



A STEP AHEAD

More than just a means of making your way around the house, a staircase is a great place to showcase your style. **Georgia Madden** shows how to take your home to the next level.

After years spent languishing in the design doldrums, the humble staircase is enjoying its moment in the spotlight. Once seen as little more than a means of taking you from one level of the house to the next, words such as 'sculptural' and 'statement' in reference to staircases are all clear signs that they have come of age.

While traditional staircases are unlikely to ever fall off the design radar completely, modern engineering technology has taken previously unimaginable designs off the drawing table and into our homes. Staircases now appear to float in mid-air, hang from the ceiling, or twist around central columns like leaves on a branch. They do everything, it seems, except slink into the background.



Design choices

- ***Straight** This no-frills design is well suited to narrow spaces.
- ***Spiral or helical** These dramatic styles wind around a central column with a single handrail on the outer side.
- ***Winding** Features a small landing halfway up, where the staircase changes direction. A good choice when a long bank of stairs is needed in a tight space.
- ***Cantilevered** Treads extend out from the wall so the staircase appears to float.
- ***Suspended** The whole staircase is attached to the walls or suspended from the ceiling with rigid cables.
- ***Open risers** Allows light and air to flow unobstructed. Can enhance the feeling of space in a small room.
- ***Mono stringer** Risers connected via a single central support (stringer).



Material considerations

While timber remains a firm favourite for building both stairs and balustrades, materials such as glass, stainless steel, stone and sheet metal are cropping up with more frequency. Designers are combining contrasting materials – concrete with timber and glass, for example – to create staircases that double as eye-catching features. Tom Acquroff, Marketing Manager at staircase design and manufacture firm Slattery & Acquroff, says 'going green' will be the next big thing in staircases. "We'll see a move away from heavy, expensive and wasteful materials to those that are lightweight, cost-effective and eco-friendly – think recycled and sustainable timbers, timber composites and substrates."

The finer details

A show-stopping balustrade can transform a staircase into a fabulous design element. The latest balustrade trends include frameless glass, horizontal steel wire or vertical rods that extend to the ceiling, sculpted metal and plastic. According to architect Steffen Welsch, who designed the webbed balustrade at left, balustrades can be used to direct and diffuse light and change the mood of the space entirely, so whatever is visible should be carefully considered. If you opt for glass, you could create channels for fixing the glass so the hardware is completely invisible, says interior designer Meryl Hare. "Or, you could make a feature of the fixings by choosing ones that add to the overall design." >

Easy updates

- *Lay an attention-grabbing runner the length of the stairwell.
- *Repaint banisters in shades of the same colour, or give dark timber stairs the 'bright white' treatment to make the surrounding area feel larger and lighter.
- *Update the handrail or balustrade.
- *Rejuvenate worn treads with timber or stone cladding.
- *Make a feature of the walls alongside the stairs with a bold paint colour, decals or statement wallpaper. "The trick is to keep the design of the staircase simple so that anything you add isn't overwhelming," says interior designer Greg Natale.
- *If you rarely use that cupboard under the stairs, replace it with shelves or wine storage or simply open up the space.



The first steps

It's crucial to ensure stair width, headroom and maximum width, pitch, weight-bearing capacity and the engineering behind curved or floating staircases are correctly calculated, so you should always consult an expert. An architect, building designer or staircase specialist will help you navigate your way through the maze of safety regulations associated with stairs laid out in the Building Code of Australia. They will also ensure that the new staircase fits in proportionately and stylistically with your home, and may even introduce you to designs and materials you hadn't considered. Matthew Browne, Design Manager at Arden Architectural Stairs, says renovators should ask a number of

