

Bath Sinks

With Style and Sense

Don't let choices overwhelm your quest for a great lav

BY MARIA LAPIANA

Running the gamut from spalike minimalism to sybaritic decadence, today's bathrooms bear little resemblance to the no-nonsense washrooms of old. If this is apparent anywhere, it's in the stunning array of bathroom sinks—or lavatories, as they are known in the trade—available today.

These artful fixtures include vessels of natural stone, copper, bronze, and blown glass as well as ceramic basins that distinguish themselves through designs that are alternately sleek, curvaceous, carved, outsize, or edgy. It may seem that function has given way to form, with designs so stunning we're likely to forget that bathroom sinks even have a purpose. Consider this a reminder that there are practical considerations to weigh when choosing a new sink.

If you're designing a bath, your first task is deciding the type of sink suitable for the space. After you've settled on one of those seven essential types—pedestal, wall mount,

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GV-100
Kraus

Color? Keep it controlled



It's official: Coordinated bath fixtures in shades of pink and aqua have gone the way of crocheted toilet-roll cozies and seahorse wallpaper. While American Standard once offered china sinks in 11 colors, its go-to palette today numbers a mere three or four—all neutrals, depending on the model. "It used to be that color in the bath was driven by fixtures and tiles," says Gray Uhl, the company's design director, "but since there has been such an explosion of color in materials and accessories, including fabrics, fixtures are now the basics around which colors are chosen."

These days, it doesn't get any better than white. "I think white is nice and simple, and it's generally cheaper," says architect Sophie Piesse. "It's contemporary and modern, and gives a bath a clean and fresh look." Likewise, Paul DeGroot, an architect in Austin, Texas, is in no hurry to specify colorful sinks. They're a throwback to the past, he says. "I remember a green cultured-marble sink that matched a green 1980s tub, and a brown lav that matched a brown toilet—yes, brown—from a 1950s home." He adds, "Hopefully, this trend won't come full circle any time soon."

Still, some manufacturers are embracing color. Kohler's Jonathan Adler collection offers three low-profile lavs in four head-turning hues, including Palermo Blue and Piccadilly Yellow. "We're getting back to more fun and exciting statement colors," says Kohler designer Travis Rotelli. "But even our neutrals have a fresh look. They used to be white and biscuit. Now they're more dimensional. They have almost a textured look. We call them Sea Salt, Cane Sugar, and Basalt."

Not coy on color. Kohler's Jonathan Adler collection turns up the color volume, but most designers suggest keeping lavatories low key.

MATERIAL CHOICES

"The design process really gets going once materials come into play," says Bill McKeone, design manager for Kohler's Kallista brand. Familiar, tried-and-true sink materials such as vitreous china and enameled cast iron will always have an important place in the market. Newer composites, such as high-end solid-surface materials, are often specified today because they allow

for relatively fuss-free care. Material options are a major way by which the lavatory has crossed over from utility into art. Vessels made of glass, carved from stone, cast in bronze, or hammered in copper all reflect materials that have contributed to a veritable design revolution in bathroom sinks. Here are some common materials used in lavatories today.

VITREOUS CHINA

Made from a clay-and-mineral mixture that is glazed and then fired at high temperatures, vitreous china is the oldest, most common sink material. These high-gloss sinks are scratch- and stain-resistant, and require only minimal maintenance. "It's hard to beat the cleanability and decades of durability that come with vitreous china," says architect Paul DeGroot. If that's not enough, brands such as Porcher (from American Standard) boast an antimicrobial surface glaze on some china sinks that makes it even harder for stains and other nasties to gain a foothold. Although featured more often on toilets and tubs, the glaze, called EverClean, is also available on some sinks.



Vitreous china semirecessed vessel Xylem

PROS: When glazed and fired properly, vitreous china absorbs no water at all, making it long-lasting and sanitary. The material is also popular in basic, entry-level sinks, making it an economical choice.

CONS: Although less likely to chip or crack than other sinks, vitreous-china lavs are susceptible to damage from heavy impact.

