

## Antique of Fake

Recently, a friend of mine, asked me,  
“How do you tell the difference between an antique and a fake?”  
“You don’t” I replied, “You ask me”.

A fake is something that has been cynically created with the intention to deceive. The intended deception is not as common as people think, we don’t encounter too many out and out fakes, but likewise we don’t encounter lots of really good untouched pieces of furniture either. The real problem with antique furniture is identifying all the changes and adaptations that a piece may have encountered throughout its serviceable life. In the fine art world it is a different story, a recent story published this year in the Antiques Trade Gazette suggests that ten percent of all the artwork in the UK’s Museums is probably fake.

In reality, much of the antique furniture we work on has been restored many times in its life. These operations vary from wonderful metal work repairs by 18<sup>th</sup> Century smithies and very well executed professional restorations, to crude onslaught by thoughtless people with hammers and nails and saws, inflicting much damage and in a lot of cases, huge devaluations. So many pieces we trade in have had changes and adaptations, I was amazed recently when stripping the garnished modern covering fabric off a rather plump overstuffed Victorian spoonback chair, to find seven layers of previously upholstered fabric, each upholsterer had added the latest covering without removing the old one first!

Earlier this year, a customer sent me some photographs of an antique table they had bought in an antique shop in Tetbury, about five years ago. They were moving house and the new house was too small for it. The table was described as an antique regency period. Mahogany triple pillar dining table, with two additional leaves, Circa 1800.

On closer examination of the photos, I quickly realise that it was probably an early 20<sup>th</sup> Century copy, the shape and design of the legs attached to the turned columns, put the table’s earliest possible date at 1850, early Victorian. The rather heavy, staid form, and its dull finish, plus the lack of any interesting graining to the timbers, gave the game away, it was a reproduction probably made in the 1920’s.

“What do you think the table’s worth?” He asked me on the phone that evening,

“I think it has a decorative value of about £4000 to £5000” I replied, “but first, you would need to spend about £1200 to have it repolished”.

It went very quiet on the end of the phone line; he thanked me politely, and hung up.

Much later, I discovered he had paid £32,000 for it.

Most reputable dealers will know what they are dealing with most of the time, and as long as their prices represent value for money and the pieces they retail are honestly portrayed; then it’s fair. In this case I think the dealer who sold the table was probably a crook, who passed off a cheap 20<sup>th</sup> century copy for a real regency antique table, at a massively inflated price.

Some dealers have a habit of “adding age” to pieces. Early Victorian pieces are sold as William IV period, and William IV as regency. Late Georgian pieces are often sold as George II etc. Sometimes the dealers selling these pieces are ignorant of the real age and have endorsed the description given to them when they bought the piece!! People have always copied good ideas; it is the same with antiques. Most of these copies are done with no intention to deceive, but with the passing of time they can acquire all the characteristics of a genuine old example, eventually they become very difficult to distinguish from the original. This is especially true of pieces that have lived much of their existence in the public domain, in hotels and pubs. A table can acquire the same amount of ageing in a busy pub for 40 years, as an antique table made in the 17<sup>th</sup> century would in private ownership, and even the expert can be deceived, and has to look very carefully for clues, often the timber used is incorrect, also the brass used for the handles may be too bright and brittle indicating a higher zinc content than brass used in the 18<sup>th</sup> century. Sometimes there is a hint of incorrectness in the overall proportions of the piece or the shape of the bracket feet or the shape of the mouldings. Copies are like Chinese whispers, often there are tiny changes in the detail, and mistakes made in the copying process! These may not be obvious, but an experienced professional dealer will spot them immediately, often across the room, before close inspection of the piece. Restoration is sometimes a problem, how much is acceptable? There is an ocean of difference between an honest repair and a cleverly disguised embellishment intended to deceive. The Italians (and many museums) restore antiques such as frescos by replacing the missing material in an obviously different textured or coloured material, thus highlighting what is restoration, and what is original. I dislike this approach, firstly it requires no skill whatsoever and secondly it looks awful. There is no wrong and good restoration, the deception is when the restoration is misrepresented, and the piece is portrayed as original. My friend and I concluded our conversation, he had the last word, he said, “of course, nobody knows about the really good fakes, do they?”