

a dressing down

Pared-down elegance, superlative materials and a high level of customisation are the three qualities that define today's most desirable dressing tables. Nicole Swengley reports.

FINANCIAL TIMES how to spend it



A glamorous dressing table, made bespoke to suit a client's personal requirements, is the smart choice for homeowners who want to combine intimacy with practicality – especially now that dressing tables are not always used merely for grooming. Of course, antique dressing tables are still popular. Tara Bernerd, CEO and head of design at interiors company Target Living, for example, has a Louis XV dressing table in her own bedroom. However, homeowners are increasingly choosing to commission a contemporary design, custom-specified down to the last centimetre. As interior designer Martin Brudnizki – who recently created a chic dressing table in bleached oak for a modern apartment (price on request) – puts it, “People use their dressing tables in different ways, so everyone wants a specially tailored design.”

Bespoke-furniture maker David Linley, chairman and founder of Linley, notes that dressing tables are very intimate, which is why people want to personalise them. “One client was such a Chanel devotee that she asked us to measure her cosmetics and perfume bottles and customise the drawer interiors accordingly,” he says. “We’ve even been asked to embellish tables with marquetry motifs ranging from a couple’s entwined initials to good-luck symbols such as pineapples.” (Linley dressing tables range from about £13,000 to £35,000.)

Shape and materials are usually the first considerations. “Some clients want a



Left: walnut and antique-mirror dressing table by Julian Chichester, with Aiveen Daly chair (both to order through Joanna Trading). Above: bespoke Taylor Howes dressing table, with chair by Baker.

in the 1940s – is partly prompted, says furniture designer Tim Gosling, “by notions about Hollywood film stars’ dressing tables. Indeed, we’re currently designing a 1940s-style dressing room for a north London house where the dressing table is based on furniture used aboard the ocean liner *SS Normandie*.”

Another of Gosling’s clients requested a contemporary art-deco look. So, inspired by the late French designer Jacques-Emile Ruhlmann, he built the dressing table in rosewood with a vellum top. The design has mirror-fronted drawers and bevelled glass facets along its curved front edge, while bone-edged feet draw the eye to its graceful reeded legs (£28,200). Equally luxurious is a contemporary-looking design in sycamore with a burr ash top. A wavy groove inlaid with silver leaf runs down the pedestal, acting as a drawer handle and offering a delicate nod to art-deco styling (£25,850). (Another art-deco design is pictured on previous page.)

Some clients want to evoke early-20th-century glamour quite literally. Designer Suzy Hoodless sourced vintage trunks for a spacious dressing room belonging to professional academics. “They wanted the dressing room stacked with luggage to use as storage,” she says. “We stood some very large trunks on their ends, slightly ajar, to act as hanging space, then created a dressing table from one trunk laid horizontally across some others at an appropriate height. We added a 1940s leather-bound mirror, and they keep cosmetics and bottles out on the surface. It’s a fun, adventurous and imaginative idea, which looks great and is very practical.” (Bespoke prices on request.)

While the golden days of travel prompted that scheme, the influence of contemporary six-star hotels inspires others. Clients increasingly specify super-deep drawers for hairdryers and hair straighteners, through which they are permanently attached to wall sockets. But that’s not all. “One client wanted a drawer with a tiny fridge where she could store her perfume,” says Howes. “Another

design that looks like a leather-topped desk; others want a more decorative piece with lots of internal and external compartments,” says William Yeoward, home product designer and creative director of his eponymous company. “The consensus, however, is for a smart, pared-back, almost masculine look – not an upholstered frivolity with skirts and frills. People want to see the grain of the timber and the sheen of a nickel trim.”

Yeoward has recently completed several designs in fine-grain rosewood stained a soft grey. “Natural English chestnut, also stained grey, is popular because it has a big grain and wonderful figuring,” he says. Drawer specifications, meanwhile, vary widely. “Some people want them deep enough for bottles, while others want lots of internal compartments or just an empty space, but in all cases they want self-closing mechanisms with a smooth glide and click.”