"With glazed vitreous china, there is virtually no place for microbes to grab onto and live."

—Gray Uhl, American Standard

GLASS



Dorian glass vessel
American Standard

PROS: Most glass is stain-resistant and can be cleaned with any household cleanser.

CONS: Glass sinks can be pricey, and they show soap and water spots easily.

Colored, textured, flecked, studded, or otherwise adorned, glass sinks are an artful addition to any bathroom. Tempered handmade glass is most often used to create vessel sinks, but some undercounter styles (with clear, colored, or frosted finishes) are becoming popular options. Glass sinks are elegant, versatile, and surprisingly durable.

"The best glass sink is one that has texture. It's much more forgiving; you don't see the drips and every splash. You're not wiping it down 24/7." —Ann Morris, kitchen and bath designer

FIRECLAY

In use since the 19th century, fireclay, like vitreous china, is made from a clay-and-mineral mixture, but is fired at a higher temperature, making it even more resistant to extreme heat. The difference between the two lies primarily in the manufacturing process rather than the material itself. Fireclay is smooth and nonporous, and it won't fade or discolor. Its strength makes it the material of choice for many pedestals and console-style vanities.

"Thicker and more dense than those made from vitreous china, fireclay sinks are found more often in the kitchen than in the bath."

—Travis Rotelli, Kohler



Fireclay
Town Square
pedestal
American
Standard

PROS: Fireclay sinks are lead-free and highly resistant to chips, stains, and scratches.

CONS: Sometimes heavy, they often require additional structural support.

STAINLESS STEEL

Stainless-steel sinks come in several gauges, or thicknesses. Thicker metals are naturally more durable—and expensive. Stainless-steel lavs are available in high-end mirrorlike finishes, but it's just extra buffing that gives them that brilliant shine. Brushed finishes don't compromise durability.



Stainless-steel Bachata undermount Kohler

PROS: Stainless-steel sinks are tough and can withstand extreme temperatures.

CONS: Stainless steel scratches and dulls over time, and it comes in only one color.

"Stainless-steel sinks are very trendy, but they can be noisy and appear commercial and cold-feeling."

—Gray Uhl, American Standard

STONE

Bath sinks can be carved from an extraordinary array of natural stones—from granite and marble to onyx, limestone, and even petrified wood. Stone sinks are typically available in vessel (countertop) styles and in a variety of colors. Because stone is so porous, these sinks are often sealed before shipping. It's recommended that they be resealed every year; nevertheless, some designers advise against heavy daily use.

PROS: Few fixtures steal the show like hand-carved stone sinks.

CONS: It's not uncommon for stone sinks to chip, break, or stain.

Jeton vessel in Nero Marquina marble Kallista

"I did a half-granite rock with the middle scooped out. It was sculptural, but it weighed 150 lb. Reinforcing it required a structural engineer and thousands of dollars."

—Sophie Piesse, architect

ENAMELED CAST IRON

One of the oldest fixture materials, cast iron is also one of the most durable. When porcelain enamel (in a wide range of colors) is applied over cast iron, the result is a workhorse of a sink with incomparable gloss and shine. Because these sinks are made from such a trusted, long-lasting material, Kohler's come with a lifetime guarantee against cracks, chips, or burns.

Enameled cast-iron Tones basin Kohler

PROS: Enameled cast-iron sinks are solid, affordable, and easy to clean.

CONS: Installation may require extra support—and helping hands.

"Recycled iron (as much as 80%) is used in the manufacturing process, so these sinks are considered by many to be green products."

—Travis Rotelli, Kohler

SYNTHETIC

Synthetic lavatories represent a broad range of price, quality, and appearance, from budget-friendly "cultured stone" to proprietary (and pricey) solid-surface materials.

At the lower end, ground stone is mixed with synthetic resins, molded, and finished with a gel coating. Pricier solid-surface sinks are made from a blend of natural minerals and high-performance acrylics.

