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Furniture Delivery Delays? Interior Designers Have Found Workarounds

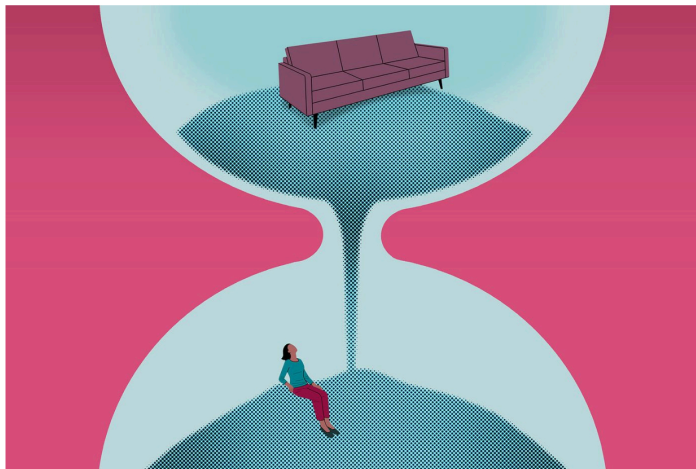
Couches, upholstered beds, rugs and light fixtures can take up to a year to arrive because of supply-chain gaps. And experts say this may not change until 2023. But design pros have devised creative workarounds.

By Michelle Slatalla

Oct. 26, 2021 12:27 pm ET

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SOFA AWAY Made-to-order and custom furnishings that ship from outside the U.S. are particularly held up. ILLUSTRATION: DAN PAGE

MY MOTHER, who was not known for her patience, once waited for nine months for an armless rocking chair upholstered in a custom green velvet stripe. Long waits were common in the 1960s. A wait of nine months was long even for the 1960s. She complained to the furniture store, which blamed the factory, which said actually it was the shipper's fault.

"I've had babies in less time than it took for me to get this damn chair," my mother observed to my father, who knew better than to engage.

For everyone [waiting for furniture delivery these days](#), it feels like the 1960s all over again. Thanks to the pandemic, [the supply chain has been tangled up in knots](#) over the past year and a half—and it has become routine to wait for many months for furnishings.

"Two-thirds of all goods trying to come into this country are coming in really late," said furniture industry analyst Ray Allegranza, executive director of the International Home Furnishings Representatives Association in High Point, N.C. "I've never seen anything this crazy—and it's not going to get better any time soon."

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Custom fabric would add up to 10 weeks to this sofa's production, said designer Michelle Gage. PHOTO: BRIAN WETZEL

Of course, far worse things happened during the pandemic. "It's just furniture," said Ali Budd, an interior designer in Toronto. "That's what I remind people."

Ms. Budd said that even getting the simplest things is a challenge. "Getting a stone slab right now is like the Wild West. You show up and have to be ready to buy if you don't want to lose the slab," she said. "Everything is selling and people won't hold things, sometimes not even for 24 hours."

Why is the home décor industry being hit so hard by supply chain problems?






Home Furnishing Pros Explain

"It was a perfect storm," Mr. Allegrezza explained. "There's a higher-than-normal demand for home goods because everybody who was forced to stay in place during the pandemic realized they hated their sofas. Meanwhile the companies in Asia that make furniture had shutdowns. Ports everywhere are clogged, so ships can't find a spot to unload, and when they finally do, there aren't enough crane operators to unload the containers. Also, the trucking industry has a shortage of drivers, because a lot of them decided to retire in recent months."






Worsening the perfect storm was actual bad weather. Winter 2021 storms in Texas and Louisiana [shut down two major factories](#) that manufacture chemicals used to make foam padding for sofas and chairs. "The delays are so bad that I had a client recently who needed a bed for a guest room, and I said, 'Maybe don't get an upholstered bed,'" said Michelle Gage, an interior designer in Philadelphia.