Men are as keen on bespoke grooming areas as women. “One couple in London wanted a slick, contemporary dressing table that resembled a partners’ desk,” says Yeoward. “We built it in grey chestnut with a black leather top inlaid with a polished nickel band. Although the surface was unified, there were different types of drawers on each side. His were very thin. Hers were very deep. The mirror was freestanding and stood sideways, so they could share it [£9,910].”

Similarly, interior designer Emily Todhunter has designed co-ordinating his-and-hers dressing tables with suede-lined drawers for Raymond Blanc’s Le Manoir aux Quat’Saisons hotel. And for a private residence, she turned a vintage

One of Channels’ clients, a City lawyer, took enormous care over the specifications – he even measured the height of his wife’s face-cream jars.

Chinese cabinet into a his-and-hers dresser (conversion less than £1,000). “My clients wanted to stand opposite each other and chat while grooming, so I adapted a tall, black-lacquered chest with drawers on each side and put a pair of freestanding mirrors on top,” she says.

Still, men increasingly want their own grooming space. “Just as the allocation of his-and-hers wardrobe space is now 50-50 in a master suite, we’re expecting to create an equivalent ratio of bespoke dressing tables in the future,” says Karen Howes, founder director of interior design company Taylor Howes. She is currently working on a commission from a male City executive for a dressing table in ebony macassar with red-lacquer-lined drawers in which to keep his watch rolls (about £10,000): “The dressing table has cable management for a computer screen where you’d normally have a mirror, because the first thing he does each morning is look at Bloomberg,” says Howes. “It’s shaped like a desk, too, with four drawers either side of the knee-hole and a slim one in the middle.”

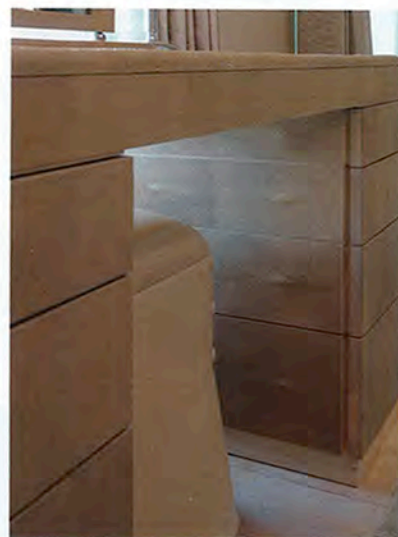
Joanna Wood, director and lead designer at Joanna Trading, agrees that men are just as specific about their requirements as women: “We recently built a dressing table with 12 graduated drawers for a male client. The top drawer has compartments for his rings. The

next, slightly deeper one is for his cuff links. The third is for his watches and electric winders, the fourth for his socks, and so on. It’s topped by a mirror with integrated low-voltage lights behind a glass edge and looks fabulous.” (The budget for this was about £8,000.)

“Dressing tables have changed in style, but are still very much in demand,” she adds. “When we design a master bedroom, we find that eight out of 10 clients want a dressing table. If it’s in a dressing room, they usually specify lots of drawers. If it’s in the bedroom, they tend to want a sleeker design that looks sexy and sensual as well as being functional – so we use luxurious materials such as shagreen or bleached and grey-stained hardwood or ebonised wood combined with mirror finishes for a really glamorous look.” (A mirrored example is pictured above left.)

Bernerd agrees that “an elegant dressing table is a wonderful excuse for using beautiful, unusual finishes. We recently put one in a walk-in dressing room in a Hong Kong apartment that’s covered in off-white leather vellum to match the wardrobe doors. It has a lift-up lid concealing a mirror and discreet, purple-velvet-lined drawers on either side.” (Bespoke prices on request.)

The current demand for shagreen, lacquer and vellum – materials popular



This picture and right: Gosling art-deco-style dressing table and mirror, wrapped in shagreen skin with sycamore details.

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Left: Linley dressing table/writing desk in sycamore, with lift-up mirror and secret drawer in frieze.

wanted a minibar." (Commissions like these cost between £6,000 and £8,000.)

