



Artisans of the Valley

The Philosophy of Restoration

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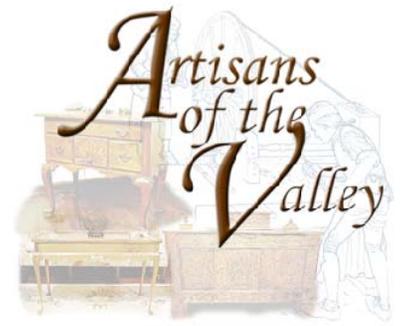
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The Philosophy of Restoration



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Unbelievably, antique restoration is a highly controversial topic. Amongst collectors and enthusiasts, the debate has raged since the first awareness of a concept of value beyond function. While what is appropriate remains unresolved, antiques live and die by subjective rules and restorations. This article provides some insight into what antique furniture is, how value is derived, and some prospective on restoration.

There are several schools of thought on antique furniture restoration. The philosophies range drastically, and the effect on value and lifespan of your piece is paramount in effect when your choices are set. Knowing your personality, knowing your financial situation and your goals for your antiques, understanding the fundamentals of aging woods and finishes, and understanding the options is key to success when dabbling in the antique market.

The jury is still out on the schools of Philosophy – nobody is the end all of authority. The owner of a piece chooses its destiny, and integrates his or her personality into its history through the entire tenure of their possession. This integration may increase or decrease its value in a subjective world of appraisals. Remember, the decisions are personal, and should never be second-guessed. Make educated choices, and enjoy your antique furniture.

Schools of Thought

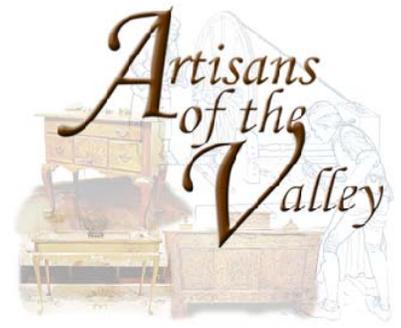
The first school; do nothing, accept the piece as it appears no matter how poor the condition. Buy only pieces in good condition, and avoid any antique that is not already in useable condition, as museums do. This is not feasible for most; the price of the few remaining pristine pieces is out of reach for all but museums and the upper crust. If you can afford to practice this ideology, by all means indulge, do your part to preserve the piece in an environment conducive to longevity of wood and finishes. Do not use the piece; maintain it for your enjoyment and the enjoyment of others outside the burden of daily abuse.

The second school; acquire antiques that with skillful restoration will return to a state of beauty and have practical use within your home, maintaining a good percentage of the antique value. Antiques of fair to poor value are in most cases savable. Unapparent to the untrained eye, these pieces possess great beauty and can continue to offer functional use in your home once they receive proper care. With proper conservation, these pieces maintain a good portion of their antique value, and are no longer an eyesore.

The third school; strip it bare, sand it down, and fix it any way you can to make it look new and functional again no matter how much of the true antique value is lost. All but a few outspoken members of the antique community, including the authors of this article, hate this philosophy. The worst possible option involves removing shellac to replace it with a modern finish; this is a grave transgression against history and immediately negates all antique value.

Stripping a piece to bare wood removes the history of a piece, it destroys the continuity of the timeline created by generations of use. This option is only acceptable when the original finish has already been lost, usually through previous ill-advised restorations, and there is no choice but to remove paint or lacquer and return a natural shellac finish or paint appropriate to the period. If the value has already been lost, there is no harm in removing a bad finish; especially when the plan is to replace it with a proper one.

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A Day in the Life of an Antique

Most collectors of antique furniture want to use it in their homes, while furniture acquired for investment or display in a museum is for inspection only. The angles are very different. Museums and investors want their pieces to be in a condition and environment conducive to mitigating natural deterioration. The piece must remain true to its found form, and in this way the maximum antique value is preserved.

