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Shopping Guide: Bookcases

By TIM MCKEOUGH FEB. 19, 2016

Bookcases say as much about you as the books you read. So which style to choose? An interior designer offers some suggestions. [RELATED ARTICLE](#)

Nick Olsen would like to see your books. “In every apartment I go to, and in every magazine spread, I’m always interested in seeing what people are reading,” said Mr. Olsen, a Manhattan interior designer. “There’s a voyeuristic quality to it.”

He also likes what books can do for a room: “If you’re surrounded by your books, it’s cozier than bare walls.”

Mr. Olsen, 33, favors interiors with strong colors and patterns, and a mix of furniture from different eras. But keeping your books in orderly rows and stacks is key, he said, which is why a good bookcase is important. But what style is right for you? Consider the following:

- Where do you plan to put it? “A small étagère could be a nightstand,” Mr. Olsen said. “A larger one could be a room divider.” Or a pair might flank a fireplace.
- What will you put in it? If your books vary widely in size, look for adjustable shelves. If you need storage space for games or children’s toys, try something with doors on the bottom.
- Do you prefer open or closed sides? “If it has open sides, it’s a lighter look and feel,” Mr. Olsen said, but there’s a functional cost: You’ll need bookends to keep things from falling off the shelves.
- And if you’re a voracious reader who is always pulling books off the shelves, how will those shelves age? “Finish is a matter of taste,” he said. “But lacquer is going to scratch over time. Wood is more forgiving.”

Slim Bookcase

This steel bookcase is a good choice if you don't want to spend a lot, and it's also incredibly versatile, Mr. Olsen noted, because it comes in four sizes, from 15 to 42 inches wide. "In rooms where there are niches or columns, those smaller sizes often fit right in, providing additional storage." And the 14 powder-coated colors in which it's available are "pretty, pure and cheerful."

\$329 to \$499 at Room & Board; (800) 301-9720 or roomandboard.com

Nornas Bookcase

Ikea

Ikea has long been a go-to source for simple, inexpensive furniture, but this bookcase is a step up in style, Mr. Olsen said: "It's not fussy, and is a nice scale," and the unfinished pine bears a pleasing resemblance to reclaimed wood. "You do have to assemble it yourself, of course, but it's a nice alternative to white melamine."

\$159 at Ikea; (800) 434-4532 or ikea.com

Cole Porter Étagère

Developed by the furniture maker Frederick P. Victoria & Son and the revered decorator Billy Baldwin for the study in Cole Porter's Manhattan apartment, this is the Mercedes of bookcases, Mr. Olsen said. The brass frame comes in a variety of finishes, paired with shelves in wood, glass, leather or other materials. "It's just gorgeous – the finish, the scale, the history and the Billy Baldwin seal of chic. Pass it down to the grandkids."

\$13,750 as shown at Frederick P. Victoria & Son; (718) 392-9651 or victoriaandson.com

Regency Mahogany Breakfront Bookcase

1stdibs

Bookcases from the Regency period often have intricately patterned glass on the doors, ornate hardware or a lacy pediment, but this piece "is just a clean, straightforward shape with simple glazing and a flat cornice," Mr. Olson said. "It would be appropriate in any setting."

\$32,000 at Eerdmans Fine Art on 1stdibs; (212) 920-1393 or 1stdibs.com

Honeycomb Metal Bookcase

While this unit might hold fewer books than a conventional bookcase, it has other virtues. “It’s like a piece of sculpture, and could be an interesting room divider,” Mr. Olsen said, and its hexagonal patterns have been experiencing a comeback in everything from floor tiles to fabrics. “If you have the Library of Congress in your apartment, it may not be the piece for you. But in terms of display, it’s pretty fabulous.”

\$3,050 at Mecox; (212) 249-5301 or mecox.com

Jacques Étagère

Jonathan Adler

For a touch of 1970s-style glam, it would be difficult to beat this bookcase from Jonathan Adler, Mr. Olsen said: “He’s the best at it; it’s his stock-in-trade.” With thick Lucite shelves (either clear or smoked) and chunky metal connectors (in brass or nickel), this piece adds bling without being overwhelming. But for a sense of balance, Mr. Olsen said, “I’d use it in the context of an English-style sofa or a little mahogany.”

\$2,400 at Jonathan Adler; (800) 963-0891 or jonathanadler.com

Eames Storage Unit

Designed by Charles and Ray Eames in 1949, this modular unit never gets old, Mr. Olsen said. Customizable to a variety of shapes and sizes, and available in two color schemes, it is as fun as it is functional, while its zinc-coated steel supports and plywood shelves are no-nonsense basics. “It could be in a young Brooklyn couple’s office or your kid’s room,” he said. “The appeal is very broad.”

\$1,400 as shown at Design Within Reach; (800) 944-2233 or dwr.com

Parisian Cornice Double Shelving

RH

There are many variations on this style of shelving, but Restoration Hardware’s is particularly well done, Mr. Olsen said. “It’s immediately identifiable as the classic French baker’s rack or bistro shelving,” he noted, although this version is slimmer and darker than most. “It won’t date, because the styling, design and lines are totally classic. It’s worked for Parisians since the late 19th century.”

\$1,295 to \$1,695 at RH; (800) 762-1005 or restorationhardware.com

John Dickinson Skyscraper Bookcases

At nine feet tall, this pair of vintage 1970s bookcases by John Dickinson makes a big statement. “He’s known mostly for white plaster furniture that has anthropomorphic hooves,” Mr. Olsen said. “This is way more architectural – and lacquer,” which makes it particularly interesting. And at this scale, there’s plenty of storage space; there’s also a concealed section with doors at the bottom. “If I win the Powerball,” Mr. Olsen said, “I’m buying these.”

\$75,000 for the pair at Liz O'Brien; (212) 755-3800 or lizobrien.com

Visby Bookcase

Anthropologie

“You normally don’t think of rolling bookcases around your apartment, but I like the idea that you could if you wanted to,” Mr. Olsen said. With its integrated casters and curved, powder-coated iron frame, the Visby is “like a drinks trolley from a Viennese tea house, with this cage around it – it reminds me of the Wiener Werkstätte,” he said, referring to the groundbreaking early 20th-century Austrian workshop.

\$448 to \$1,298 at Anthropologie; (800) 309-2500 or anthropologie.com

