Sconces Buying Guide

Sconces light up walls and bring decorative flair to any home. Learn more about sconces construction, types, style, and care.

Sconces are wall-mounted fixtures that bring directional and ambient light to hallways, bathrooms, exterior entryways, offices, and other spaces throughout the home. These fixtures can be found in any room or setting where added illumination or softened lighting is desired. While all sconces share common design elements, the look and application of these lights can vary greatly. We recommend pairing wall sconces with general overhead and task lighting to fully illuminate a space.

Sconces Construction

The Fixture

Most wall sconces share common design elements. These types of lights can be crafted from a variety of materials, from bronze to brass, and generally include a shade crafted from metal, fabric, or glass. Owing to their prominent, eye-level placement, sconces are oftentimes highly decorative and intended to make a strong decorative statement in any setting. Outdoor wall sconces will be crafted from weather-resistant metals, glass, or marine-grade plastic. Common components of sconces include:

- **Backplate:** the backplate can be simple or decorative in design. Its flush back surface attaches to the wall and conceals any wiring or electrical boxes. The backplate supports the weight of the rest of the fixture and typically includes mounting hardware and brackets
- **Arm:** the arm of a wall sconce extends from the backplate like a stem, with the light bulb and shade at its extended end. Sconce arms may be curved and highly decorative or simple and sleek in style. The length of the arm largely determines how far the sconce will protrude from the wall.
- **Power switch:** Depending on their placement and design, wall sconces may include an on/off power switch integrated into the design of the fixture. A power switch can be a sought-after feature for bedside or reading nook sconces.

- **Shade:** Since wall sconces are styled at eye-level, they will typically include a shade to diffuse the harsh direct light of the bulb(s). Shades also add decorative value to the look of the sconce.
- **Dimmer:** Many sconces include a dimmer, making it easy to partially illuminate hallways, outdoor walkways, bathrooms, and other hazardous walking spaces without wasting energy by fully illuminating the space

The Bulb

Sconces typically use LED, incandescent, or fluorescent bulbs. Wall sconces rarely include exposed bulbs (except in the case of candle sconces) and the aesthetic of the bulb is rarely a consideration. The size and design of the sconce will determine its bulb compatibility. Each bulb type has unique qualities and advantages.

Incandescent

- **Pros:** Emit the soft light tone we are used to seeing, inexpensive
- **Cons:** Need to be replaced often, use the most energy

LED

- **Pros:** Energy saving, very long lives (up to 20 years)
- **Cons:** Expensive, color varies from traditional incandescent bulbs

Fluorescent

- **Pros:** Use 90% less energy than incandescent bulbs, emit little heat, last 10x longer than incandescent bulbs
- **Cons:** Expensive, not dimmable, color varies from traditional incandescent bulbs, harsh color tone

Powering Your System

Indoor wall sconces can be powered by batteries, wall plug-ins, or hard wiring. Hard-wired wall sconces are typically run on a line voltage or high voltage system (defined at 120 volts). Outdoor wall sconces will generally be low voltage, and require low voltage wiring and a transformer pack to operate. Indoor wall sconces may be low voltage in cases where small or speciality bulbs are used, because low voltage lighting systems allow for a wider range of bulb sizes and types. Each power system has unique benefits and deterrents.

Note: Always consult a professional lighting electrication before purchasing or installing any lighting system. This guide is not intended to take the place of a professional's best opinion or serve as a technical safety manual.

Low Voltage

Low voltage lighting systems are defined at 10V, 12V or 24V. Low voltage fixtures generally include outdoor lighting systems and indoor fixtures with specialty or small bulbs. Low voltage lights require the use of a low voltage electrical cable and transformer pack to operate correctly.

- **Pros:** Safer than high voltage systems, more energy efficient, easier to install and adjust
- **Cons:** Requires compatible low voltage equipment (transformer, electrical cable)

High Voltage

Line voltage or high voltage systems are the default wiring voltage for most home interiors. High voltage fixtures do not

require any special equipment or transformers to operate. Line voltage lights are the most popular option in indoor settings.

- **Pros:** Same voltage as appliances, lower cost fixtures, bulbs, and installation
- **Cons:** Less energy efficient, difficult to install, high operating costs

Sconce Types

Single-Bulb Shaded Wall Sconces

The most common type of wall sconce features a single bulb and shade. These types of sconces can be made from any standard fixture material, and popular shade materials are fabric, metal and glass. When picturing a standard wall sconce, many people tend to imagine a ornamented, highly-decorative fixture. While traditional styles are popular, more sleek, modern options are also available. Wall sconce shades are generally open at one end (the top or bottom) or open at both the top and bottom. The orientation of the shade will determine if the sconce uplights, downlights, or simultaneously uplights and downlights the corresponding wall and surrounding area. Some glass sconce shades are opaque and completely closed, and emit general, ambient light as opposed to directed light. Most standard wall sconces are hard-wired to a junction boxes along a wall surface, though standard wall sconces can include an integrated on/off switch.

Directional Wall Sconces

Directional wall sconces resemble standard wall sconces, however their design includes a discrete hinged component. The hinge makes these sconces easily adjustable, and allows for spotlighting of specific artwork or features throughout a room.

Multi-Light Wall Sconces

Multi-light sconces include multiple bulbs and shades in their design. These types of sconces are commonly found in bathrooms, kitchens, and other spaces throughout the home where more dimensional, dynamic lighting is desired. Multi-light sconces typically include two bulbs and shades that symmetrically extend from the central arm or back plate, but they can include any number lights in their design.

Candle-Light Wall Sconces

Candle wall sconces are intended to imitate the look of genuine flame fixtures, popular in Europe throughout the 19th century. These sconces have a decidedly antique look, and usually do not include shades to highlight the appearance of the candle-flame light bulbs. Candle flame sconces can include one, two, or more bulbs.