Consistent colors and patterns run all the way through, allowing solid-surface materials to be cut, carved, routed, and inlaid to create a variety of designs. Because of the wide disparity in the quality of synthetic materials, it's important to do research.

"Although they've been around for some time, there are newer solid-surface materials that are worth a second look."

—Bill McKeone, Kallista

OTHER METALS

A sink made of brass, bronze, copper, hammered copper, or nickel is a true statement piece. Most are found at the higher end of the price scale, with hand-crafted bronze among the most expensive. Brushed nickel has a warm, brown-tone appearance and a vintage feel. Copper has natural antibacterial properties.

PROS: Most metal sinks age gracefully, developing a soft patina.

CONS: Constant cleaning and care are required.

"The choices are endless—from rustic metal to detailed patterns."

—Travis Rotelli, Kohler

Lilies Lore cast-bronze undermount Kohler



Englishcast Cabrits basin Victoria + Albert

PROS: Synthetic-sink options are endless and available at all price points. Expensive ones are durable and can be repaired and renewed by sanding.

CONS: Heat may discolor some of these sinks, and coatings may crack over time. Appearance varies greatly with price.

SORTING THROUGH SHAPES

Choosing the shape of your lavatory can feel like sitting down to a geometry lesson in which you measure every angle and carefully calculate the area inside and out of the sinks on your short list. It also can come down to an immediate response: the conviction that the flat, minimalist pool you saw online is a must-have for your new powder room. Designers see it both ways. While scale and proportion make certain shapes more suitable for a particular space, the choice often comes down to aesthetics. Although certain shapes inherently offer a more modern vibe (rectangles fall into this category) and others read as more traditional (ovals), almost any shape can work in any bath, depending on its material and general style. Given the imagination of today's sink designers, though, there's no question that shape has become one more critical consideration in choosing the perfect lav, and not always an easy one. "Let's say you come upon a really cool octagonal shape, and everyone agrees it's really cool," says Kallista's McKeone. "If it conflicts with everything else that's going on in the bath, is it really that cool?"



Luna vessel
Kraus

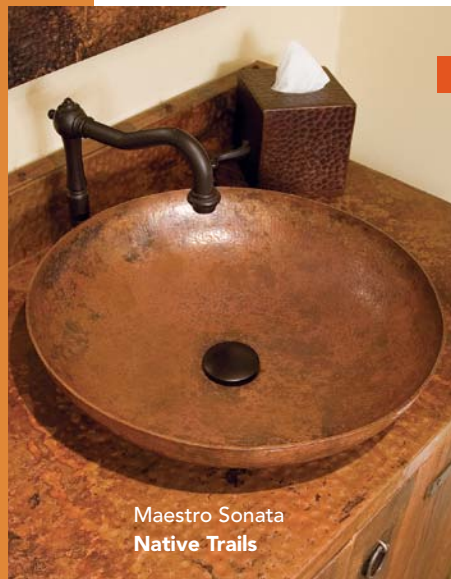
BOWLS

Hands down, the bowl-shaped vessel sink is the most artful option for any bath. Vessels get an A+ for the vast array of materials, sizes, and styles they reflect. While we're speaking here primarily of round, deep bowls with sloping sides, the term *vessel* has been used to describe a wide array of top-mounted sinks of various shapes, all designed to mimic a portable basin that's been set artfully on the flat surface of a countertop. Although vessel sinks are dismissed by some as trendy, most designers are convinced they are here to stay.

PROS: Our sources were unanimous: No sink makes a design statement better than a vessel.

CONS: Because of their height, vessel sinks often require wall-mounted faucets, of which there are fewer choices available; it also takes care to get the location and alignment right.

"Vessel sinks are beautiful. They can be very sculptural, but an inescapable truth is you've got to keep the inside and outside clean. More surface means room for fingerprints." —Sophie Piesse, architect



Maestro Sonata
Native Trails

ROUND

Today's round sinks edge a bit toward contemporary styling, but they've fallen out of favor with many designers, who see drop-in rounds as dated. Undermount and vessel models, however, still retain something of a modern cachet. The most common size for round sinks is 15 in. dia.