It is fascinating to ponder how a 250-year-old piece of furniture manages to survive in such good condition while perusing through a museum. The conclusion is simple in almost all cases; they did not. Furniture is just that furniture ... in 1910 a Ford Model T was a car; it was transportation and nothing more. People drove their car, maintained the car, and scrapped it when it wore out. Today, you would not see one as a daily driver, and you would not see someone randomly drilling a hole to mount a mismatched seat for a functional replacement. Today it's an antique, but at the time it was simply a car to be used and abused, and maintained as required with resources as available, all in the cause of point A to point B. Furniture is no different, it was used – made to perform its practical function. Did you think your first addition Spider Man was worth anything when you tore out the ad in the back? Did you drag your original Barbie around the world and back again; then decide to cut her hair? Think about it ...

Museum furniture has received much needed attention in one form or another just like the furniture in your home has or may need. Museums maintain entire staffs of conservation and restoration specialists standing ready behind the scenes to keep the existing collection preserved and bring newly acquired pieces up to snuff.

Many museums keep a fulltime paid and highly qualified staff, specialists who almost never work for the public. The time it takes to restore a piece to museum specifications puts the price range out of scope for all but the wealthiest antique enthusiasts. This leaves the public, in most cases, to the self-taught, and the branching out cabinet or strip shop that accepts the occasional antique for repair.

There is one undisputed fact concerning old furniture 50 years and back, it's that it has suffered lots of use and abuse. There is an old adage that says, "Three moves are as bad as a fire." Since America is a mobile country, our ancestors made many moves by car, by wagon, by boat or rail and truck. Anybody that has moved has quickly learned that movers can be guerrillas. It's a wonder that any furniture survived this brutality at all.

Defining the Periods

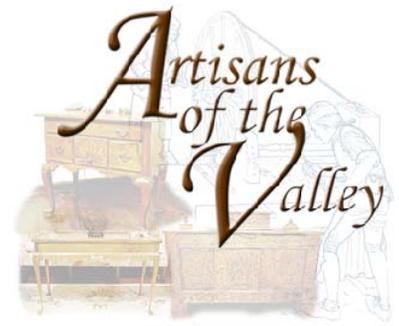
In the Early American furniture world, there are classes of antique furniture. Classic definitions of an antique describe handmade, pre-machine era, furniture dated from 1640 to 1840. This timeline includes the great periods and is referred to as period furniture. The great periods include:

- Jacobean or Pilgrim (1640-80)
- William and Mary (1640-1705)
- Queen Anne (1705-1720)
- Georgian (1720-1780)
- Federal (1780-1840)

Hand made stood for quality, sturdy, functional pieces of furniture designed to endure for generations. Misconceptions of this concept are that each piece was made one at a time by a small shop producing each work. True in some cases, these are the most valuable pieces when properly documented. However, most hand made pieces were made in a factory, an assembly line of skilled workers specializing in a key area of design, joinery, carving, or finishing. These craftsmen were proud of their work, each contributing their part to the whole.

Enter the Victorian period (1840-1900) ushering in unrefined machinery and questionably designed, poorly constructed, mass-produced furniture. The complexity of furniture construction remained just out of reach of the ability of the machinery of the

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time to produce quality, and the advent of these devices resulted in significant drops in the skill of the workers. Unlike the computerized operations of today, the technology was simply not available to mass-produce sturdy and quality pieces. The Victorian era has never been recognized by the mainstream antique community as having produced works of any great value. The entrance of this period ended the volume of high quality hand made pieces, leaving only the small shops to produce pieces of previously expected quality.

By the turn of the century, things improved a notch with the entrance of Mission, Art Nouveau, and lines from manufacturers such as Stickley producing Golden Oak. Quickly falling out of style, a mass quantity of this furniture was tossed to the curbside through the 50's and 60's.

With this, comes modern furniture, artificial veneers such as Formica, plastics, and metal. Tastes changed, modernized, and cast aside the classical concept of wood furnishings. Modern furniture is out of our scope for this article, so the descriptions of this era will conclude here.

Classical and Modern Definitions of an Antique

Class 1: As previously discussed, the classical requirements for furniture to be deemed an “Antique,” are that it has to have been hand made in 1840 or earlier. With obvious exceptions made for high quality handmade pieces through the turn of the century, especially those with a noteworthy and documented history. This defines the first class.

