

CAN THIS BE LOVE?

HOME-WRECKED It's a natural disaster: disagreement about decorating.

Sometimes I envy Stone Age couples. All they had to do was find a roomy cave and move into it. They did not have to decide what color to paint the walls, or argue whether to furnish it in early Pleistocene. Modern couples, however, seem to agree even less often on decorating ideas than they do on whose friends give worse parties.

My lover and I are a case in point. I am from the minimalist school of decoration, believing that the less you put in a home, the less you have to clean. A proper abode, it seems to me, should have a comfortable bed, a good TV, a capacious refrigerator, and lots of disposable eating utensils. What more does one need to be comfortable?

Plenty, according to my lover, who has the idea that his home is his castle, and that castles should not be equipped with plastic cups. Fine antiques are his line. They are beautifully made, he points out, and their value will appreciate. True enough, I rejoin, but while these gems are sitting around appreciating, somebody has to dust them.

Along with a lot of other men, my partner has an abiding terror that our home will look too feminine, or, as he puts it, "like a woman lives here." "A woman *does* live here," I point out, but this minor technicality has yet to influence his ban on any decorative object that has lace on it, or any decorative design other than geometric. "Bring home flowered sheets," he says, "and you sleep on them alone."

My friend Kim's boyfriend is even more of a hard-liner. The apartment they share—so high-tech it might be the inside of a space module—is a study in grays, as if any sign of color might be mistaken for a sign of weakness. (When a friend of Kim's visited their place, she noted that the toilet bowl, its waters stained blue with bowl freshener, was a welcome "bright touch.") Kim has argued that soft seating in a home does not necessarily indicate soft moral fiber on the part of its occupants, and that pictures on the walls do not necessarily advertise inhabitants who can't read, but she has yet to make her point strike home. She still opens her eyes each day on an apartment that looks "like a wet day in February—on Mars."

Annie's husband, Peter, gets sentimental attachments to furniture, which means that she is forced to live with things like the chair from his boyhood room, a little Early American number that looks as if it's been in a couple of fires and at least one flood, quite possibly in early America. Annie says, "I've

suggested donating this historic piece to the Smithsonian, along with all the other hallowed monstrosities he is so attached to. But here they still reside: a rocking chair featuring a decal of his college emblem; an oil painting of Mt. Baldy done by his elderly aunt; seventeen shell ashtrays he found during his childhood summers on Cape Cod; a pillow with a picture of Glacier National Park executed in glitter on its front; a lamp with a bronzed pair of baby shoes on its base. I tell him I want to live at our present address, not on Memory Lane, but if I put even one shell ashtray out of sight, he reacts as if I were severing him from his roots with a hacksaw."

Decorating difficulties are often brought about by partners' physical differences. One friend, for instance, is nearly a head shorter than her husband, but he insists that if they install a shelf any lower than six feet one inch high, he will surely be blinded walking into it one day, or at the least risk multiple head injuries and possible brain damage. So, practically everything in their apartment is out of her reach, and she is forever stretching and straining to get at things the rest of us take for granted, things like tissues and cans of soup. Her summation of this arrangement is that "It's like living on the rack."

Another gender-related decorating difference has to do with the practically universal male obsession with wiring. When my friend Sue and her husband moved into a new apartment, she scoured the city for wallpaper that Gil would greet in some way other than by clapping his hand to his mouth and running into the bathroom. Gil's sole decorating interest lay in finding ways to wire the place for maximum audiovisual penetration. "I pick out a cabinet for the living room, and his only concern is where he can drill a hole in it for the wire to the stereo," Sue reports. "I try to place the furniture attractively and find that everything has to be in some precise, acoustically efficient relationship to the speakers. Half of our bedroom is untouchable because Gil's set it aside for a home video system that allows us to see Henry Winkler's true flesh tones. I finally told him that if great sound and picture quality were that important to him, perhaps he'd be happier living at Radio City Music Hall."

The question is, what do you do when you're forced to live with an oil painting of your partner's first motorcycle, or when you're forever barred from buying anything pink for your home, or when you have to part with a beloved little Victorian settee because your partner says that he will not live with something that looks as if it belonged in a "home for aged governesses"? What you do, I guess, is decide whether *who* you live with is more important than *what* you live with. (Of course, if you can't tell the difference, you've got a bigger problem than I'm prepared to deal with.)

by Bette-Jane Raphael