

HOME

& Garden

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Section G

When hide-and-seek beats bargain hunting

Savvy **Sally Socolich** finds the ultimate deal — her grandchildren. Now the Bay Area will have to shop around.

By Susan Fornoff
CHRONICLE STAFF WRITER

GOOD DEALS ON GIFTS:
The Bargain Hunter column
Inside

Sally Socolich, the queen of Bay Area shoppers, answers the door to the family home in Moraga holding a pair of wool herringbone slacks with needle and thread attached. They called to her from the sale rack at Two Star Dog in Berkeley in May — just \$19! — and she is raising the hemline on this bright November Saturday morning.

"All wool, lined, a great buy," enthuses the Bargain Hunter, as she is known to Chronicle readers and KRON watchers. "I believe in buying opportunistically. These pants, I didn't need them in May, but they were a great deal. I keep trying to explain this to my husband, and he keeps resisting me."

"Men buy, women shop," Dick Socolich says with a shrug. But then he proudly displays some of the comfortable golf wear that Sally found for him at an Emeryville warehouse sale. And Sally tells of how on a golf outing, he stopped the car on Interstate 80 to Reno when she spotted a new Restoration Hardware outlet in Vacaville.

"I ran in and looked around, and, wow!" Sally exclaims. "That makes my day. Totally makes my day."

All of this enthusiasm can't help but make one wonder why on earth Socolich took her shopping bible of 13 printings, "Bargain Hunting in the Bay Area," off the shelf five years ago and is discontinuing her popular shopping dispatch for the Chronicle Home&Garden section.

She puts the slacks down and leads her visitor into the kitchen for

and scones. A stencil that says "Live well, laugh often, love much" decorates the wall, and pictures of her six grandchildren stand prominently on the counter.

"Two in Dallas, one in Portland, three in Mission Viejo," she says. "Which is why I can't do the column anymore. It really takes time to be with them. . . . It's been 30 years that I've been in the bargain-hunting mode, three or four years since my husband retired. I'm the one holding us back from doing the things we really want to do."

Sally wants to sew quilts from the scraps of fabric she's culled from remnant tables over the years. She might give a few as gifts, wrapped in the exquisite ribbons she says have been her weakness over years of casing outlet sales and discount warehouses. "You want to see my stash?" she says, and we're inspecting the ribbon reels neatly lined up in the closet of her office.

The phone and fax machine are quiet, maybe because it's Saturday and her merchant correspondents are busy having the sales that Socolich has reported over the years — often after herself having had to cajole purveyors in the first place into putting their seconds and overstocks out before the public at great markdowns.

"Eight years ago now Sally discovered us at the Gift Show," says Nima Oberoi, whose sales of gift-

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ERIC LUSE / The Chronicle

She came, she saw, she conquered retail: Sally Socolich (at Lunares in San Francisco) is hanging up her shopping bag.

Treasures for the table

By Laura Thomas
and Lynette Evans
CHRONICLE STAFF WRITERS

What do you take the hostess who's putting you up for the holidays? Or Mom, who puts up with you even when it isn't a holiday? How about something to display — or play with — that will look good on the coffee table?

Here are some items that caught the eyes of Home&Garden editors who'd love to see any one of them under the tree for their own coffee tables (listen up, significant others):

A perfect bud vase

The grande dame of design, Eva Zeisel, still working at age 99, is noted for her perfectly simple, and therefore simply perfect, ceramic designs. Although you'll find her designs in museums, you can also find her elegant little bud vase for \$49 at Room & Board, 685 Seventh St. (at Townsend), San Francisco; (415) 252-9280.



Coffee mugs in sensuous shapes with abstract designs from San Mateo industrial designers Miami-Miami retail for \$15 each.

Coffee mugs

Nothing warms up a winter evening like a hot beverage. If the mug, that symbol of Saturday morning leisure time, seems too tacky to give as a holiday hostess gift, think again.

