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Connoisseur



SHELTER

When Neutral Is Not Boring

Nuanced off-whites and tans add sass and class to home décor.

By Sarah Coombs

The uninspired neutral room ranks as the saddest of spaces. Think drab brown carpet coupled with off-white paint. It's shorthand for bad rentals and house-flips everywhere. But neutral doesn't have to mean boring. It can be nu-

anced, lush, and truly sophisticated, as long as you follow these steps.

First, vary your textures. "When we have a client who wants a neutral palette, we make sure to use a wide variety of materials," says Oakland-based interior designer Laura Martin Bovard of LMB Interiors. "We might pair a mohair sofa with



Photos by Steve Babuljak



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LMB Interiors shows how a little variation in texture and tone can make neutrals pop.

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an antiqued velvet chair, and then add leather benches for even more textural contrast." That contrast is key, because it heightens the qualities of each element. Thus a nubby jute rug will set off the sheen of a silk pillow, even if they're the same beige.

Second, diversify your tones. If gray is your main neutral, incorporate dark gray, light gray, and everything in between. Sticking to a single color is an easy way to unify the space, and varying the saturation provides both interest and depth. The result will be a room that feels serene and refined and remarkably cohesive, too

Third, don't be afraid to go dark. It's an old decorator adage that every room needs a touch of black, and that's still true for a neutral room. Black is one of the most elegant of neutrals, and it provides welcome contrast in a light space. It lends a certain weight and crispness even when used in small doses, on a lampshade say, or the frame of a painting.

Fourth, use organic materials. Some of the most gorgeous neutrals come straight from Earth itself. A driftwood lamp, a capiz shell chandelier, twisty branches placed in a vase: These elements will ground the space, and take it from sterile to soulful in one fell swoop.

Follow these tips, and you'll end up with a room that's beautifully classic and decidedly chic. And that's about as far from boring as you can get.

Sarah Coombs is an interior designer based in Alameda.



Top photo by Patrick Argast; bottom by Babuljak.