

# The vanishing TV set

Forget the gaudy flat-panel; now everyone's hiding the home entertainment system

By ANDREW LAVALLEE

When Ryan Heuser was putting the finishing touches on his restored 1960s-era house in California, he wanted to preserve its period look and minimalist interior. It wasn't hard in the kitchen, which the 34-year-old outfitted with Boffi cabinets and sleek appliances such as a Viking range and Miele dishwasher.

But the living room, where he planned to install a home-theater system, was trickier. Even high-end loudspeakers were going to be too clunky for the room, he says. "I really wanted something that blended seamlessly," says Mr. Heuser, president of Paul Frank Industries Inc., an apparel company.

So he paid about \$7,000 for three thin speakers that are embedded in the wall and hidden behind a screen. The system, called Artcoustic, includes an "acoustically transparent" fabric that consumers can have images printed on, making the speakers look like framed artwork or a wall panel.

Big home-entertainment systems and flat-screen plasma television sets may remain status symbols for some, but as prices continue to drop—and the devices become ubiquitous—an increasing number of consumers are downplaying their living-room gadgetry.

Manufacturers, for their part, are adding decorative touches to soften their components' looks. Others are offering products that disguise liquid-crystal displays as Pic-

assos and speaker systems designed to be works of art in themselves.

A handful of manufacturers have previously offered "lifts"—devices that let TV sets flip down from ceilings or emerge from furniture—but this next generation of devices attempts to hide electronics in plain sight.

VisionArt, a unit of Solar Shading Systems of California, makes prints that retract in their frames to reveal plasma TV sets. The motorized frames sell for as much as \$18,000. The company's vice president, Dave Froerer, says the line, now in its fifth year, has seen sales increase 40% to 50% a year, helped, he adds, by falling flat-panel prices.

"Plasma doesn't carry the prestige that it used to," he says. "Hanging a \$20,000 TV on the wall, there was something to be said for wanting people to see it. The thing right now is to hide electronics."

World-wide sales of flat-panel TV sets nearly doubled last year to 48.5 million units, from 25.6 million in 2005, according to iSuppli Corp., a market-research firm in California. The average selling

price for plasma TV sets dropped to about \$1,700, from nearly \$2,500 in 2005.

Chicago interior designer Jessica Lagrange incorporated a VisionArt piece into a client's pent house, reproducing a 1934 painting the client already owned—"Michigan Avenue," by J. Jeffrey Grant—to cover a plasma TV set. "A big black screen just seemed out

of character with the style of the room," which has a more traditional design, Ms. Lagrange says. With the system in place, she adds "You'd never know there was a TV behind it."

Other companies are reintroducing wood, a material more evocative of antique armoires than contemporary design, to home electronics. LG Electronics has developed a prototype wooden frame for a large plasma screen. Wood Contour Inc., based in Neustadt, Germany, sells wood LCD monitors for personal computers, while Swiss Computers of Ontario, Canada launched in September with a variety of limited-edition, wood-encased PCs.

The idea behind the products, says Howard Suissa, the company's 37-year-old president, is to "create something that people would want to showcase as a device in a living room." Suissa also

offers ornamental detailing, such as a PC inlaid with white gold and five carats of diamonds, which recently sold for about \$25,000, according to Mr. Suissa.

"They're signed, they're numbered. They're not only computers

or functional systems, but works of art," he says. Still, he added, the wait for Microsoft Corp.'s Windows Vista slowed sales, since some customers put off PC purchases until the new operating system launched.



Media Director  
HidandChic, a  
TV-set masking  
device (left);  
speakers  
disguised as a  
wall sconce  
(below left) and  
a clock (below)  
from Audio's  
Acoustic  
Research line



# Homeowners treat flashy electronics as eyesores

## Manufacturers add decorative touches to ease appearances

By ANDREW LAVALLEE

When Ryan Heuser was putting the finishing touches on his restored 1960s-era house in Newport Beach, California, he wanted to preserve its period look and minimalist interior. It wasn't hard in the kitchen, which the 34-year-old outfitted with Boffi cabinets and sleek appliances like a Viking range and Miele dishwasher.

But the living room, where he planned to install a home-theater system, was trickier. Even high-end loudspeakers were going to be too clunky for the room, he says. "I really wanted something that blended seamlessly," says Mr. Heuser, president of Paul Frank Industries Inc., an apparel company.

So he paid about \$7,000 for three thin speakers that are embedded in the wall and hidden behind a screen. The system, called Artcoustic, includes an "acoustically transparent" fabric that consumers can have images printed on, making the speakers look like framed artwork or a wall panel.

