

Some Cautions on Fancy Faucets

by Lynn Comeskey



Until recently, kitchen and bathroom faucets were all chrome and all business. No longer. They have become an important part of the decor and boast new functions, shapes, and colors.

Properly known as decorative plumbing brass, these new faucets, many of them imported from Europe, have caught the imagination of designers and clients. Fully 50 percent of my business includes these upscale faucets. But with them come problems you don't have to face with old chrome standbys like Delta or Moen. These surprises can be nasty, and they seem to increase with the price of the faucet.

Getting to Know You

One of the Twelve Commandments of Remodeling is "Thou shalt not start the job until all materials are in hand." This Commandment was written for decorative faucets. It's tempting to just settle for the valve body and worry about the trim later, but don't. In fact, as caution as it may sound, you or your plumber may want to "dry-fit" all of the parts of the faucet when you pick it up. This way you can make sure that you'll have everything you need. It also allows you a chance to ask questions of your supplier if some part of the assembly isn't clear.

If you won't have a chance to see the fitting ahead of time, you might offer to install it on a time-and-materials basis. But even then, make sure you or your plumber end up with the printed instructions. A few years ago, we neglected both of these pearls of wisdom when installing a Danish tub/shower mixer. After many more hours than any of us care to remember (and within mere moments of admitting defeat), our plumber finally figured out how it was supposed to be installed.

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An illustrated parts list is helpful too. We were once asked to install a faucet by a homeowner who, unbeknownst to us, had purchased it as is (missing a few parts) for a song from the local purveyor of "faucet exotica." You can imagine how much fun we had with that one.

Putting the Pieces Together

Beware of tub/shower or lavie

mixers that are assembled from several pieces, because how these pieces are put together can make all the difference. For instance, we have received mixers with both valves operating in the same direction, rather than hot and cold operating in opposite directions. Obviously we were given a unit made with two rights or two lefts.

Another assembly problem to watch for is valve stems that don't align in mixers that are silver-soldered together. Unlike threaded or corrugated connections to the valves that are easy to line up, the silver-soldered versions are impossible to budge. We recently had to get three Broadway mixers off our distributor's shelves before finding one that was even close to being correct.

Some Italian mixer valves don't have these assembly problems – they come unassembled, and you get to put them together. Our imported faucet "guru" won't even stock these. And while you would assume that any plumbing fitting offered for sale in this country would either have U.S. threads or come with adapters, this is not always the case. The only answer is to be thorough. At the \$55 to \$65 an hour we pay plumbers in this area, it's important they have everything they need to complete the installation on the first trip.

Plumbing the Depth

Another disturbing fact about many European faucets is that they are intended for finished surfaces with little depth. This can be a real problem for tiled shower/tub walls. While trying to install the Danish mixer I mentioned earlier, we discovered after much head-scratching, that it was made for a 3/8-inch-thick wall. We were trying to install it in tile over a mortar float that exceeded an inch in thickness. With some good luck, we were able to locate an extra lavie faucet escutcheon and "refashion" it at a local machine shop. Thank goodness. We would never have been able to duplicate the distinctive yellow-enamel finish.

Remember that tile needs some latitude because the thickness of the mortar bed can vary considerably depending on how plumb and square the framing is. Our plumber is used to having over an inch of flexibility with domestic mixer valve bodies because they are deep and have lots of thread. By contrast, we have encountered some imported mixers with approximately $\frac{1}{2}$ inch of thread. This means the valve body has to be installed very accurately to make the trim work later.

But this problem isn't exclusive to tub/shower installations. Although plastic laminate and solid surfacing material like Corian aren't usually a problem, tiled lavies and kitchen countertops can be. Grohe, Dornbracht, Broadway do offer valve stem extensions, and another manufacturer, Phylrich, will custom make stems to the length you need.

A Solid Finish

Another popular item is the reproduction, white-ceramic cross or lever handles. However, they don't make 'em like they used to. The handles seem to break with greater ease than you'd expect – I test them ahead of time.

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Truth be known, some of the decorative faucets in the higher-priced brackets, which the homeowner naturally equates with the highest quality, just aren't made very well. On several occasions we have been asked to replace expensive, nationally advertised faucets that should have gone right back to the retailer under the warranty. In this vein, talk to your supplier about brand names you don't have experience with; they know what comes back and what doesn't.

One expectation that the homeowner carries after many years of owning chrome-finished fixtures is that even an aging faucet will continue to sport that flawless, showroom gleam. Fine for chrome, but not for polished brass and other more exotic finishes that are experiencing a wave of popularity. One manufacturer purposely doesn't apply a finished protective finish so the faucet trim tarnishes right away. That's okay if the homeowner is aware of it; but that's usually not the case. We make sure that the client understands what to expect before we purchase and install.

Most manufacturers spray their fixtures with a lacquer finish to protect the raw metal or plating. Lacquer finishes have a nice warm sheen, but won't take a lot of abuse and allow rapid tarnishing once this coating is scratched. We've tried to have tarnished pieces repolished and lacquered locally, but the finish doesn't last long. To put off the inevitable, look for the brands with a polymer resin finish; they are much more durable. Artistic Brass, for example, offers a five-year guarantee on its finish.

Despite this litany of cautions, I'm not trying to discourage anyone from using decorative faucets. Most are good-looking and functional, and they continue to rise in popularity. But they do require extra diligence and attention from you, and a new set of expectations from your client. ■

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