Outdoor Wall Sconces

Outdoor wall sconces share many components with indoor wall sconces, and are made from weather-graded materials (such as powdered metal or durable plastic) to prevent damage from rain, wind, and snow. Outdoor sconces generally include a framed decorative housing for the bulb(s) with glass panels that fully encase the fixture to prevent water or leaves from accumulating within the fixture. Outdoor wall sconces are typically low voltage, and may include features such as automatic shut off and motion sensors. Outdoor sconces illuminate hazardous and eliminate shadows along walkways, paths, and add to exterior home appeal. They are oftentimes used to illuminate a front entryway or spotlight house numbers.

Swing Arm Sconces

Swing arm sconces include a hinged, extendable arm. Contrary to directional sconces, which can only be adjusted up and down or side to side, these lights offer much more freedom of adjustability. Wall swing arm sconces can typically be moved closer to the wall or further away and be rotated for effective task lighting. Swing arm sconces are popular in reading nooks and by bedsides in rooms that are too small to accommodate a nightstand. On/off switches and integrated dimmers are popular features in swing arm sconce design.

Flush Mount Sconces

Flush mount wall sconces do not have an extended arm, but are instead mounted flush against the wall surface. Flush mount sconces are fully encased, and usually have an opaque glass surface that emits diffused light. These types of lights are ideal in narrow hallways, and generally carry a more relaxed appearance than traditional arm sconces. Flush mount sconces provide general illumination as opposed to ambient, directional light.

Wallchieres

Wallchieres mimic the look of original wall-mount torches, which were real flame torches that could be set into permanent stands attached to walls or removed and used as a portable light source. These lights combine the modern functionality of a wall sconce with the appearance of a stand-alone torch. Wallchieres cast soft, upwards light, and both modern and traditional wallchieres are available.

Half Moon Sconce

Half moon sconces closely resemble flush mount sconces, with the addition of an open top that casts light upwards. These sconces are a popular option because the cast diffused general light as well as upwards light.

Wall Sconce Style

Contemporary

Contemporary fixtures feature sleek lines and straight-forward styling. Geometric shapes, clean finishes, and modern glass are trademark indicators of the contemporary look.

Transitional

Transitional lights bridge the gap between traditional and contemporary styles, lifting elements from both new and timeless design for a unique aesthetic. These fixtures may include sleek lines with some decorative ornamentation, elegant curved frames, and light detailing.

Traditional

Traditional fixtures draw upon time-honored motifs for their design. Traditional lights are highly ornamental, and may recall a vintage European aesthetic. Popular features in traditional design include frosted glass, curved frames, and antiqued bronze finishes.

Rustic

Popular in country or quaint home design, rustic lighting integrates organic shapes, textures, and weathering for a warm, relaxed look with regained modern appeal.

Craftsman

Craftsman lighting design mimics craftsman home design. Straight, simple lines, sharp angles, and contemporary materials are indicators of the craftsman style. Craftsman lights incorporate artistic hand-made style elements, such as painted finishings and seeded glass.

Industrial

Contemporary industrial style mimics turn-of-the-century factory design, for a gritty, urban look. These lights use patinaed metals, vintage bulbs, and reclaimed motifs to achieve their signature aesthetic.

Wall Sconce Sizes

Wall sconces vary in terms of size, but generally fall between 4”-20” wide. Sconces used for task lighting purposes should be proportional to the object they are illuminating. For example, sconces alongside a small bathroom mirror should be smaller in size, while sconces illuminating a tall outdoor entryway should be larger.

- Bathroom sconces in regular sized bathrooms should measure close to 9-10” in length
- Sconces flanking an outdoor garage door or front door should measure 1/4 the height of the door
- Sconces that are very close to what they are lighting should be smaller in size. Sconces that are further away from what they are lighting should be larger

- Consider how closely sconces will be placed when selecting the best size sconces for a space. Larger sconces look best when placed further apart. Sconces that are small in size can be closer together

Wall Sconce Placement

Ideal sconce platement depends on the size and type of the fixture, application, room size, and proportional size of the item being illuminated, among other factors.

General Placement

- In most circumstances, situate sconces close to 65” above the floor. This orients the fixtures at near eye level
- In spaces that are largely used for sitting down, sconces can be situated slightly lower to match a lower eye level from a seated position (living and dining rooms)

Along Staircases

- Place sconces approximately 3/4 of the way up the wall along staircases.
- The atypical vantage point offered by stairways makes it easier to see down into sconces. Placing the sconces slightly higher on the wall than is generally recommended counters this effect

In the Bathroom

- Leave 4” between the frame of the bathroom mirror and sconces
- Mount bathroom wall sconces 60” above the floor and 36”-40” apart

In the Hallway

- Place hallway sconces close to 60” above the floor.
- Hallway sconces can be slightly higher in taller-ceilinged homes. The top of the sconce should not be visible while standing.
- If multiple hallway sconces are placed in succession, space the fixtures between 8’ and 10’ apart
- In narrow hallways, opt for slim fixtures that protrude 4” or less from the wall. This will keep the hallway from feeling cramped, and helps to prevent a passersby from bumping into the fixtures
- If installing sconces along both sides of a hallway, stagger fixtures so that sconces are not directly across from each other

Outdoors

- Outdoor wall lights should measure close to eye level, or close to 6’ above the ground
- Leave 8’-10’ between light sources in outdoor settings

Wall Sconce Care

- Direct all installation and safety questions to a certified electrician
- Energy-efficient and LED bulbs can help to reduce electrical costs and will last longer than traditional incandescent

bulbs
- Consider a material’s resilience to wear and damage from rain, snow, and sun when shopping for outdoor lighting fixtures