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The Ring Cycle: Coasters' Star Turn

By JULIE LASKY MARCH 26, 2014

Brian Dubois is a Detroit-area designer whose surname means “of the wood,” and it fits. At the Architectural Digest Home Show in New York last weekend, he showed tables of solid walnut with cork embedded in the tops.

But what really caught the eye were his drink coasters. Or Corksters. The wood-and-cork squares were designed to be stacked into artful columns when not in use. “Mini-sculptures,” Mr. Dubois called them, an alternative life for objects that don’t usually rate a lot of attention unless tipsy people are flinging them across barrooms.

Traditionally, coasters have been like omelets: beautifully basic, easily elaborated, appreciated by almost everyone, but not particularly inspiring. That has been the case for as long as people have sought to protect their wood furniture from the destructive forces of condensation.

But look again. Coasters are having a moment. Log onto Etsy, the online marketplace for craft, and you will find more than 73,000 listings. A single page recently offered coasters made with jar lids, “Downton Abbey” quotes and maps of Chicago.

Coasters can be cardboard, glass, cork, leather, agate, silver, plastic, cotton, ceramic, Corian or petrified wood. And even budget-conscious consumers might set their drinks on expensive stuff like malachite or shagreen because so little material is required to make a coaster, and the designs need not be intricately tooled; any dumb slab will do.



The Night You Left Me, by Nir Hod, available from Artware Editions; \$95 for a set of four.

The variety of coaster shapes is dazzling anyway: circles, arcs, hexagons. The silhouetted components of a paper cheeseburger (patty, bun, tomato, lettuce), which you stack to make a complete sandwich, or a mirrored square with simulated lines of cocaine.

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The coaster epidemic can be attributed to the collision of two cultural movements: the popularity of do-it-and-sell-it-yourself projects and the cult of the cocktail.

“You have this huge rise in young, independent makers who are creating things out of their own studios and then putting them on the web to sell,” said Jill Singer, a co-founder of the design website Sight Unseen (and a former staff editor of mine when I ran the now-defunct design magazine I.D.). “This is just a tiny little canvas where they can play with ideas about form and materials and have fun.”

Bari Ziperstein, a Los Angeles artist who exhibits in galleries while marketing household objects and jewelry under the name Bzippy and Company, is one example. She makes ceramic coasters with colorful, rustic patterns inspired by Finnish design. “I can play with pattern, test shapes, glazes, et cetera, on a small scale,” she wrote in an email about her design adventures, which involve firing the coasters in a kiln and drying them between sheets of moisture-absorbing drywall for two weeks, flipping them every other day to keep them from warping.

Similarly, Cold Cuts by Chen Chen and Kai Williams, Brooklyn designers, are an experiment first and consumer objects as a bonus. The original idea, Mr. Chen said, was to bundle materials together and slice them at the point of purchase, like deli workers carving cured meats. “Obviously, for a lot of reasons, that didn’t get realized,” he added. But he and Mr. Williams persisted in binding wood chunks, cords, plastic and other materials together with resin-soaked spandex netting and cutting randomly patterned cross-sections that work nicely as coasters. The men have since scaled up their method to produce tabletops, one of which will be shown in May by the Grey Area Gallery in New York, and they have translated the look of the coasters into limited-edition carpets for Tai Ping, which were displayed at [Art Basel Miami](#) in December.



Santorini coasters from Jonathan Adler; \$68 for a set of four.

The headcheese aesthetic of Cold Cuts may not be for everyone, but one virtue of coasters is that they allow consumers to indulge their wildest tastes without disrupting their décor. Social media platforms like Instagram spread the fever. As Ms. Singer said: “You want to have all these cute little styling objects around because people are constantly documenting their own life and spaces. You think, ‘Oh, that creates such a nice little vignette.’”

Thanks to their size and simplicity, coasters are stealthy cultural touchstones. They allude to dramas much more profound than their simple uses may suggest.

