

# Freestanding

## The reinvention of a classic fixture reshapes

BY MARIA LAPIANA



**Bisazza Bagno Soapbath** fiberglass

**American Standard Cadet** acrylic

**Bartok Designs** hinoki wood

In many ways, the shower—in all its walk-in, double-wide, steam-powered, glass-tiled glory—has eclipsed the tub in today’s upscale bath. There’s no doubt that showers are more practical than tubs if all you want to do is get really clean really fast (they call it performance showering in the industry). But what if you’d prefer to wash the day away with immersion in a deep, soothing bath—and make a design statement in the process? Consider the current darling of bath designers: the freestanding tub.

Freestanding bathtubs have been around since ancient times. In the 19th century, the classic claw-foot was considered a symbol of affluence. It eventually became mainstream, but its dominance was soon

challenged. Thanks to advances in plumbing (and the Kohler Co.), the first built-in tub was introduced in 1911 and went on to replace the stand-alone claw-foot as the bathroom mainstay for 50 years. In the 1960s, wall-hugging tubs laid claim to the luxury market as well, with the introduction by Jacuzzi of the jetted spa tub.

But the freestanding tub is enjoying renewed popularity. That may be due to the many features and design options freestanding tubs offer. They’re available in a wide array of sizes and shapes, and in materials ranging from acrylic to cast iron, natural stone, copper, and even wood. Although purists scoff, those who seek a massage or light show along with their soak will find in many freestanding models a plethora of

# Tubs

the modern bath

Stone Forest Natural granite



Wetstyle BBE01-Shelf composite and wood



Stone Forest Oval Soaking Tub marble



Native Trails Aurora nickel



Maax Sax fiberglass



features more commonly associated with spa tubs: air jets, hydrotherapy systems, chromotherapy, aromatherapy, and sound systems.

These days, there's a tub out there to suit every style, including minimalist bath designs that intentionally frame the tub as a sculptural work—which many of today's tubs are. (The Soapbath, designed by Marcel Wanders for Italian maker Bisazza Bagno and shown on p. 56, takes creativity to a whole new level.) "The freestanding tub has really become the focal point or centerpiece of a room," says Rebecca Seiler, bathing product manager for Kohler. "They're doubling as works of art. It's the perfect blend of design and function."

Another reason freestanding tubs are so popular is that they're flexible. Equipped with a floor-mounted filler, the typical tub—at 60 in. to 66 in. long and 30 in. to 40 in. wide—can be placed practically anywhere. Even in tight places, the air around and under them gives the impression of spaciousness. "People are moving into smaller homes, and while the definition of luxury is now an en suite bath for every bedroom, we're having to scale down those spaces," says Gray Uhl, brand education director at American Standard Brands. In luxury baths, gracious stand-alones have taken the place of the once-popular whirlpool tub, possibly due to environmental concerns. "The beauty of most freestanding tubs is that they don't have pumps or motors," Uhl says. "In general, they are only large enough to fit one person, so they use less water, too." Add to that the trend toward simpler baths—rooms that evoke a Zen-like calm—and you have a serious demand for beautiful, freestanding fonts of relaxation.

When Maria Stapperfenne reviewed the entries to the bath category for the 2014 National Kitchen and Bath Association Design Competition, she was overwhelmed by the number of freestanding tubs she saw. "We looked at literally hundreds of entries," says Stapperfenne, president-elect of the NKBA's executive committee. "Virtually every full bath had a freestanding tub in it. No kidding. No more built-ins. We're done with them."

### Designed to catch the eye

That said, Stapperfenne acknowledges that freestanding tubs are not for everyone, particularly if there are young children to bathe or if a family member would have difficulty climbing into a freestanding tub. "Let's just

## TUB MATERIALS

# Design flexibility

### ACRYLIC

Common and available in many styles, acrylic tubs are made from vacuum-formed acrylic sheets reinforced with fiberglass.

**PROS** Durable; lightweight; easy to install; available in many colors, shapes, and sizes

**CONS** Easily scratched if cleaned with abrasive products

**SHOWN** Acri-Tec VT180B, \$2000



# meets everyday durability



## ENAMELED CAST IRON

These "old school" tubs are made by pouring molten iron into a mold, then smoothing it and coating it with a heavy layer of enamel.

**PROS** Strong and durable; resistant to scratches, cracks, and chips

**CONS** Very heavy; may require extra labor and floor reinforcement to install

**SHOWN** Kohler Iron Works Historic Bath, \$5064



## NATURAL STONE

Many natural stones—such as granite, onyx, sandstone, travertine, and marble—can be carved into freestanding tubs.

**PROS** Very elegant; organic in appearance

**CONS** Extremely heavy and, in most cases, requires reinforcement of the floor; very expensive

**SHOWN** Stone Forest Oval, \$35,000

## ENGINEERED STONE/COMPOSITE

To make these tubs, a mixture of ground minerals and resin or other binding agents is liquefied, poured into a mold, and hardened. Because these mixtures are proprietary, characteristics and quality vary widely.

**PROS** Durable; heat and stain resistant; less porous than natural stone

**CONS** Can be prone to hairline cracks if surface coating wears away

**SHOWN** MTI Elsie 2, \$6135



## WOOD

Often made of teak, but available in other woods, these tubs are harder to find than most. They may or may not be sealed.

