzhanzen.com)