Consider, for instance, the last episode of the seventh season of the HBO series “Curb Your Enthusiasm.” Larry David is on the verge of reuniting with his estranged wife, Cheryl (Cheryl Hines), when she places a paper cup of latte on his unprotected coffee table.

“Cheryl, do you respect wood?” Mr. David asks, all hopes for a reconciliation now gone.

The first tabletop object called a coaster was not designed out of respect for wood: It was a bottle stand used by 18th-century Europeans passing around a decanter after supper. Sarah Coffin, head of the product design and decorative arts department at Cooper-Hewitt, National Design Museum said that the cloth would have been pulled up at that point and the servants dismissed, leaving the diners (usually men) to fend for themselves.

Originally called sliders, these decanter stands were rimmed silver trays, often with baize-covered wood bases to reduce friction on bare tables. Some even had wheels. Sliders later became known as coasters in allusion to the edge, or “coast,” of the table, around which the decanter circulated, like a ship hugging a shore.



Burger coasters, available from Kikkerland; \$5 for a set of six.

Sharing equal billing as an influence on the modern coaster, Ms. Coffin said, is the bierdeckel, or paper beer mat, a late-19th-century German invention that was originally placed on top of a mug to keep stray dirt and insects from falling in. (The hinged cover of a beer stein served the same purpose.)

Eventually, the beer mat migrated underneath the mug like the coasters we use today, but its job was to absorb messy liquid that sloshed over the edges of the glass, and, more

important, to advertise the name of the beer hall or brew.

In Ms. Coffin’s view, a more direct ancestor of the modern coaster is the saucer, a design that dates to the Middle Ages and is all about protection. The coaster as we know it evolved in the 20th century, she said, because of three developments that made furniture more vulnerable: the growing popularity of aperitifs enjoyed away from the dining room; the availability of ice, giving rise to condensation on glassware; and the exposing of wood surfaces throughout the home. (In a shrouded Victorian interior, one might have had to actively search for a place to leave a ring.)

Of course, beer mats are still with us, publicizing their commercial messages. Some do more. Fifty thousand drink coasters containing information about missing persons were recently distributed to bars and restaurants around Albany. In other cities, bars lay out coasters printed with warnings about drunken driving or QR codes that patrons can scan to arrange for transportation during a carousing holiday like St. Patrick’s Day. And more and more bars are using coasters manufactured by Drink Safe Technologies of Plantation, Fla., that are treated with a chemical that can detect if a date-rape drug has been added to a drink.

On the lighter side of bar-inspired coaster innovation is [BlinkDrink](#), an iPhone app that turns your drink into a kinetic sculpture. As your phone’s microphone picks up ambient noise, it translates it into a pulsing circle of colored light on the screen. Set your drink on this pool of light, and the glass seems to throb with the music playing around you.

BlinkDrink’s inventor, Bradley Simpson, a designer and engineer with IDEO in Palo Alto, Calif., said that the idea came from seeing so many people at bars and restaurants riveted to their phones and not communicating with anyone around them. He wanted to reposition the smartphone “as something other than an email, voice or Twitter interface,” he wrote in his own email.

But isn’t there something counterintuitive about putting a sweating glass on an iPhone?

“It’s a funny tension,” said Mr. Simpson. It “ultimately forces people to view their phone as a utility or tool instead of a precious object.”

Exactly like a coaster.

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THE DETAILS

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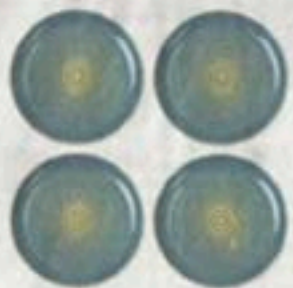
Toast It, available from Moxie Design Store; \$30 for a set of eight.



Race Track, available from Kikkerland; \$5 for a set of six.



India Sheldrake's Southwestern coasters, available from Sight Lines; \$65 for a set of four.



Swirled coasters from Jonathan Adler; \$48 for a set of four.