Class 2: Time evolves all things, and the antique world is no different. Now that we have entered the twenty first century, a whole new class of antique furniture is emerging. The class consists of inherited or heirloom machine made furniture, including Victorian and the once curbside ornament Golden Oak styles. The possessions of the baby boomers are now being passed on to Generation X as a result of the downsizing from family homes to retirement communities. This furniture may have been purchased by the grandparents, passed to the baby boom children, some true antiques and others passing both sentimental and a virgin antique value along with an otherwise garage sale piece, creating class two antiques from the previously defined collectibles.

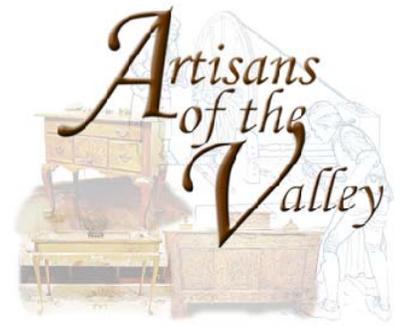
Mission furniture, with Golden oak leading the charge, now shows a sudden surge in value keeping up with investment gains previously shown only in classic antique pieces. Somehow, you can completely refinish and restore a piece, and its value increases. An uneasy feeling for antique conservationists, this trend is a great opportunity to expand their expertise into these pieces, a world where change is accepted without question because the piece is not a hand made antique. Restoring the piece to near original condition does not hurt the value, but many clients request many of the markings remain intact – especially if it's the initials they carved as a child. Modern homes don't allow for beat-up furniture, and grandma's dining set may fit perfectly if it were just a little cleaner in appearance. If you possess such a piece, many are of superior quality wood and construction than what is available in the mass-market Ikea world of today. Restoring these pieces may cost more than their antique value may ever regain, but finding equivalent quality replacements commonly runs three times the cost of restoration – and this option will lose all family history in the piece.

Class 3: Generic machine made furniture of the 1930's and 40's is now overflowing into the homes of the nuclear families. This furniture has absolutely no true antique value; it is collectable, but barely. It's restored for sentimental or replacement cost comparison reasons only. Most of this furniture has been used and abused now for two full generations, and is on its way for use in a third. The lifespan of these pieces is a testament to the improvements in machining technology by this era. This class makes up the majority of pieces now being hauled to antique restorers and strip shops across the country.

Subjective Appraisal

The antique world is, although it will insult some, much like a casino. The value of a piece is truly subjective and falls to the mere whims of whomever may be attending the auction that day. There is only one guaranteed way to determine what a piece

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is worth, regardless of what anyone tells you. That is simply to sell it ... bring the piece to auction and let it go. Nobody can tell you exactly what a piece will sell for, unless they are willing to buy it at that moment, but they can estimate value.

The factors involved are both tangible and intangible. The condition, the structure, the finish, the hardware, the age, the maker, and known owners, all play obvious key rolls. Opinions span the spectrum when it comes to what value restorations increase or decrease. Where some say restore it, save it for the future, others say that destroys the history. The bottom line, it's your piece so it's your choice.

For example, you find a secretary exactly like one seen on Antique Road Show for \$50,000, in mint condition with documentation tracing back to a Revolutionary War general. Your piece is in fair condition, the hardware has been replaced, the finish is cracked and the piece has obvious signs of previous improper repairs. When we receive this piece, it may be worth \$1,000. For perhaps one or two thousand dollars investment we can return a piece worth perhaps \$2,000-5,000 through subjective appraisal. Your piece was never, and cannot ever be, worth the same as the pristine example. Our function is to bring the piece back to life, as a restored antique.

A second example, a piece brought to an auction that happens to fit the exact need of three parties. The three parties bit this piece up to \$12,000. Perhaps the range expected was \$4,000 - \$6,000. A very happy seller receives a significant sum for this piece simply because there was an unpredicted bidding war. The winning bidder decides the piece doesn't fit as well and he believed, and brings it back to auction the following week. There is no series competition on the piece, and it sells for \$5,500. No change in the piece; no restorations, no damage, no change in the economy, no change in decorating taste. Antique pricing is simply this fickle.

Insurance appraisals are based on evaluation of the piece, including all condition factors. The piece is then compared to known auction sale prices for comparable pieces. Most appraisers will recommend you insure the piece for the higher side of the range provided, however proving this to your insurance company will take detailed information. Maintain all records of restorations and purchase of the piece, and keep detailed photos safe in case of any disaster.

