

The care and maintenance of antique furniture

My primary source of income for the last 20 years has come from working as a professional antique furniture restorer from workshops in Ascott under Wychwood. I have met many interesting and colourful people during this period and have given talks on all aspects of the antique trade and given restoration demonstration too. I always welcome questions from the floor and unsurprisingly the same concerns tend to be raised time and again, so here is a very brief article which deals with some of those issues.

I was once called out to a local country house to inspect a valuable 18th Century Walnut and Kingswood veneered bombe chest of drawers, it required extensive restoration to the veneers because their housekeeper waxed the piece each week, the aggressive nature of the attack combined with the regularity of the event had taken its toll on this rare piece, inevitably pieces of veneer fell off on a regular basis, she always carried a tube of super glue, and hurriedly stuck the bits back on sometimes upside down, sometimes back to the front, it cost the major who owned it, a small fortune, to have it properly restored. It is best to wax furniture only two or three times a year, but do it well and carefully, make it a labour of love, use beeswax there are many brands on the market, I prefer to use a dark wax which colours in any knocks and scratches, making them look like old marks.

A common myth is that all aerosol spray waxes are bad, certainly any that contain silicon are detrimental e.g. Mr Sheen, but there are many modern beeswax sprays on the market, Johnson and Johnson make a number of varieties which used sparingly are excellent when dusting. Much antique furniture is French polished, which when done properly seal the grain completely, waxing then becomes purely a cosmetic exercise because it doesn't feed the timbers.

Woodworm can be a serious problem in furniture, but it is easily treated by brushing on a proprietary brand of woodworm killer, or in small infestations applying woodworm killer to individual holes. It can be purchased from any good hardware store, but be warned furniture can become infested again a few years after treatment. The woodworm is the larval stage of the beetle, there are various species, the most common is the furniture Beetle (*Anobium punctatum*) which becomes active from May to August laying it's eggs in cracks and old holes, these hatch into larvae which eat their way through timber for up to two years before emerging as an adult beetle, then the cycle begins again. A simple test for live woodworm is to tap or knock near a hole with a small hammer; if dust leaks out from the hole then the worm is probably active.

Modern central heating plays havoc with antique furniture, and is responsible for many 'smiling' card tables, warped tops and doors, also splits and buckled and raised veneers, caused when the carcass timber dries out faster than the veneers laid on top. Keep furniture away from radiators, put a bowl of water underneath pieces of importance, it helps maintain the humidity levels. Be careful when positioning pieces of furniture, the ultra violet rays in bright

sunshine will not only cause fading to the colour of your furniture but also eventually destroy any finish.

A general rule is that the more valuable your antique is, the less you should do to it. Never clean, wax or touch the areas that are unfinished, and if you wish to sell a piece, often restoration will actually devalue it because it can cast doubt on the integrity of the piece, which reduces the number of potential buyers. I was once sent a fantastic 16th Century Walnut console table from one of our wealthy Italian clients; he wanted us to strip off the finish and French polish it. It was accompanied by an insurance valuation of £165,000 by the curator of the Musée d'antiquité de Milan. Needless to say we carefully waxed it up, and sent it straight back!

I am often asked about DIY remedies for removing unsightly marks and burns on tops. White marks are usually blooms in the finish often caused by water, darker marks are usually marks that have gone through the finish into the wood, my advice is when possible, "celebrate the scars" they are part of the piece's history unless they are really bad in which case their removal is always a professional job, a patina built up over two hundred and fifty years can be ruined in a couple of minutes by an inexperienced enthusiast!

Some jobs are best brought to a restorer sooner rather than later, a wobbly chair is much cheaper to repair than a collapsed one that may well require a new tenon making, it is also much more expensive to restore a piece when the owner has made a botched repair, this is specially true with chairs, a broken leg is much easier to repair than a badly glued leg.

Finally, a word of warning, don't lock antique cabinets, a locked cabinet is irresistible to a thief, he will always assume something valuable is inside and smash his way in, if you are burgled he will take the contents regardless, it's a pity to also have your cabinet smashed, we restore a number of smashed bureau falls every year.