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If there is an art to the folding screen, it is diplomacy. Unallied and independent in the field of decorating, it packs quickly; it travels. Without the wrecking ball of renovation or the bull-doze of big sofas and chairs, a folding screen can furnish an original solution to most design standoffs. Like a diplomat, it takes both sides in a crisis. A pleasure when engaged, entertaining in a group, it is the civilest of servants.

Only recently has the folding screen been relegated to the corner, where it patiently shades the wall. Historically, the folding screen has had important household responsibilities. For more than two thousand years a convention of furnishing in Far Eastern Asia, the

providing more intimate scale for seating groups, hiding the unsightly object, and preventing formidable drafts. For pure effect, large-scale folding screens could be moved more conveniently than framed paintings or wallpaper; for three hundred years, it was the most fun you could have with a piece of unupholstered furniture. By the nineteenth century, the screen was synonymous with the idea of comfort, its winged, nestlike nooks called “snuggeries for writing or work” in a household magazine in 1885.

Nothing has changed but attitudes. With modern architectural space, the folding screen is more useful than ever. The traditional screen is also showing

FOLDING SCREENS

for two thousand years, they've been the most versatile pieces of furniture in the house

screen provided a flexible floor plan for houses built with few interior walls.

A Chinese invention, the folding screen was also a literary and artistic device—a popular medium for writers and painters. During the Sung dynasty in China, it was considered a serious art form, displayed as a conversation piece to inspire poetic discussion among scholars. Painted landscapes of classical sites, accompanied by narrative and comment in an accomplished calligraphic hand, unfolded like a journey on the panels of the screen.

In Western Europe, the folding screen enjoyed similar roles, both functional and decorative. It proved its use among the aristocracy in large sixteenth-century salons, dividing them into smaller rooms for specific events,

new reach in its range of raw materials: For instance, architectural salvage, like sets of antique windows, shutters, or doors, need only hinges to become one-of-a-kind screens. With elegant hardware such as stainless-steel hinges or nickel-plated casters, or a colorful paint treatment, plain lumber can be turned into a stylish, versatile screen that is also simple to make.

From the entry to the study to the bedroom to the bathroom tub, screens prove to be dedicated workers, not dilettantes—creating privacy where there was none, mediating or expanding the uses of a room, keeping ugliness in its place while billboard a little beauty instead. The folding screen may look like a decorative pushover, but a design lightweight it's not.

FOYER SCREEN An entry hall gains definition, direction, and architectural interest with a screen constructed from antique windows. The four panels were connected with single-action hinges (they fold in one direction only, like a book). The hinges were reversed in direction between the middle panels so the screen can be folded flat, like a series of pleats.