In the hands of Miami-Miami, the mug has been reborn in sensuous and organic shapes combined

with graphic patterns. A San Mateo group of industrial designers that has joined together to design amusing tabletop items, Miami-Miami has revitalized that icon of post-1960s laid-back lifestyle. They offer 10 styles in swirling abstract designs in bright greens, oranges and earth tones that evoke the decade while catering to design sen-

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A library for the coffee table

By Beth Hughes
CHRONICLE STAFF WRITER

What would the agony of gift lists be without those colorful monsters for impossibly processed trees better known as coffee-table books? Select one carefully as a gift, and your efforts will be appreciated because the volume shows you understand the recipient's life, interests or secret passions. Pick the wrong title, and you lay the foundation for a cliched pile of books too noticeable to the givers for immediate re-gifting, and too damn big to fit in a standard bookshelf.

A Victorian era English publisher, John Camden Hotten, deserves some credit for launching the genre, according to "Book History: 2000." His efforts such as "The His-

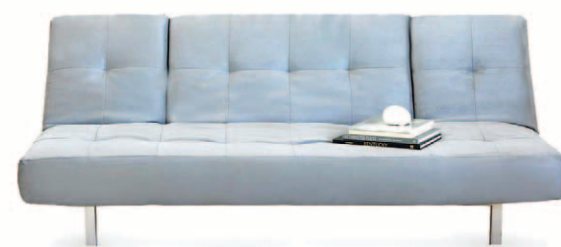
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Eva Zeisel's
7-inch-high
vase can be
had at Room
& Board for
\$49.

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BERKELEY 510.848.8250

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SAN JOSE 408.255.5900

SAN RAFAEL 415.457.5500

Gifts to go on the coffee table, or perhaps just the table itself

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sibilities. And they're just plain cute.

They're \$15 at some Whole Foods stores as well as Zinc Details in San Francisco and Berkeley; Flax Art and Design, Fin Decor and Therapy in San Francisco and Patricia's Pantry in Alameda. www.unitedbrands.us.

Tea and sake sets

Head for Chinatown to find a wide variety of Chinese tea sets with tiny bowl cups. Choose cast iron or ceramic, even porcelain. What could be more elegant or graceful or strike the right note? The same goes for sake sets. Old Shanghai at 645 Grant Ave. in San Francisco offers a good selection of both, in traditional and contemporary designs; (415) 986-1222.

Carsten Jorgenson's Naoko tea bowl for Bodum, with stainless steel body and tea infuser, looks like a Modernist's idea of Aladdin's



This three-piece Swirl sake set can be had for \$19.

lamp. \$50-\$55 at the San Francisco Museum of Art's Museum Store, 151 Third St., San Francisco; (415) 357-4035 or www.SFMOMA.org; or bodumusa.com.

Another set that would look stunning on a Modernist coffee table is French architect Jean Nouvel's 2005 tea and coffee service — cylindrical stainless steel pitcher, mugs and cups inspired by “a truncated cone shaped cup that was very fashionable in cafes during the 1960s.” Pitcher \$125; two cups and saucers \$80; mug \$35; milk jug

\$66; sugar bowl with spoon \$32; round tray \$88; four coffee spoons \$26, at Alessi Flagship, 424 Sutter St., San Francisco; (415) 434-0403.

For the New Age crowd

For the spiritual seeker, two hostess gifts could be resounding successes. The Dharma Diary, beautifully illustrated and photographed with notes on Buddhist teachings, is a weekly calendar (\$16), while the Sacred Journey (\$20) is that and more. It includes pages to write goals, affirmations, strengths and gratitudes and note the highlights of each month. Both are published by Pomegranate Communications in Petaluma www.pomegranate.com.

For the rest of us

Those who will mutter “just shoot me” under their breath at the mere mention of a self-improvement guide will much prefer the New York Times Crossword Puzzles 365-day calendar (\$13), a great gift for all devotees of the New York Times and for word lovers in general. Also from Pomegranate.

For the dexterous, there are the handsome stainless steel Pick Up Sticks by Philippi, Germany, \$75 at SFMOMA Museum Store.

Or how about leaving a handful of PoetryCards lying on the coffee table, so that when conversation flags, guests can pass the time composing pithy sayings? A modern version of the medieval val-de-ville, Poetry Cards are credit-card-size wheel charts that let the user choose words from three wheels to “write” their poems in one of six themes — Relating, Questioning, Manifesting, Healing, Celebrating and Appreciating. \$3.95 each at Pleasant Thoughts in Danville or through www.poetrycardsusa.com.