Some Restoration Terminology

Conservation: Detail oriented process designed to preserve as much original finish and materials as possible while bringing the piece back to as close to its original condition as possible. Artisans specializes in conservation, we always provide our customers options to preserve the antique value as opposed to reducing it with unnecessary efforts.

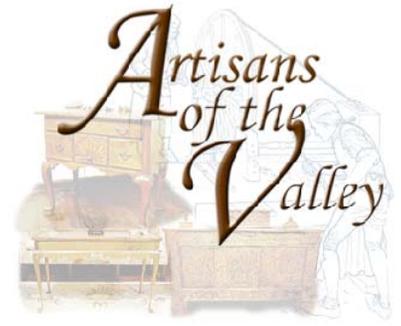
Finish Restoration: Finish restoration is the process of bringing an existing finish back to life. This involves re-emulsifying the original finish, either shellac or varnish. By using the original solvents to liquefy the solids, their ability to adhere to and penetrate the piece returns. The process also removes the dirt and grime accumulated over years of use. If the finish is very thin, additional layers of the same finish may be applied to bolster the restored finish and ensure longevity. Finish restoration results in an original finish rating, say 85% original finish remains. The original finish that remains, the greater antique value remains.

Preservation: The process of stopping or slowing deterioration usually does not involve actual restoration or attempts to return the piece to its original condition. Damage and finish deterioration are left intact, but prevented from going further. This process is usually done on museum works; we recommend a conservation or restoration process for home use of antiques. In most cases this is a chemical process that prevents further oxidation of the wood and metals, and in addition adds moisture to the existing finish.

Refinishing: Removing a finish and applying a new finish in its place. This process destroys significant portions of antique value in furniture and should be avoided unless absolutely necessary.

Repair: Physical structural replacement or reinforcement of parts of the original piece. May involve addition of new materials altered to appear aged or the application of antique materials to improve appearance of repair and preserve as much value as possible.

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Restoration: Bringing a piece back to close to its original condition including structural and finish repairs.

Stripping: Avoid stripping antiques at almost any cost, stripping in its true sense involves dipping the piece in a chemical bath that will remove finish, patina, and in some cases the glue holding the piece together. A stripped antique is truly stripped, mainly of its value. Veneering may peel, joints will swell or break apart, and the piece usually has to be completely rebuilt. This applies in cases where someone has foolishly stripped the piece in the past and applied inappropriate finishes that must be removed.

Artisans Restoration Philosophy

Artisans of the Valley provides museum quality restoration and conservation services. We are the only formally trained 18th century craftsmen providing credentials in furniture making, woodcarving, and finishing. These techniques used to design and construct reproductions, translate directly into restoration services. With thirty years experience in this arena we produce only the finest quality results.

Artisans restoration philosophy is one of preparing furniture for practical use in the home while maintaining as much of the antique value as possible. We are primarily second school conservationists. Museums maintain the luxury of pieces for inspection only, while most enthusiasts and collectors intend to use the pieces in their homes and include them in their lives. Most people do not want a pile of rotting wood in their home; they want a piece of furniture. For these reasons, we carefully employ only 18th century techniques when working on period pieces, and the same proven methods to class two and three antiques, when breathing in new life and preserving these works of art for future generations.

Very rarely, we receive a piece of furniture in pristine condition, of a quality acceptable directly into a museum collection. In such a case, or even with a very good condition piece, we will insist that we complete only the bare minimum repairs to assure preservation of both historic and antique value. However, the majority of pieces we receive are in fair to poor condition. These pieces may require the care and attention that we can provide.

We will evaluate your piece, discuss the options available and develop conservation plans on a case-by-case basis. For restorations of true antiques, a detailed conservation plan will include before and after photographs, photographs of key areas, and detailed text descriptions of the piece before restoration.

Artisans offers to our clients our very best; our skills, our experience, our shop, and our connections in the industry will be called upon to care for your piece per your wishes. This is the bottom line of our restoration philosophy.

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Photo by Frank Jacobs Stanley (left) & Eric Saperstein

*Thanks for reading our views on antique restoration,
if we can be of service please contact us at:*

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