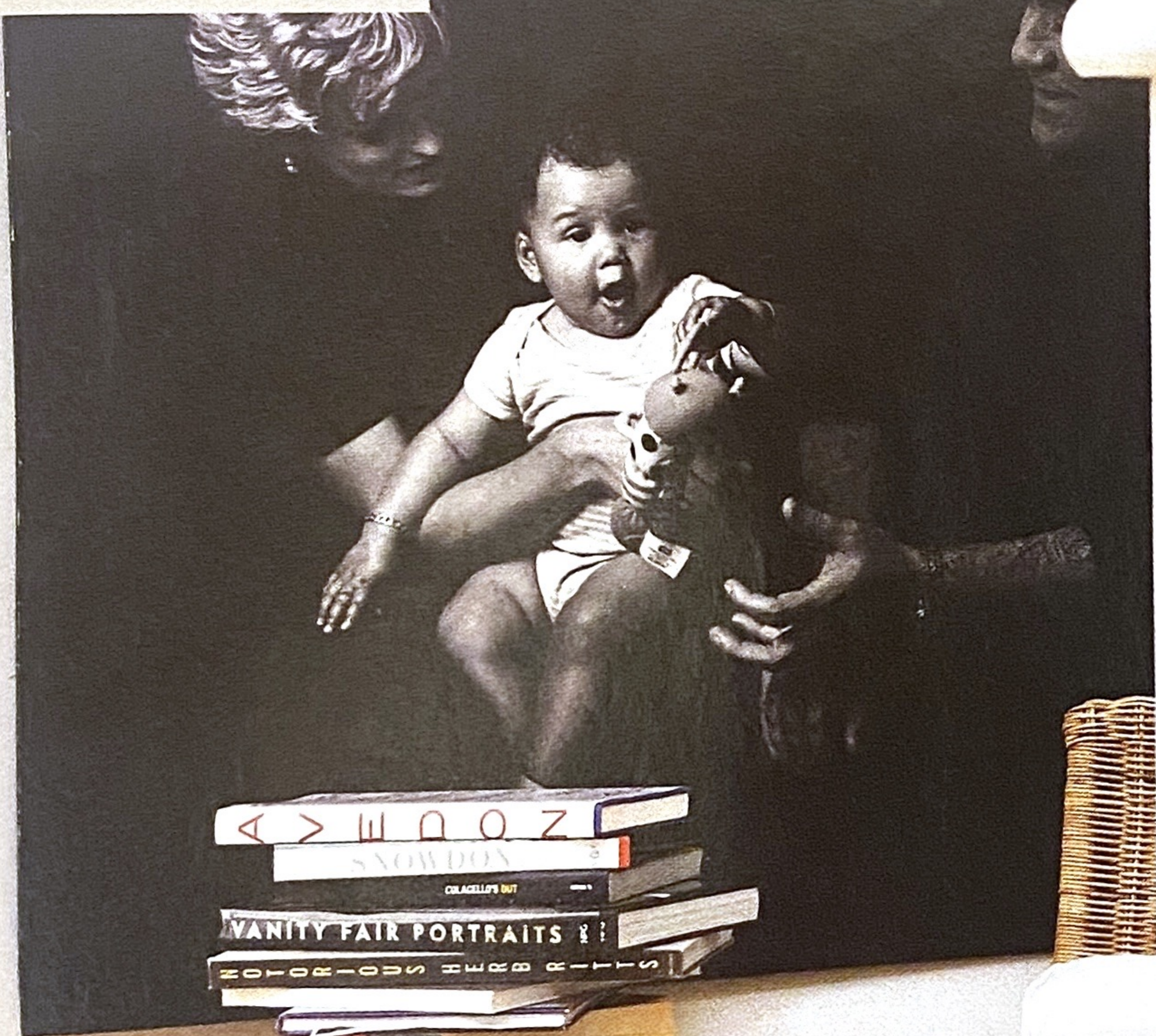
important questions before choosing their staircase designer: "Do they have current BCA licensing? Will they provide a detailed quote? If hardwood timber is being used, have they included sustainability ratings?" According to Browne, one of the hot trends in stairs is the feature balustrade. "Semi-opaque feature walls, or those constructed from vertical timber battens, are taking over where the traditional balustrade left off. Designers are also using modern synthetic materials to create balustrades with eye-catching and intricate optical properties." If you are in the market for a cutting-edge design, working with someone who not only has the ideas but knows how to implement them, will prevent hiccups during construction. >

'Balustrades can be used to direct and diffuse light, and can change the mood of a room entirely.' STEFFEN WELSCH, ARCHITECT