Naturally, such requests affect the look and design – particularly when one client requested a drawer for a safe. "It meant the dressing table had to be much heavier and fixed to the floor and wall for insurance purposes" (and cost £8,000-£10,000). A better option, Howes believes, is an elegant design like the one she made in polished mahogany for a client in Connecticut. "Two drawers on each side are lined with quilted suede, so she can move her jewellery easily from a safe to the dressing table."

Not everyone uses a safe, though. Linley was asked to create a secret dressing-table drawer on a push-catch mechanism. "My client wanted to use it for her rings, so we concealed it in the fluting. It was much less obvious than a jewellery box," he says. This particular dressing table also doubles as a desk. The mirror is on the inside and the top has a leather writing surface (pictured above). "Quite a few clients like this versatility and we made a version for another client with drawers concealing suspended files on one side and drawers for accessories on the other," says Linley. Similarly, a client commissioned Gosling to create a dressing table that also housed a laptop and stationery (about £27,600).

This high level of customisation explains why interior designers find it difficult to source "off-the-peg" dressing tables. "Even when we've found a good design, it generally turns out to be the wrong scale for the client's property or lacks cable management," says Howes. In any case, many clients want site-specific designs. "One wanted a dressing table located at the foot of her bed in front of a wall-hung plasma television. We designed it with a lift-up top and interior mirror so that, when it's closed, the TV remains visible from the bed [about £5,000; pictured on previous page]."

Furniture makers are often asked to customise dressing tables for anniversary gifts. No detail, it seems, is overlooked by the giver. Channels, which makes its Gillespie design to order in walnut (£1,705) or natural oak (£1,550), with custom-design options for the storage compartment, was commissioned by a

City lawyer who "took enormous care over the specifications – even down to measuring the height of his wife's face-cream jars", says Marylois Chan of Channels. "He also requested a matching walnut stool to house a hairdryer with cable management in its top [£500]."

A City executive recently asked furniture maker Benchmark to customise its Kay & Stemmer-designed dressing table. The standard design is lacquered walnut with pink leather interior and two deep compartments with sections for cosmetics and a lid concealing a mirror and jewellery compartments (£3,995). "Instead, he wanted a lighter timber – they live in a light penthouse apartment full of pale colours – so we used sycamore," says Sean Sutcliffe, who runs the Berkshire-based company with Terence Conran. "He chose a duck-egg-blue interior – his partner's favourite colour – and specified the drawers should come with cable management [£4,795]."

Homeowners undoubtedly want their dressing tables to look fabulous, but they also view them as a lifestyle management necessity. "People are prepared to spend freely on a bespoke design because it ultimately saves on time and stress, and they know they will use it every day," says Howes. It's also, as Sutcliffe observes, "a gorgeous object of desire". ♦

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Benchmark, Bath Rd, Kintbury, Berks RG17 9SA (01488-658 184; www.benchmarkfurniture.com).

Channels, 1-3 New King's Rd, London SW6 (020-7371 0301; www.channelsdesign.com). **Gosling**, 4 Old Town, London SW4 (020-7498 8335; www.tgosling.com). **Joanna Trading**, 7 Bunhouse Pl, London SW1 (020-7730 0693; www.joannatrading.com).

Linley, 60 Pimlico Rd, London SW1 (020-7730 7300; www.davidlinleyfurniture.com) and branch. **Martin Brudnizki**, Chelsea Reach, 79-89 Lots Rd, London SW10 (020-7376 7555; www.mbds.net). **Suzy Hoodless**, 020-7221 8844, www.suzyhoodless.com. **Target Living**, 6 Burnhall St, London SW3 (020-7351 7588; www.targetliving.com).

Taylor Howes, 29 Fernshaw Rd, London SW10 (020-7349 9017; www.taylorhowes.co.uk). **Todhunter Earle Interiors**, Chelsea Reach, 79-89 Lots Rd, London SW10 (020-7349 9999; www.todhunterearle.com).

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