Big home-entertainment systems and flat-screen plasma television sets may remain status symbols for some, but as prices continue to drop—and the devices become ubiquitous—an increasing number of consumers are playing down their living-room gadgetry.

Manufacturers, for their part, are adding decorative touches to soften their components' looks. Others are offering products that disguise liquid-crystal displays as Picassos and speaker systems designed to be works of art in themselves.

Artcoustic sales have increased 50% a year in the U.S. for the past four years and are poised to generate more than \$3 million in revenue in 2007, says StJohn Group Inc., the Bellingham, Washington, company that sells the line domestically. "The typical customer for this has probably never even ventured into a hi-fi store," says John Caidwell, StJohn's co-founder.

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vices that let TV sets flip down from ceilings or emerge from furniture—but this next generation of devices attempts to hide electronics in plain sight.

**VisionArt**, a unit of **Solar Shading Systems** of Costa Mesa, California, makes prints that retract in their frames to reveal plasma TV sets. The motorized frames sell for as much as \$18,000. Vice President Dave Froerer says the line, now in its fifth year, has seen sales increase 40% to 50% a year, helped, he adds, by falling flat-panel prices.

"Plasma doesn't carry the prestige that it used to," he says. "Hanging a \$20,000 TV on the wall, there was something to be said for wanting people to see it. The thing right now is to hide electronics."

Judith Sexton, co-owner of **Media Decor LLC** in Fort Lauderdale, Florida, which offers a TV-masking device called **HideandChic**, echoed the sentiment. "While the television's on, that's one thing," she says. When it is turned off, "the lady of the house and the designers find it a little ugly. It's just like a big, blank, black square on the wall." She declined to specify **HideandChic**'s sales.

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Chicago interior designer **Jessica Lagrange** incorporated a **VisionArt** piece into a client's Lake Shore Drive penthouse, reproducing a 1934 painting the client already owned—"Michigan Avenue," by J. Jeffrey Grant—to cover a plasma TV set. "A big black screen just seemed out of character with the style of the room," which has a more traditional design, Ms. Lagrange says. With the system in place, she adds, "you'd never know there was a TV behind it."

**VisionArt** also sells editions of works signed by its painters and photographers and employs Ren Wicks,

a former ad agency art director, to prospect for talent at expos and online. Artists used to rebuff the idea of providing work to cover TVs as a "contraption," Mr. Wicks says, but he now has a backlog of inquiries from artists from places as distant as Kuwait and New Zealand.

Other companies are reintroducing wood, a material more evocative of antique armchairs than contemporary design, to home electronics. At the Consumer Electronics Show in January, LG Electronics displayed a prototype wooden frame for a large plasma screen, and **Chief Manufacturing Inc.**, of Savage, Minnesota, unveiled a line of decorative pine frames for 32-, 42- and 50-inch flat-panel TVs that retail for \$699 to \$879.

The company also offers a five-millimeter glass overlay that turns the TV into a mirror when it is

turned off, though it reduces the TV's brightness about 5%. The mirror kits cost \$549 to \$1,199.

**Wood Contour Inc.**, based in Neustadt, Germany, sells wood LCD monitors for personal computers, while **Suissa Computers** of Thornhill, Ontario, launched in September with a variety of limited-edition, wood-encased PCs that range from the deconstructed, contemporary "Revolution" to "Yasuko," a \$6,400 piece of hardware that wouldn't look out of place on a mantel.

The idea behind the products, says Howard Suissa, the company's 37-year-old president, is to "create something that people would want to showcase as a device in a living room." The systems are assembled to order, he says, using Intel and Advanced Micro Devices chips, Nvidia video cards, Seagate Technology hard drives and other well-known providers. Suissa also offers ornamental detailing, such as a PC inlaid with white gold and five carats of diamonds, which recently sold for about \$25,000, according to Mr. Suissa.

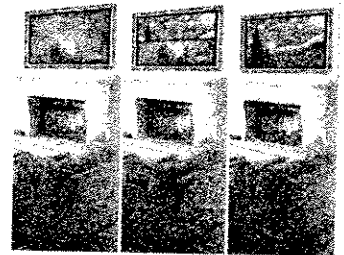
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wait for Microsoft Corp.'s Windows Vista slowed sales, since some customers held off PC purchases until the new operating system launched.

Anne Janis, a veterinary researcher in Fayetteville, Georgia, originally bought her set of **Wood Contour** peripherals because she

suspected her plastic keyboard was irritating her fingers. She likes that the purpleheart wood of her monitor, mouse and keyboard complements the sage and cranberry interior of her home office.

"I didn't want something that looked yucky," she says.



Media Decor's HideandChic system hides a flat TV behind a framed art print.