CARLOS ÁVILA GONZALEZ / The Chronicle

Inspired by a genie's lamp, Naoko tea bowl is \$50-\$55 at bodumusa.com or SFMOMA.



Poetry cards by Phil Silberman come in sets like “Healing.”

com.

A must for reading the Poetry Cards or seeing the details in those coffee-table books: the LED Lighted Rim-Free Magnifier, with 2x magnification, \$14.99, including batteries, from the Container Store, www.containerstore.com.

And the tables themselves

All these coffee-table gifts, but what to put them on? SFMOMA Museum Store has lowered the price of Christine Schwarzer's flower tables — her stainless-steel framed, birch-edged, red or black laminate-topped ode to Finnish



CARLOS ÁVILA GONZALEZ / The Chronicle

Christine Schwarzer's flower end table is marked down to \$495 at the SFMOMA Museum Store.

architect Alvar Aalto's 1937 Amoeba vase. Designed for Swedese, the coffee table, once \$1,250, is now \$995, while the nesting end tables have come down from \$790 to \$495 each.

Less pricey but more versatile,

Sandra Ciganic-McKinney's Remix Reversible coffee table for U+ is \$195, also at the Museum Store.

E-mail Lynette Evans and Laura Thomas at home@sfchronicle.com.



CARLOS ÁVILA GONZALEZ / The Chronicle

Remix Reversible coffee table by Sandra Ciganic-McKinney for U+ is \$195 at the SFMOMA Museum Store.

Gifts so sumptuous, you might have to just keep them

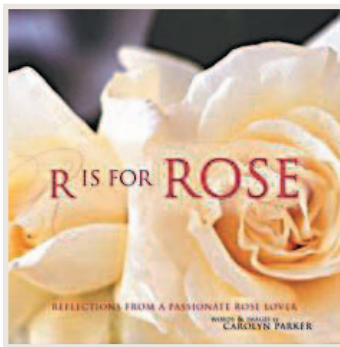
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tory of Playing Cards” (1859) and “A History of Booksellers” (1873) evolved into coffee-table books. “The Photobook, Vol. 1,” by Gerry Badger and Martin Parr (Phaidon; 320 pages; \$75), provides more detail.

For a passionate gardener, even one with grand ambitions for window boxes, “The New Garden Paradise” by Dominique Browning (Norton; 464 pages; \$59.95) offers hours of distraction. It's OK to give this in hopes of receiving seasonal thank-you cuttings.

Lafayette author Carolyn Parker fills 208 pages of “R Is for Rose” (F&W Publications; \$35) with roses and rose lore, from Alba rosa rugosa to Zephrine drouhin. For added impact, send it along with a bottle of rose-based perfume such as Guerlain's peppery Aqua Allegoria Rosa Magnifica (\$65) or a plant certificate from one of the Bay Area nurseries specializing in roses Parker lists in the book.

Expect a resurgence of faded chintz because of Martin Wood's “Nancy Lancaster: English Country House Style” (Frances Lincoln;



200 pages; \$60). A Virginia society beauty who married often and well, she did up some grand homes and owned Colefax and Fowler, the London antiques dealer now as well known for fabrics as Regency chairs. Bid quickly and you can wrap this in one of the Colefax and Fowler remnants available on eBay. A pillowcase isn't a difficult project.

Understated chinoiserie accents could pop up in living rooms near you courtesy of “Class Act” (Pointed Leaf Press; 228 pages; \$95). Peter Schifando and Jean Mathison document the career of Hollywood's William Haines, an actor who reinvented himself as a designer. For 40 years, he made red carpet A-listers,

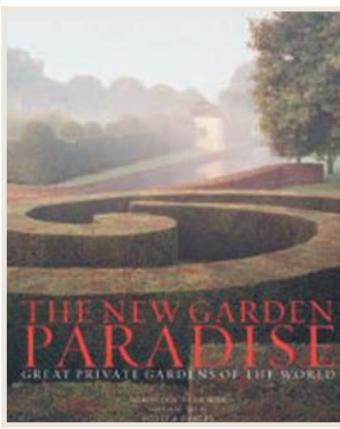
socialites and business leaders very comfortable in homes filled with de-lovely and delightful furniture of his own design. When pieces appear on the market, they are not cheap.