**PROS** Can be customized and finished to individual tastes

**CONS** Best used as a dedicated soaking tub; expensive

**SHOWN** Zen Bathworks, \$6000



## METAL

Often hammered and sometimes coated on the inside, genuine copper tubs are warm and natural looking. By contrast, tubs made of nickel or stainless steel exude a more contemporary vibe.

**PROS** Elegant; durable; requires minimal maintenance; develops a natural patina over time (copper)

**CONS** Usually must be custom-made; very expensive

**SHOWN** Native Trails Aspen in copper, \$19,800



## FIBERGLASS

These tubs are made by forming layers of fiberglass into a desired shape, then coating it with gelcoat resin. (It's also known as FRP, or fiberglass-reinforced plastic.) Cost and quality vary greatly.

**PROS** Lightweight; easy to install; finish can be repaired

**CONS** Cheap fiberglass tubs are prone to flexing and are not very durable

**SHOWN** Maax Sax, \$1250

## Issues with big tubs: Weight and flow

Freestanding tubs are generally deeper and hold more water than the average built-in, which raises two issues worth thinking about: getting the tub filled fast, and making sure your bathroom floor is strong enough to support it once it's filled. While an average built-in tub holds 30 gal. of water, deep stand-alone models can hold twice that.

EPA standards limit the flow of water from showerheads and bath faucets to 2.5 gpm (gal. per minute) and 2.2 gpm, respectively, but when it comes to filling a bathtub, slowing down the rate of flow is the last thing you want to do. Say you have a 60-gal. tub. A filler rated at 16 gpm will fill the tub in just under 4 minutes. Slow the flow down to 7 gpm, and the tub will take nearly 9 minutes to fill. That not only means waiting longer for your splash; it also means more time for the hot water in the tub to cool off.

**Fast fill.** A high-flow ceramic cartridge allows this Brizo Virage single-handle freestanding tub filler to flow at 14.5 gpm, reducing the time it takes to fill a large tub.

To ensure a good flow rate, your tub filler—whether it's mounted on the deck, the wall, or the floor—should be connected to a  $\frac{3}{4}$ -in. supply line. If you're considering a really big tub, make sure your water heater has the capacity to deliver that much hot water at once. A final consideration, notes Danbury, Conn., plumber Mike Lombardi, is that your tub's drain and vent need to be sized to remove large amounts of water without siphoning. Most large-capacity tubs can be connected with a 1½-in.-dia. trap and drain, but the waste arm shouldn't exceed 6 ft. If your stand-alone tub is out in the middle of a large bathroom, a 2-in.-dia. drainpipe will allow you to increase this distance to 8 ft.

Unless they're made of stone or another inherently heavy material, freestanding tubs are themselves no heavier than most built-ins; however, the large number of gallons they hold (at just over 8 lb. per gal.) can put a lot of strain on a floor system. Despite this, freestanding tubs usually do not require additional floor support in new homes built to code, Lombardi says. Still, most manufacturers' installation instructions recommend that you confirm the floor's load rating before installation. If support appears to be an issue (in older homes, for example, or where joists are notched or damaged), it may pay to consult an engineer. When the feet on a footed tub land in the middle of a joist bay, installing solid blocking below can prevent subfloor deflection and cracked tiles.

say this is not the kind of tub you'd see in universal design," she says.

There are essentially three styles of freestanding tubs: floor-set models, which sit directly on the floor; footed tubs (the iconic claw-foot remains a popular choice); and pedestals, which have a plinth or frame that raises the basin off the floor. In terms of shape, today's models run the gamut, from rectangular tubs to oblong tubs to graceful slipper tubs, which have a sloped end that is higher than the other end.

Then there are soaking tubs—deep basins with strong vertical sides. In traditional Japanese culture, these ritual-specific tubs, known as *ofuro*, are designed for leisurely, restorative immersion—but only after a shower. Made of aromatic woods such as hinoki, a type of cypress with antibacterial qualities, the tubs release a soothing, wood-and-citrus scent when filled.

Just as they can satisfy any design style, freestanding tubs are available in a wide range of prices—from no-frills models just under \$1000; to products such as American Standard's Cadet, a retro design equipped with a tub filler and hand spray that sells for around \$1800; to the Clothilde, an elegant, tin-lined copper tub from Waterworks that can be yours for \$44,350. What you typically get at the higher end is an emphasis on quality and design, says Kohler's Seiler. In addition to some of the more glamorous material choices like marble or copper, she says, "you get thoughtfully placed curves, more comfort in integral lumbar supports, and depth, which delivers a more luxurious experience."

Whatever your budget, be sure you are the one to choose your tub. "Take a test drive," says Stapperfenne. "It may seem silly, but you should get in, with your clothes on, and see how it feels." Consider length: Can you stretch your legs out to a relaxed position? Consider the backrest: How tall is it? Does the slope feel good? Consider ease of entry: Can you step over the sides easily? Even the most beautiful tub won't enhance your bath if you find that you don't use it.

Russell Adams, president and chief of design for MTI, has a different take. "We think of our tubs as art for the bath," he says. "You may not be using it every day, but you are walking by it. We make sure our tubs are relaxing, even just to look at." □

Maria LaPiana is a freelance writer specializing in home design.