

REPAIRS AND RESTORATIONS

FORMER GLORIES

Some antiques should be refinished, others simply restored

BY EILEEN WATKINS

You hear it often from antique appraisers on cable TV: "It's too bad this piece was refinished. If it wasn't, it would be worth a lot more!"

That's misleading and often untrue, say two professionals with restoration businesses in North Jersey.

"Every piece has to be handled differently," said Isabel Salinas, head of the Englewood studio Isabel Salinas Professional Antiques Restoration.

"If it's very antique, or has a lot of decorative hand-painting, you'll think twice about refinishing. But if it's falling apart, you have to do something — at least preservation and conservation."

"Ask any museum curator how many of their pieces have been restored or refinished," suggested Tony Vuolo, owner of Mad Hatter Antiques Refinishing & Restoration, in Garfield. "Many very valuable pieces in museums don't have the original finish."

He also explained the difference between refinishing and restoring. "Especially in the case of a period piece, if the finish is still in pretty good condition, it can be restored," he said. "You can



PHOTOS BY EUGENE PARSIACEPE JR.

At Mad Hatter Antiques, this 140-year-old walnut chest, left, is missing one of its drawer pulls and other bits of its ornate trim. Mildew also has damaged the original finish beyond restoration. Above, Tony Vuolo of Mad Hatter shows the chest after he repaired the drawer pulls and trim, and gave it a new finish that replicates the original as far as possible.



clean it to bring back the patina, and sometimes add more of the same finish. In refinishing, you completely remove it and put on a new finish."

The first line of defense, according to Salinas, is to care for the original finish as well as possible. "If you have an expensive antique, dust it!" she emphasized. "Older pieces usually weren't sealed and lacquered like we do today, so dust can damage it."

Also, Salinas pointed out, homes in the past weren't heated to 70 degrees all winter, which can cause wood shrink from dryness. To

counteract this, she recommended applying a solution of half turpentine and half linseed oil to the inside, back and underside surfaces, which are usually unfinished, to make the wood fibers more elastic.

Beyond that, she said, polish an antique wooden piece with either lemon oil or a fresh paste wax. She noted that beeswax was the traditional treatment and can help revive an old, worn finish.

How old is antique? "Normally, something is considered antique if it is 100 years old," Salinas said, adding that she has restored pieces up to

500 years old. "When I have to work with a real antique, I'm very careful. I try to get as much information as I can from the owner, and I get books and do research."

"For example, if you have a 200-year-old table with wonderful marquetry, you want to use a varnish to preserve the natural color. To use polyurethane would be wrong for the age and the piece."

Vuolo said a customer often asks him if it's worth restoring a piece, based on its monetary value. "If it's from the 1700s or earlier, I usually tell them yes," he said. "With

a piece from the 1940s or 1950s, the designer may be a factor in the value.

"I see a lot of family heirlooms with more sentimental value, and I'll always give the customer a straight answer — you can buy another in an antique shop for less (than the restoration job). But he may say, 'It was my grandmother's, and I can't put a price on that.'"

Also, Vuolo explained, certain antiques go in an out of fashion. "In the 1980s, when I first opened my business, oak furniture was all the rage and a restored rolltop desk would go for thousands," he recalled. "Now it would sell for about \$1,500, partly because you can't really use a computer on one."

He noted that eBay has made it possible to buy antiques without going through a dealer, but these long-distance purchases can backfire. "I had one customer who bought a Victorian sofa from New England for a good price, but when it arrived it was in rough shape," Vuolo said. "You can't see how loose (in the joints) a piece of furniture is from a picture. I expected to reupholster it, but we basically had to take the frame apart and rebuild it."

Both professionals also can remember wrongheaded restoration jobs they've had to repair.

"A customer brought me a picture frame covered in 24-

carat gold that someone tried to restore with spray paint," Salinas said. "Fortunately, there was a layer of dust in between, so we were able to remove the paint and restore the finish, but it took months!"

"A lot of the time, I'm fixing old repairs," Vuolo said. "Chairs are notorious. Either Dad or Grandpa saw it was getting loose and banged some finishing nails into the joints — so first I have to dig out the nails. The proper way to fix it is to take it apart, clean up the old glue and put it back together again."

Instead of modern carpenter's glue, Vuolo recommends hot animal-hide glue, the same as furniture makers used 100 years ago. "It's heat and water soluble, so if I've missed any of the old glue it will reactivate it and create an even stronger bond."

As far as the final appearance of a piece, though, Vuolo believes the customer is always right. "If someone has a valuable piece over 100 years old in rough condition, I'll always advise, 'Keep it original — what it looked like before the finish darkened and oxidized,'" he said. "But if they want to change the look, I won't fight them. It's their piece, and I want them to enjoy it."

Eileen Watkins is *Homescape* editor.

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