“Albert Hadley” by Adam Lewis (Rizzoli; 256 pages; \$65) traces the evolution of the influential designer. You may prefer a Zen aesthetic, but you cannot deny his eye for comfort and grace. Ditto the work of designer Bunny Williams. She bought an 18th century New England house almost 30 years ago and restored a neglected property into a showplace reminiscent of those welcoming movie homes in “White Christmas” and “Christmas in Connecticut.” Her “Affair With a House” (Stewart, Tabori & Chang; 240 pages; \$55) chronicles her project. It could offer hope to a friend in the middle of an endless remodel. Or they could bash you over the head with it, 6½ pounds on one optimistically inaccurate bathroom scale.

Other women on this year's list include Elsie de Wolfe, the grand dame of modern interiors. Penny Sparke's book, “Elsie de Wolfe” (Acanthus Press; 372 pages; \$85), gives a wonderful sense of the

scope of Wolfe's career, Gilded Age to early modernism. The giftee, and you too, since you'll preview before wrapping, will never look at a closet the same way again.

Worth noting is “Frances Elkins,” by Stephen Salny and Frances Elkins (Norton; 208 pages; \$65). The sister of Chicago architect David Adler, tastemaker Elkins embraced the avant-garde for three decades until her death in 1953, after which her reputation did that girl thing, and faded away. This record of her interiors, including those in Northern California, reveals the why behind a growing ap-



preciation of her work.

For longtime Californians and newcomers alike, “Greene & Greene,” by Marvin Rand (Gibbs Smith; 240 pages; \$50), won't rest on the table unopened. Rand's photographs treasure the work of the Greene brothers, Charles and Henry. Many of the Greene & Greene houses included offer tours. Plan a few weekend jaunts for the coming year around them.

While you're California dreaming, consider “Crystal Cove Cottages,” by Karen Steen, Laura Davick, Meriam Braselle and John Connell (Chronicle Books; 159 pages; \$35). Now on the National Register of Historic Places, this idyllic hideaway on the Orange County coast embraced the state's plein air painters, silent movie-makers and generations of free-spirited families who knew they were onto a special vacation retreat. The book captures the sun-tanned glow of the settlement's otherworldliness. Friends in snow country will hate you for this.

If your finances allow “one for thee and one for me” giving, realize there can be gold on those coffee tables. A first edition of “Vogue's Book of Houses, Gardens, People,”



NANCY LANCASTER

by Horst P. Horst (Viking; 195 pages; 1968), now sells for as much as \$750. A first edition of “Under the Hula Moon: Living in Hawaii,” by Jocelyn Fujii and Linny Morris (Crown; 180 pages; 1992), can cost more than \$350. World War II combat photographer Slim Aarons became known postwar for casual portraits of the international elite. Two recent volumes, “A Place in the Sun” (Abrams; 244 pages; \$75) and “Once Upon a Time” (Abrams; 240 pages; \$75; 2003), give a sense of his work. A fine copy of the first edition of his 1974 “A Wonderful Time” (Harper & Row; 250 pages) now costs well over \$1,000. If you find one filed in a bargain bin, keep it for yourself and give whomever a jar of jam.

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Discount diva bypasses bargains for family time

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worthy pieces at Lunares rate among Socolich's red-letter days. “I didn't know anything about warehouse sales then and in fact was a bit skeptical because we were wholesale, but she said, ‘You should do it. Put out some coffee in the morning, mark down your seconds, they'll sell.’ The first time, I expected to do not even \$5,000, and I think I sold \$30,000 in one day.”

Yet even a Lunares sale wouldn't have made it into “Bargain Hunter” if it hadn't met Socolich's criteria. Her reports, merchants quickly discover, aren't advertisements open to the highest bidders — and Oberoi says that even attempts to give Socolich some small item she's admired, a pillow, perhaps, are waved off, elegantly but firmly.

“This is why I'm still able to do this after 30 years: I can't be bought,” Socolich says. “Oh, I get my share of candies and flowers. I'm going to miss the flowers. But that's where I draw the line. Because once word gets out that Sally can be bought . . .”

So she says she has tried to per-

sonally check out all of the merchandisers and goods she's listed, first for quality. “Sometimes they're not appropriate for my column,” she says. “This is a challenge, to be diplomatic and explain that this isn't quite right for me.”

