

EYE ON DESIGN

Slipping Your Furniture Into Something Fitted and Chic

By Patricia Dane Rogers

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Loose and slouchy ready-made slipcovers for sofas and chairs are a real boon to the budget-minded, whether looking to hide the flaws of a flea-market find or refresh a room with a seasonal change of wardrobe.

But in recent years, the ready-made remedy became rather too much of a good thing. The large, loose, often elasticized throws turned love seats into lumps and sofas into shapeless billows — though they were certainly a quick fix and a lot less expensive than reupholstering or custom-made slipcovers.

Ten years ago, Washington designer Gary Lovejoy fell for the shabby chic look, draping his living room furniture in white canvas painter's dropcloths. Today? "They're gone. The 'in' look in slipcovers now is sleek and fitted — to show off the furniture's silhouette," he says.

At the International Contemporary Furniture Fair in New York last week, Lovejoy adds, tight slipcovers were the rule. "The old ones dragged on the floor and picked up dust. The new ones are less cumbersome. They don't slip and slide around every time you move."

Fortunately for consumers, the market is adapting to the shift in taste.

"Everybody wants slipcovers that fit," says Sallie Siegal, founder of *Todo es*, an online California company that uses computers to design slipcovers that fit more like a glove and less like a pair of XXL Sansabelt pants (800-467-2810; www.todoes.com).

"People are tired of spending half their life tucking in loose throws. They want the arms of their furniture defined — not puckered with elastic running down the middle. The more their slipcovers look like upholstery, the happier they are," says Siegal.



Siegal, who started her career in women's fashion, launched *Todo es* in 1997 as a source for decorative pillows. But her customers started asking for slipcovers too, she says, with dressmaker details such as welting, defined arms, hidden zippers, knife-edged kick-pleats, bows and more choices in skirt styles. When Siegal took the company in that direction, business mushroomed; within a year, the firm was doing 15 times more work than before.

"How could I ignore it? They wanted slipcovers for everything — dining room chairs, armchairs, wingbacks and sofas — and they didn't want baggy, ready-mades."

Siegal was entering a market dominated by a Pennsylvania company called *Sure Fit*, a manufacturer of loose, ready-made slipcovers. *Sure Fit*, sold through stores and catalogues nationwide, had just gone online; it also was picking up on the trend toward tailored, and starting to offer smoother silhouettes, a tighter fit and stylish fabrics such as Provencal prints and jewel-toned velvets (www.surefit.com). Today *Sure Fit* has 85 percent of the market, according to the trade publication *HFN*.

Before ready-made slipcovers, if you wanted to re-cover a sofa or chair you had a choice between re-upholstering or having a slipcover custom cut and pinned, both of which were relatively expensive. The early ready-mades were much less pricey, but far from a careful fit. Companies such as Siegal's offer a semi-custom hybrid, somewhere between one-size-fits-all and fastidiously pinned-to-perfection.

Part of what Siegal's firm offers is the convenience of having a piece re-covered without needing to take it to a workroom, or even having someone stop by to take measurements. She developed a computer-assisted design program that applies basic dressmaking skills to a few generic shapes of upholstered

pieces, which can be adapted to specific sofas and chairs. Though the results are not skintight, she says, the look is definitely "fitted."

A Web site, www.slipcovers.com, lists other U.S. companies that offer mail-order, made-to-order slipcovers based on measurements a customer sends in, including a Franklin, N.H., workroom, *Seams to Be* (www.seamstobe.com).

"There are a lot of people out there without access to custom workrooms or who find the ones in their area too expensive," Siegal says.

Siegal's semi-custom slipcovers cost more than *Sure Fit*'s loosely fitted throws, which average \$100 for a full-size sofa. Prices at *Todo es*, which include fabric and labor, are comparable to mid-priced custom workrooms — \$550 to \$900 for a three-seat, tight-back sofa — but considerably less than a couture fit from a designer workroom.

"As long as there are children, dogs, cats and hand-me-downs, there will always be a need for slipcovers," Siegal says. "You can turn a contemporary piece into a big, flowery, ruffly cottage look and then back again. It's just like changing the clothes in your room."