Manufacturers and retailers say it's difficult to predict when furnishings will be delivered. "We have a container of rugs coming from Morocco that was delayed for weeks in Barcelona—with no real explanation—so we gave all the customers






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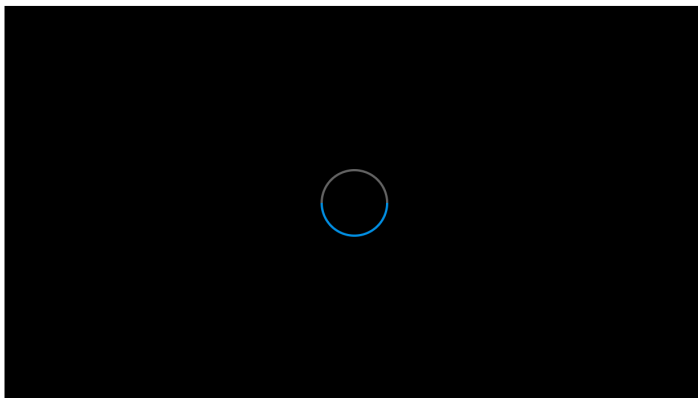
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who purchased them a 10% discount to try to assuage the anger,” said Ben Hyman, chief executive of [Revival Rugs](#) in Oakland, Calif.

“We had 200 or 300 customers waiting for a woven-wire chandelier that was shipping from India and was expected in four to five months,” said Brownlee Currey, chief executive of Currey & Company in Atlanta. “It ended up being nine or 10 months. We kept ordering more meanwhile, and when they finally sent them, we got an enormous shipment.”

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California's Port of Los Angeles is struggling to keep up with the crush of cargo containers arriving at its terminals, creating one of the biggest choke points in the global supply-chain crisis. This exclusive aerial video illustrates the scope of the problem and the complexities of this process. Photo: Thomas C. Miller

The bad news is that the situation isn't going to get better soon: “The pundits are saying maybe 2023,” Mr. Allegranza said.

The good news? Interior designers are coming up with creative workarounds.

How to Sidestep Shipping Delays

“I'm getting more things custom made by local craftsmen—things like small side tables and upholstery pieces—because then you don't have to worry about shipping,” said Courtney Sempliner, an interior designer in Port Washington, N.Y., who I phoned for advice. “We're fortunate to have a lot of local mom-and-pop craftsmen in Brooklyn, Queens and upstate.”

“Who are some of your favorite go-to suppliers?” I asked.

“Sorry, I can't share my sources—it's too dangerous, because I don't want them to be overwhelmed,” Ms. Sempliner said. “But here are other tips: Buy floor samples from showrooms. Or reupholster something you already own—the wait time is much shorter.”

Ms. Gage, the interior designer in Philadelphia, said a quick way to shave off weeks of wait time is to eschew custom fabrics. “Where in the past we might have picked a custom fabric for a sofa and waited for the fabric to get shipped from the manufacturer, now we choose a stock fabric for a sofa,” she said.

Other strategies: If you are shopping online and see that an item you want is in stock, “order it immediately. Don't wait until the next day, because who knows if it still will be available,” said Ms. Budd, the interior designer in Toronto.

One-of-a-kind vintage wooden furniture from sites such as [1stdibs](#), [Chairish](#) and [Etsy](#) are another option. “Vintage coffee tables and consoles are good because if they are high-quality pieces, they retain their value—just be sure you ask the seller for a lot of pictures taken from every angle to ensure that there’s no damage,” said Joy Williams, an interior designer in Chicago.

The main thing is to keep some perspective. It’s just furniture.

In my mother’s case, nine months after she ordered her rocker, the delivery man—the poor delivery man—finally arrived. On the appointed day, all four of us children gathered around his hand truck, expecting a thrill like Christmas morning.

With a flourish, the delivery man unwrapped the package—to reveal a chair upholstered in the wrong fabric. It was another nine months before they got it right.

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