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Home Decor Fades to Black As Fashion and News Get Dark

By June Fletcher

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Interior design is going over to the dark side.

After years of favoring pale woods, bleached floors and taupe color schemes, furniture and decor companies are getting back to black -- and brown and grey. The new interior hues come as the fashion industry is making its own shift toward somber shades, but some homeowners credit another influence: At a time of economic and political uncertainty, they say, darker colors reflect the mood and help to create a comforting retreat. Home decorators are embracing the new look, putting black-flocked wallpaper in the bedroom, deep-bronze faucets in the bathroom and shiny brown countertops in the kitchen.

Kraftmaid has just introduced Venica, a line of black kitchen cabinetry, and Hunter Douglas has rolled out new window shades in colors such as Fossil, Granite and Henna. Pottery Barn's new ebony and mahogany furniture collection includes \$1,600 wine bars, \$800 bookcases and \$700 pedestal tables, while Storehouse has introduced its "smoky charcoal" dining room, where everything from buffets to side chairs is done up in dusky hues.

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The look has even trickled down to sinks and faucets. Kohler is now selling sinks for the kitchen in "black black" and for the bath in "igneous black." Moen says sales of its Glacier white kitchen bar and sink faucets dropped 20% in 2005 from the year before and bright polished brass was down 75%, while dark oil-rubbed bronze finishes more than tripled and wrought-iron finishes were up 18%. The company released a new pewter faucet last month,

which it showcases on its Web site in a black sink.

From Blonde to Brunette

Some industry observers connect the shift to the fashion world's marked turnaround, with deep greys, burgundies and blacks replacing the colorful prints and frills that dominated the last decade. It also comes as consumers are tiring of the ubiquitous blonde furniture long promoted by retailers. "It's human nature to want something different," says New York interior designer Miles Redd, who has created all-black kitchens and aubergine libraries. Others say the impulse is a response to jitters about stagnating incomes, plane crashes and terrorism, and a desire to create womblike refuges.

That's what inspired Lew Oliver. When the urban planner moved into his new Atlanta town house two months ago, he decided not to recreate the off-white kitchen he had in his old place. Instead, he decorated his new one to look like a "dark cave." The walls, cabinets, countertops and trim in his combined kitchen and great room are a deep brownish black, and his floors and ceiling are honey brown. The only things that reflect light are the pewter-colored roofing tiles that serve as a backsplash and his glossy black piano.

"It's all about comfort," he says. "The world is so turbulent now."

Numerous studies over the years have examined the relationship between color preferences and emotions: Yellow is associated with cheerfulness, and green with relaxation, for example. But while colors can elicit both positive and negative feelings depending on their shade, in general when people prefer light colors, they tend to be in happy moods; when they prefer dark, they're often sad or worried. "Color affects what you think, believe and are feeling," says Brian Cronk, a cognitive psychology professor at Missouri Western State University in St. Joseph, Mo., who has studied the relationship between color and emotions.



Lew Oliver's kitchen in brown, honey and pewter.

Beth Greene, spokeswoman for Kravet/Lee Jofa, a Bethpage, N.Y., fabric maker, often speaks to interior design and trade groups about these connections. She says demand currently is highest for furnishings in the deepest shades of black, brown, navy and charcoal -- suggesting, she says, that people are feeling a bit depressed about current events and are seeking reassurance. She recently redid her own beige family room with chocolate walls, dark-stained bookcases and brown leather chairs. "It makes me feel hugged," she says.

Similarly, Behr Process Corp., a Santa Ana, Calif., paint and stain maker that sells exclusively through Home Depot, says earthy colors like Brown Teepee are currently strong sellers. Sherman Williams, meanwhile, says sales of its deep brown Turkish Coffee paint was up 24% in the first six months of the year, while Inkwell (a deep blue-based black) and Cyberspace (deep gray with blue undertones) both showed 19% gains. Overall, the company's sales were up 11% over the same period.

There are drawbacks with fading to black. Pricy pieces can haunt a home long after the trend passes -- in five years' time, a black sink may seem as outré as a pink bathtub does today. Also, dark surfaces don't necessarily go with everything, designers say. Walls painted in deep hues can visually swallow up dark-toned furniture and accessories. And the shiny surfaces that are often included in dark-toned rooms to add some sparkle also show more smudges, scratches and dust.

Patrick Stolarski discovered this two months ago when he spent \$15,000 to redo his basement family room with cocoa-colored walls and a bar with a gleaming black Corian countertop. The Olmsted Falls, Ohio, technology consultant says he and his wife wanted a change from the living room's beige walls, gold curtains and pale sage sofa. "We played it safe upstairs," he says. "Here we wanted to take a chance." They don't regret the decision, he says, even though the black countertop needs more cleaning, wiping and polishing than the lighter one in the kitchen. The family room, where they watch TV on a big screen, "feels warm and cozy."

No More Taupe

Dark tones haven't been in vogue in home decorating since the late '80s, when forest greens and wine-dark burgundies reigned, and living rooms looked like 19th-century hunting lodges. Evanston, Ill., interior designer Ingrid Koepcke, who recently redid her own kitchen in a black wallpaper with a floral design, says the new hues seem dramatic after a generation of beige and watered-down pastels. They're especially popular with younger homeowners, she says, many of whom grew up in taupe-toned Tuscan-style decor but are buying midcentury modern and contemporary furnishings that look better against bold backgrounds. "People don't want what their mother had," Ms. Koepcke says.

But for some, the dark look can be overdone. A little over a year ago, New York architect Anthony Montalto spent \$150,000 to have his 700-square-foot apartment outfitted with custom-built cabinetry in

slate, deep brown and black.

Then he got married. One of his first fights with his bride was over whether she could bring in a red towel, which he felt would ruin the "soothing, mellow" ambiance. "I wondered, would we ever be able to have any color in here?" says Allison Montalto, a business development executive. Mr. Montalto won that fight but the mood in the house turned, well, black. So now, prominently displayed on the kitchen countertop is a red electric mixer.

Email your comments to june.fletcher@wsj.com.

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