PROS: Round sinks tend to be smaller, so they can fit into tighter spaces.

CONS: Smaller round sinks can make it more difficult to keep splashing under control.

"Consumer feedback is showing that round sinks, although versatile, are not on as many homeowners' wish lists as you might think." —Travis Rotelli, Kohler

WADING POOLS

The average, practical depth for a lavatory is 6 in. to 8 in., but some of the newer wading-pool sinks measure no more than 2 in. from lip to drain. “The trend over the past 10 years has been toward shallow sinks,” says McKeone from Kallista. While these sinks play to drama, their shape owes its functionality to the trend toward sustainability. “It’s really about water conservation,” McKeone says. “We have flow restrictors now, so water is coming through at a lower pressure than in the past. Plus, it’s a cool look.”

“As to practicality, there’s a misconception that these sinks splash water everywhere. Not true. You just have to get used to how the sink and faucet work together.” —Travis Rotelli, Kohler



Neorest
Toto

PROS: They’re the sleekest, most provocative sinks on the market.

CONS: Detractors maintain that these edgy sinks create a splashfest and are nothing more than a passing fancy.

RECTANGULAR

The darling of many designers, the rectangular sink is both attractive and practical. Think about stretching your arms out and washing up, says Kohler’s Rotelli: “A rectangular sink gives you plenty of room. It’s far better than a square sink.” The horizontal aspect of a rectangle also allows plenty of room for faucets while keeping splashes in check.

“It used to be that oval was all we used, but why would you choose one today when there are so many wonderful rectangles on the market?” —Ann Morris, designer



Bacifiore
stainless drop-in
Kallista

PROS: The rectangle is a great look that works for drop-ins as well as undermounts.

CONS: This sink’s severe angles can seem out of sync in some more curvaceous baths.

OVAL

Practically speaking, an oval sink meets all the criteria for function and form; it’s wide enough for comfortable hand (and face) washing and shallow enough to accommodate a wide variety of faucets. Not surprisingly, the standard entry-level lav is a 17-in. by 14-in. oval.

“It’s right down the middle of the runway, and it works.”
—Bill McKeone, Kallista



PROS: Tried and true, oval sinks have been updated without compromising function.

CONS: With traditional overtones, an oval sink is probably not the best choice for an ultramodern space.

Tudor undermount oval
American Standard

SQUARE

Appealing in its simplicity, the square sink with vertical sidewalls and a flat bottom is a popular choice. That said, a square sink that’s wide enough for washing is also going to be quite deep front to back, which may be problematic depending on the depth of the vanity. Designer Morris doesn’t think square sinks need to be so severe. “I prefer square shapes, but not square bottoms. I like a scooped bottom because it softens the look and also drains better,” she says.

“I’ve found that there may be hundreds of dollars’ difference in two comparable square sinks, but often, the difference in quality isn’t really that great. It pays to shop around.” —Sophie Piesse, architect



Kiwami
Renesse II
vessel
Toto

PROS: Smaller squares work well in compact baths where twin sinks are a must.

CONS: A larger square sink on a conventional vanity top limits faucet selection.

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integral, drop-in, undermount, top-mount, and console—there are plenty more decisions to be made.

This is partly because the bathroom sink has evolved from a hardworking fixture the whole family uses to a luxury item designed to call attention to itself. Still, the sink needs to fit in with the overall bath design, says Bill

McKeone, design manager for Kallista, a division of Kohler. McKeone designed sinks for more than 25 years before shifting gears to work for Kohler tile brand Ann Sacks. The change gave him some perspective about sinks and the bathrooms they live in. “I was used to putting all of my thoughts into that one product, focusing on every detail,” he says, adding that later, “I came to appreciate

that the sink is only one piece of the big picture—that there has to be unity in the room.”

