

A Modern Classic

It fell out of style in the 1930s, but the clawfoot tub is returning to today's homes.

By Anna Ingwersen



BATHS WASH AWAY children's playground dirt and lunchtime leftovers, but for adults, taking a bath is often a luxurious retreat from our busy lives. As the lazy days of summer come to an end and cool autumn temperatures return to Central Texas, the idea of soaking in a warm evening bath sounds especially appealing.

A nice bathtub can make all the difference between a functional experience and a luxurious one. The clawfoot tub can turn a bathroom into a haven. It became popular in the late 19th century, when bathing was a once-a-week affair. Better than its poorer cousin, the aluminum tub, the clawfoot offered space to stretch out and linger. Originally made from cast iron and finished with a porcelain glaze, they had four legs with claw-shaped feet for support, giving them an animate, friendly appearance.

Robin Callan, owner and principal designer of Room Fu Knockout Interiors, has a special fondness for the clawfoot tub and its history. Even though we associate it with luxury, she explains, the clawfoot tub was initially produced as a horse trough and hog scalding in the 1880s. It took another 40 to 50 years to become desirable for bathing.

In New York City, Callan says, it's still not entirely uncommon to find clawfoot tubs installed in the kitchen. When many of the old tenement buildings were originally constructed, she says, residents saved plumbing costs by installing a single wet area that was used as both a kitchen and a bathroom. Clawfoot tubs were a central part of these wet areas and were often used for bathing, doing laundry and washing dishes.

Callan fantasizes about creating an all-white bathroom

with a clawfoot tub painted an unexpected color like tangerine or fuchsia. "Sadly," she says, "many people are too afraid of resale value to go against the spa-tub grain." But there are those who appreciate the nostalgia and originality of clawfoot tubs.

"In this part of the country, bathing in a cast-iron tub began modestly in the early part of the last century," says Scott Walker, owner of the Clawfoot Bathtub Warehouse in San Marcos, but their appeal still exists today. "Cast-iron clawfoot tubs are very popular, not only because of their classic style, but they are very functional, unlike the modern apron tubs that are just too small to actually bathe in," says Walker.

Antique cast-iron clawfoot bathtubs and genuine modern reproductions are made to last a lifetime, says Walker. Antique versions require refinishing, he says, because lead was often used in the porcelain glaze. They sometimes require special plumbing hardware to install in modern bathrooms. Purchasing acrylic reproductions might be easier than refinishing and updating antique tubs, but they don't come with the old charm of early ones, such as original manufacture dates ingrained on the bottom of early 20th century tubs.

Clawfoot tubs are special for three reasons, Callan says. First, they're like sculptures for the bathroom, a focal point in an otherwise common space. They work well in smaller bathrooms because they leave more flooring material exposed, "which gives you the optical illusion of a larger space," she says. And finally, Callan appreciates that "they're the only plumbing fixtures you can transform for the price of a can of paint."

Clawfoot facts:

The father of clawfoots dates back 3,000 years to the island of Crete, where the first such tub made from pottery was discovered.

The first clawfoot tubs in the United States were made in New Jersey.

Cast-iron tubs can weigh up to 400 pounds.