Next, the prices. To qualify, they need to be a minimum of 40 percent below retail. “Sometimes I have to say, ‘You have nice things, but you're being chintzy with your markdowns.’ If I can't say to the reader that you're getting a really great bargain, it's not my story.”

She'll also freely advise the merchants on preparing for the public, with accessible displays, clearly marked prices and ample cash stations — “cuz,” she says, “I don't want to get nasty mail from my readers.” Socolich admits she's been taken once or twice, and is still chagrined about a recent gaffe, where she visited a few new spots in Berkeley and mentioned in passing the neighboring Smith & Hawken outlet, a longtime fixture on the block. “I didn't go in, because I'd been there many times, and come to find out after the column is published that it's not there anymore!” she says. “Gone!”



ERIC LUSE / The Chronicle

Store owner Nima Oberoi (in ponytail) talks shopping with veteran bargain hunter Sally Socolich at Lunares in San Francisco.

If grandchildren and quilts aren't enough to make her take a step back, there are those ever-expanding case files of the disappearing outlets. Socolich first started bargain hunting — a new mother of twins and wife to a husband who had just finished his Stanford graduate work — when she moved into a new Moraga house 35 years ago with little more than a pair of cribs. She'd worked her way through Cal State Long Beach (with a degree in home economics, of course) and gotten used to stretching a dollar, but now she had to furnish a four-bedroom home.

“I was continually trying to find the best deal on a coffee table, a lamp or whatever,” she says. “And

that's when I discovered the San Francisco outlets.”

At about the same time, her friend Barbara Partridge was publishing a guide to Los Angeles bargains. Partridge co-authored the first edition of Socolich's book and then moved to Oregon, sending Socolich off on her own, running from sale to sale — and appearance to appearance. She's been doing TV segments — first for KGO and now every other Saturday for KRON's “Daybreak” — since 1974, and ran a subscription newsletter for about 10 years.

The book's sales peaked in the 1980s, which worked out just fine for putting twins Bob and Mike and daughter Wendy through college.

In the end, it had 700 listings. “I went through it this morning, and, gone, gone, gone — there's been such turnover, with every edition I found it harder to replace a listing with a good, solid substitute,” Socolich says. “We have no garment district anymore. . . . Some of the best places moved out of state because of the labor and tax situation.”

“It's sad to see it all happen over the years. And when we got to 2000 and it was time to do another edition of the book, I just felt there was no there there.”

So she's ready to take another step away from the shops — but not before sharing a few of her hard-bought lessons with the fans who have lamented her departure from The Chronicle.

First of all, there are her favorite places to find bargains on home furnishings: Pioneer Home Supply on Mission Street in San Francisco for carpeting and Sealy mattresses, and House of Values on El Camino Real in San Mateo for brand-name furniture. Both operate on low overhead — you'll think you're lost when you're on the elevator to Pioneer, on the fifth floor of a downtown office building, and House of Values lets catalogs, not a fancy showroom, do most of its selling.

All of which figures into the meat of savvy shopping: “Bargain hunting is almost always about making trade-offs, because you can't have it both ways,” Socolich says. “If you want to save money,

you may have to go out of your way, shop someplace that doesn't have convenient hours and isn't close to home. You might not get the level of service you'd like — maybe you're going to have to wait a while. There may not be a good return policy — or it might be that all sales are final. And you always have to ask, especially with apparel: Is there anything wrong with this, is it a second? Because if there's going to be a problem, you want to know you can fix it.”

“So it's about trade-offs. I get baffled when people write to me and complain about having had to wait in a line. I think, well, did you think it would be like Nordstrom? Certain sales are really a zoo, and it's very competitive to get to the good stuff. The payoffs, though . . .”

The payoffs fill Socolich's closets and decorate her house — so much so, she says, that she can't buy anything more.

Not that that will stop her from shopping. She's excited about an outlet she found visiting her son's family in Portland, and just a few weeks ago, when she was visiting the California grandkids, she found some great buys on quilting material.

Dallas, here she comes.

Sally Socolich's final Bargain Hunter column will appear Dec. 7. E-mail Susan Fornoff at sfornoff@sfchronicle.com.