When choosing a lav, it’s important to consider where and how the sink will be used, and by whom. Designers of both sinks and bathrooms agree that the powder room is the best place to be creative. Wow and bling belong in the room to which guests are directed, says Ann Morris, a kitchen and

CONSIDER SIZE AND SCALE

In the bath, as in any room, proportion can make the difference between a serviceable design and a great one. In finding a sink to fit your bath space, it's not just about the sink itself, but the surrounding area as well. Bath designer Ann Morris notes that with so many fixtures available, it's easy to create an illusion of comfort in less-than-ideal spaces. A tiny powder room, for example, feels more spacious with

a sink that fits well, a faucet that suits it, and companion pieces (mirrors, lighting, etc.) that complement them both. The thinking among sink designers at American Standard, says Gray Uhl, is that counter space is as important to consumers as the sink they choose. He adds that accessibility—for children as well as homeowners who are aging in place—has never been as critical as it is today.

TROUGH

Trough-style sinks—those seriously oversize basins evocative of swimming pools—have been showing up in baths everywhere of late. Sleek and incomparably contemporary in style, most tend to be as shallow as they are wide. “The trough sink is more aesthetic than anything,” says Piesse. “I don’t really know if you’re gaining much advantage in terms of use.”

Trough sink, Cube collection
Wet Style



PROS: The wide scale of a trough sink suits large baths with expansive counters.

CONS: Most are at the high end of the price scale.

“A trough doesn’t really satisfy the need for ‘your sink, my sink.’ Although it’s a good look, it’s one that risks looking institutional if not done right.”

—Gray Uhl, American Standard



Tropic
Petit Pedestal
American Standard

COMPACT

There’s a clear need for small sinks that look good—especially in powder rooms used exclusively by guests. Most manufacturers recognize that and have added compact lavatories (in pedestal, wall-mount, and vanity styles) to their collections. Porcher offers its popular Solutions line, while Kohler’s Tresham integrated vanity-top sink measures only 19½ in. from front to back.

PROS: New compact designs can add style to even the tightest baths.

CONS: Smaller sinks don’t typically offer much in the way of counter space.

“Nixing the vanity frees up floor space, making wall mounts a good choice for a small bath, both physically and psychologically.”

—Paul DeGroot, architect

Style at any price

With such a wide variety in materials, manufacturers, and designs, prices for bath sinks vary widely—even within the confines of a single type. Here's just a small sample of what's available at various price points in the vessel category.

\$115



Clear glass vessel Kraus

\$350



Sandstone vessel Lenova

\$595



Reflex Aztec glass vessel Xylem

\$1007



Rectangular oil-rubbed bronze vessel Belle Floret

\$4995



Wavelet decorative vessel in copper by Robert Kuo for Kallista

bath designer from Fort Lauderdale, Fla. “The sink you choose depends on the theme of your bathroom,” says Morris. “With so many materials out there, you can make your sink the focal point of your powder room.”

To be clear, we're talking about a little-used powder room, not the one the family runs in and out of on a daily basis. “You can be really playful in the powder room, as long as it's used for just a little bit of hand-washing,” says North Carolina architect Sophie Piesse. “In my house, the first-floor powder room is used by my kids all the time.” Clearly, that's not the best place for a pricey vessel sink.

Master bathrooms offer opportunities for beauty and drama, but once again, it's important to consider purpose. Do you wash your face, shave, and brush your teeth there? Or do you also blow-dry your hair and apply makeup? If so, how much counter space do you need? Do you wash your hair at your sink? If so, depth may be a concern.

Budget comes into play here as well. While twin sinks have been in vogue for some time now, ask yourself if you really need them. Two sinks mean two faucets and twice the plumbing, which can be costly. Twin sinks also cut down on counter space.

What does all this variety mean for homeowners? Today's sink options are so exciting that it's hard not to have some fun when choosing them. “It's important to do what you like. Remember, you're the one who has to use the sink,” says Travis Rotelli, an interior designer for Kohler. “I understand that people think about resale, but I believe that done properly, a bath sink can be beautiful and functional—and be something that the next guy will like.” □

Maria LaPiana is a freelance writer who specializes in home design. Photos courtesy of the manufacturers.