

A hardware makeover

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As an element of design, door and cabinet hardware often get the short shrift. Utilitarian, to be sure, they function as a means to open a drawer or door. And sometimes, on modern cabinetry, they're no-shows: A touch-latch mechanism provides the way in.

But knobs, pulls and handles can be eye-catching – glamorous, colorful, tactile. They can totally transfer the surface of a cabinet, door or piece of furniture, elevating its style and perceived value. They can be perky, funky, rustic or whimsical, if that's the mood you're after.

For instant design gratification, there are fewer quick fixes than hardware.

And stylish hardware is so money.

Furniture manufacturers certainly know how to sell it. At the high end, especially, attention is showered on hardware that lends punctuation, even exclamation. Weight and technique – such as hand-cast metals – as well as scale are celebrated. Even suggested provenance is romanced: "This pull was inspired by the hardware on a Parisian door." Gleaming polished nickel pulls or crystal knobs are likened to jewelry: They dress up or complete a look, like a fabulous fashion accessory.

Some furniture hardware is thoroughly site specific. A graceful mahogany vanity/desk introduced by The Platt Collections at the spring High Point furniture market, for example, is part of a group incorporating the emblematic breast cancer awareness logo into the design. For this particular piece, the brushed nickel pulls were crafted in that familiar form. A silver-leaf-trimmed matching mirror in the shape further underscores the design and drama.

For years now, the trend of more furniture-look cabinetry has dominated kitchen design. And cues are being taken from high-end kitchen designers such as Christopher Peacock, whose signature classic style translates most simply with pristine white cabinets, polished nickel pulls and white Carrara marble countertops.

It's such an elegant look worth mimicking that it no doubt has inspired homeowners who can't afford six-figure kitchen remodels to perhaps spruce up existing cabinetry with sparkling new hardware. Restoration Hardware is all over it, with a formidable selection of pulls in a variety of shapes, such as modern-looking square, in several finishes, including polished nickel. Refinishing cabinet fronts and perhaps replacing one counter with new stone might be in-tandem applications, depending on budget.

"The bling certainly has come back to hardware," says Adrienne Morea, president and designer for Atlas Homewares. Her products often are cued to couture. A recent introduction of white leather and lacquered white pulls, for example, was inspired by Chanel.

We're probably not talking about \$2 knobs here. There's a huge visual as well as weighty difference between standard fare at the big box stores versus something of more substance and style. But consider that, even at a pricey investment (\$10 to \$20 or more per knob) that may not require more than a DIY installation, is achievable for most people, compared to tens of thousands of dollars to rip out cabinets and renovate, not to mention putting up with weeks or months of rehab.

Besides, the idea of renewing rather than redoing has a nice sustainable ring to it.

"People who can't afford a new kitchen can go in and spend a few hundred dollars on knobs that really will give new life," says Morea. "One singular piece can really transform."

You can start with the front door. It's a visitor's first impression, so this is a good place for added value. A well-designed substantial brass (finished as you like), bronze or wrought-iron entry system will add tremendous curb appeal, that is, if the door is up to the task. Don't invest in high-end hardware, for example, if your door is hollow core.

Upgrading interior door knobs also is an option. If you don't want to replace all or can't afford to, focus on places where it might make a difference, such as a powder room. A Swarovski crystal door knob and upgraded pulls on cabinetry are gracious touches that guests will appreciate.

One of Atlas Hardware's newest designs features crystal paves set into brushed anodized aluminum, like exclusive cufflinks set with pave diamonds.

If your look is more tailored, you may appreciate the luxurious look of supply Italian woven leather, a la Bottega Veneta handbags, with a new collection introduced by the British-based company Turnstyle Designs Ltd. The company also created a man-made version of Shagreen (ray and shark skin), whose granular texture contrasts with its shiny chrome frame. Another design features pretty turquoise shells set into bright chrome.

A more sculptural look comes into play with Rocky Mountain Hardware's five latest introductions from the hand of San Francisco artist and furniture designer Ted Boerner. The ambitious collection, which is cast in recycled, art-grade bronze, includes 27 new pieces of door hardware and cabinet pulls available in nine standard finishes. They are architectural, with chunky handles, asymmetrical knobs and a hand-wrought quality.

"These pieces are created in relationship to the eye and the hand," says Boerner. "They celebrate touch, feeling, and an immediate sense of human scale."

Other designs have an organic sensibility, such as the branch-shaped bronze pulls introduced by Top Knobs.

For furniture – cabinets, dressers, armoires, buffets, bathroom vanities and even laundry room cabinets, there's perhaps more latitude for a fun, colorful treatment. And, of course, there's less of a financial commitment because of fewer knobs or pulls to change out.

One perhaps unlikely source for hardware is Anthropologie. Its fan base has come to expect the unusual, often one-of-a-kind women's clothing and home decor from the Philadelphia-based retailer. Go to their website (www.anthropologie.com) and you'll find a formidable selection of knobs that dazzle. The eye candy includes a ceramic frog brightly decorated in blue and gold pattern that evokes the high-end porcelain of Herend; other "critters," such as a metal hardshell crab or a dragonfly that looks as if it has been delicately hand painted; flowers in the shapes and distinctive hues of poppies, orchids and frangipani; and even coiled rope. Multicolored geometric designs sometimes contrast with metal accents or inlays with mother of pearl, for example, for an ethnic exoticism.

Patterns in small doses are easier to assimilate than wall covering or a large sofa. There are so many patterns and shapes from which to choose, you'll probably satisfy some niche decorating, such as coastal style (coral, starfish, ropes), sports themes (baseballs, footballs).

A wide range of metals from shiny to matte to rustic also extends the possibilities. Even the glossy-finished can sport a hammered look, an intriguing polished nickel combination offered by manufacturer Hamilton Sinkler.

Influences from Old World architecture (Greek columns, and key design), different design periods like Art Deco all are represented. So is green. Hardware made from woven bamboo or recycled glass are among current offerings. And straight from women's fashion runways, metal studded belts, handbags, clothing and bracelets have an analogous look in polished steel-studded mango pulls at Atlas. "It's directly translatable," says Morea, who happens to be a former jewelry designer who has taken some designs and turned them into hardware.

Design, after all, is in the details. And with hardware, you have a wonderful way to customize, express your personality.