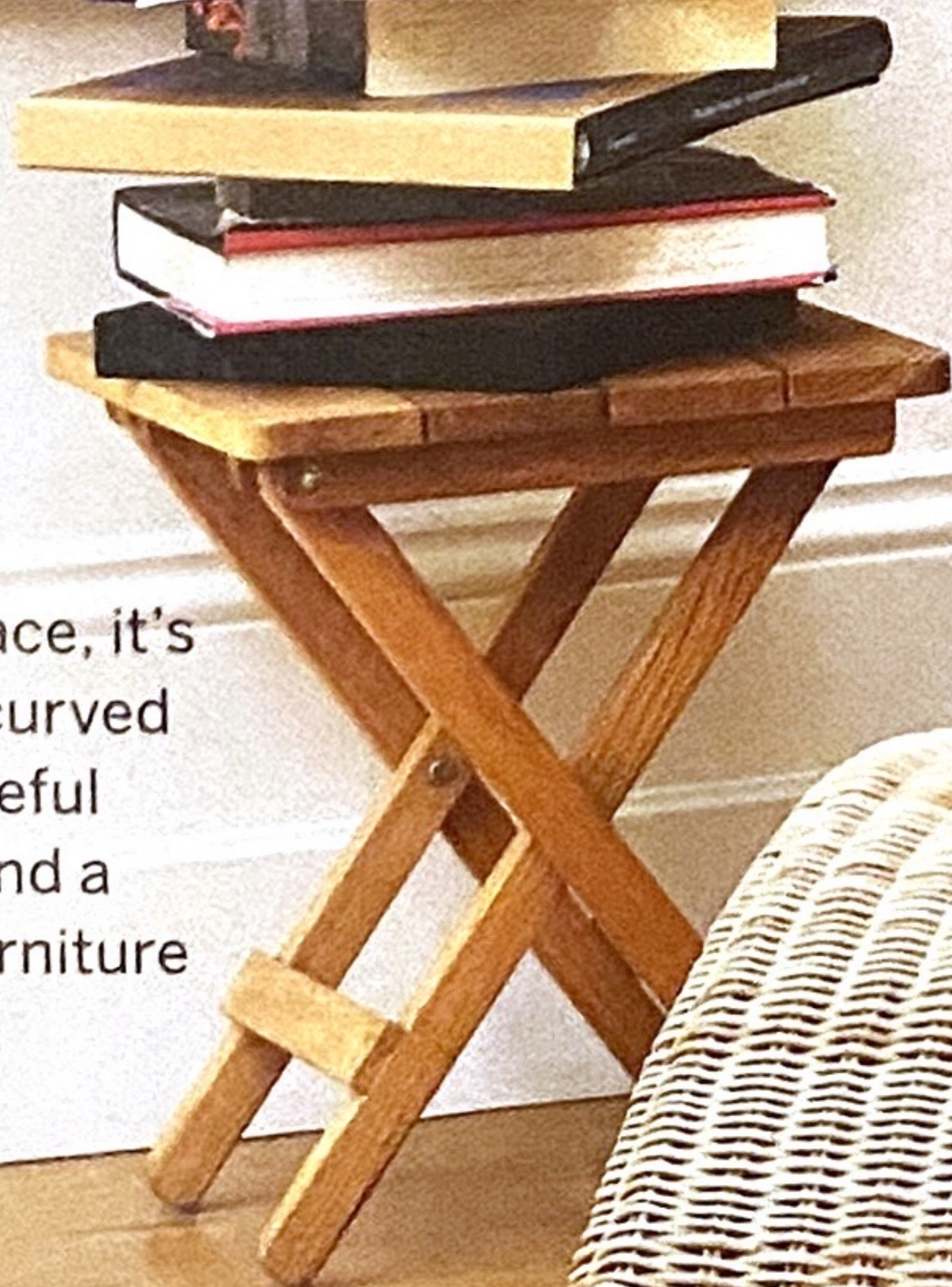


Ask yourself

Where will you position the staircase, and how much space is available? A cramped staircase will be uncomfortable to walk on and impossible to move furniture up and down – a constant source of frustration. Which style will best suit your home now and in the future? A staircase is a serious investment and will have a huge impact on the look and feel of your home, so it's wise to choose something that won't date. **H&G**



Stack of books including titles like 'VANITY FAIR PORTRAITS' and 'COLORS OF THE YEAR'.



If you have the space, it's hard to go past a curved staircase. Its graceful shape is inviting and a good match for furniture with organic lines.