

The Stylist's Eye

Ever wonder why decorators' rooms look so polished? Designer Chris Madden shows how to add those critical finishing touches

Still life painters and interior designers share a key skill: the ability to arrange a surface so that the eye is constantly engaged, delighted, and even surprised. When the rest of us attempt to create an intriguing tablescape, our efforts tend to look either scattered or crowded. But mastering the art of the accessory—truly, the stylist's secret weapon—is easier than it looks. There are some fairly simple rules to help guide your selections and technique, says style guru Chris Madden: "First, choose a theme—something important to you or appropriate for the setting. That will make it easier to select the right objects. Next, have a focal point around which you can arrange everything else. Finally, mix hard and soft textures." Read on to see these tips in action.



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dressing the mantel

The focal point should be bold, says Madden, whether that's a mirror, artwork, or even strong stonework. If you've chosen a painting, you might pick up your theme from its subject. Case in point: *At left*, faux fruit and an empty porcelain bowl are whimsical reminders of the still life hanging above. Also, decide whether you want a symmetrical arrangement (always more formal), or a casual, asymmetrical scheme. And have some fun with it. "I like to mix high and low," says Madden. "Both in actual height, and in style—like the terracotta pots beside the 18th century porcelain urns," *above*.



arranging a tabletop

“Objects on a table need a sense of organization,” says Madden. “Otherwise they will look haphazard.” Start with a clear tabletop, so you have a fresh palette to work with: “I sometimes put everything I’m thinking of using in a laundry basket, so it’s all together in one place.” Choose elements with an eye to a specific theme: reading and writing on a library table, for instance, or souvenirs from family travel on a side table. And bring out your collections, Madden advises. “Why leave your wedding presents packed away someplace? Keep them out where you can see and enjoy them every day.” Begin your arrangement by deciding what your high point will be—a pair of lamps, a pitcher, a sculpture—and then work down from there, creating different levels of display with stacks of decorative books, footed plates, and trays (doubly useful as anchors on a large, open surface). Finish with flowers or a plant, to add life to your style.



1. *Opposite:* Exotic accents, from a tray filled with faux-horn cups to sprays of miniature oranges gathered loosely in a pitcher, give a library table a worldly air.
2. *Above:* In a seaside home, an oversize mirror reflects an ocean-life-inspired collection.
3. *Right:* Personal heirlooms—like a wedding-present tea set and family photos, all in silver—are perfect table toppers.



1. *Opposite:* Shelves painted the same deep red as the library walls boldly unify the cozy space. Accessories like the wood frames and a large globe reinforce the warm palette. **2. *Left:*** Rectangular, silvery frames help a flat-screen TV blend into a formal room by repeating its shape and color. **3. *Right:*** Change displays with the seasons—swapping seashells in the summer for pinecones in the fall, for example.

accessorizing shelves

A bookcase packed with favorite volumes will delight any reader, but outside of a library, shelves look best when stocked with a mix of things: books, of course, but also boxes, framed photos, collectibles, and even a TV. The key, says Madden, is to vary the composition of each shelf, so on every level there's something to catch the eye. Balance is another important consideration: If you've stacked books at one end of a shelf, for example, you may want a similar-size grouping at the other end of the shelf above or below—otherwise your arrangement runs the risk of looking lopsided. Shelves are an ideal place to display more fragile treasures, since they're less likely to be accidentally knocked over or moved around than on a tabletop. So bring out your antique plates or delicate figurines and intersperse them with books shelved both vertically and horizontally, for variety.



1. *Opposite:* Large prints arranged vertically from floor to ceiling add drama to a narrow entry. 2. *Left:* Artwork hung in an arc acts just like a headboard, linking the twin beds. 3. *Below:* A grid layout has more visual weight than a horizontal line. Just be sure the spacing between works of art is equal.



hanging pictures

The right wall art can make a room. But deciding on placement and actually getting your photos or prints up on the wall can be a challenge. Many of us hang pictures too high and too far apart, says Madden: “A good rule of thumb is to hang art at eye level—which is usually a good three inches lower than you think it should go—unless you’re putting it behind a seat or a bed. In that case, you have to place it high enough that no one’s head will hit the frame.” For groupings of artwork, keep the spacing tight for the biggest impact. ■