

ANTIQUES: AN INTRODUCTION



Antiques, courtesy Martyn Cook Antiques, Rushcutters Bay, Sydney Australia

What is an Antique?

The word antique comes from the Latin *antiquus* or, ancient. Cambridge Dictionary tells us it is 'something made in an earlier period and collected and valued because it is beautiful, rare, old or of high quality'.

A more generally accepted understanding in the contemporary western world is goods over 100 years of age. This definition came about when it was established at a convention in Brussels in 1952 to exempt the movement of goods over 100 years of age from taxation.

Today many customs departments around the world, and in Australia still follow this guideline. The difficulty arose when once it had become standard practice of customs departments world wide to exempt goods 100 years old it led to a false idea that an 'antique', or indeed if we wanted to extend the thought, anything 'heritage' automatically had to be over 100 years old.

If, as a society we took the well regarded definition of the word antique literally then we would recognise and value anything that would prove valuable to society to conserve, whether for its intrinsic value or investment value and that could include something produced in the last ten years. It is very confusing for many people.

Today internationally many antiques associations have decided that, while they recognize quality objects from any era are worth conserving, many of them have established for the purpose of defining a period for exhibiting antiques, that they will allow goods made up to the advent of World War II to be displayed and categorized as 'antique'.



So, What is Art?



Pop Artist Andy Warhol in the 20th century turned people's expectations upside down by presenting commonplace objects, or repeated graphic images as works of "fine art" simply by presenting them in a way that no one had ever thought of before.

It induced an epiphany of "what art is", or is not

Cambridge dictionary gives us a variety of answers to consider about what constitutes art

- *the making of objects, images, music, etc. that are beautiful or that express feelings*
- *the activity of painting, drawing and making sculpture*
- *an activity through which people express particular ideas*
- *a skill or special ability*

This definition would also apply to 'antiques' as well.

So you can instantly see that the lines between the two can often seem blurred.

In reality – all art is the art of now.

However antiques have additional considerations.

We have put some of them down for you to discover, or confirm in an introduction to antiques.



*Detail of Gilded
Pediment on a
Bookcase,
courtesy
Martyn Cook
Antiques*

HOW DO I BECOME A COLLECTOR?

If you would like to become a collector, potential purchaser or, a dealer in antiques and art it is important to spend time gaining and expanding knowledge.

One thing is sure; it offers many challenges along the way. So, be prepared if you decide to take the journey.

An appreciation, the sensitive recognition of good qualities in design and art is only gained through learning the theory and practicing, which constantly challenges all accepted theories.

If you wish to deal or collect in the fields of antiques and art you also need to understand a great many things.



Some of the most important information to gather about an antique is as follows:

- *when was the item first produced?*
- *was it made to serve a specific function?*
- *who was the craftsman that made it or, the 'artist' that produced it?*
- *what type of materials was it made from?*
- *were those materials available at that time?*
- *how and where was it constructed?*
- *were the materials readily available at that time in the place where it was made?*
- *does it have the type of wear you would expect from something made during that period?*
- *is the wear consistent with its age and exposure to light based on where it has been?*
- *what repairs does it have? where has it been?*
- *are they acceptable levels of repair without affecting its intrinsic or monetary value?*
- *does it conform to a known decorative or style type?*
- *was it made for a patron? If so, what were his particular eccentricities?*
- *was it made during the period when its design was first conceived. This aspect is very important?*
- *and, what has happened to it since it was first made. Has it been 'altered' in any way.?*
- *what level of restoration affects its monetary value*
- *what is the difference between conservation and restoration and how do I know which one to apply*

Only when you have the answers to these initial questions will you begin to be able to begin to be able to assess what it is you are looking at.

Following are some basic considerations.





CONDITION

Original condition is most desirable. e.g. Furniture up to, and including the eighteenth century in England, Europe and America was waxed by hand and this imparted a soft warm glow, which over the years mellowed into a faded, soft appearance fully showing fading, knocks, marks, scratches etc. This appearance formed part of its patina (see below).

A piece of eighteenth century furniture in original condition (*including original handles*) will fetch far higher prices than a piece later 'improved' by being French polished (giving it a modern, glassier look), a technique that arrived with the advent of the Industrial Revolution in the nineteenth century.

Any item that has escaped repair will be far more highly valued because of its good fortune.



You need to keep in mind that most antiques have undergone some measure of decay or damage during their long life, especially furniture.

The only exception would be something like ceramics or glass that have been placed in cabinets for display.

However we do need to consider did someone wearing gloves always handle the pieces correctly?

You would be surprised how many items, enthusiastic owners and cleaners rubbing hard have ruined, by removing the all-important decoration and patina.

PATINA

Describes the condition of the surfaces of the object or piece of furniture. For furniture it describes the layers of polish, dirt, grease etc., built up over the course of time.



Grease and dirt from handling (especially under drawer handles etc.,) should be evident, giving a darker colour to the affected areas. Grime should have also accumulated in carving and crevices.

A lot of pieces have lost this accumulation due to heavily applied wax polishes designed to conceal conversion or replacement. It can only be produced by age and conditions surrounding its display and can never really be faked.

It is the same for old sterling silver, thousands of minute scratches from use over hundreds of years created a look of softness on old silver that is appreciated and highly desirable for collectors. If you are lucky enough to have sterling silver then do use it, don't put in a cupboard.

REPAIRS, MARRIAGES & FAKES

There is an acceptable level of repair work covering normal wear or damage during the lifetime of the piece under normal conditions.

Few pieces have escaped some repairs, but if they are over a hundred years old and have had repairs then the dealer should always point them out to the potential purchaser.

It is an unrealistic expectation to believe any article over 100 years old is perfect.

Alterations or additions should also be pointed out too. Often changing fashion dictated these at the time and was often made with no dishonest intent. Having an eye for proportion helps because many copies lack the form and style of the original.

A 'marriage' should always be pointed out. i.e. where two pieces of the similar period and style have been put together to produce a more saleable item.

When the fashion for Chests on Stands was raging a lot of original Chests on Chests were taken apart and given a stand so you had two saleable items, instead of one.

Evidence of saw marks tells a story, though if you are suspicious you should always seek professional advice.

Genuine fakes are few fortunately, because the art of faking requires considerable skill, the right materials and an enormous knowledge of the period being faked. It has happened historically in a big way. But improved techniques can fool the untrained amateur.

There are also many pieces that have been changed from their original use.

Larger pieces were frequently "cut down" to make smaller items, which are more desirable and much more expensive.

This is the most difficult of all and you really need an expert, approved service provider to an antique dealers association, rather than someone who believes their own press releases and is not held to an acceptable professional standard.

Conservation means preserving something at a moment in time.

In the case of something like textiles that often means just keeping that process going until it rots out. In England some great houses have conserved eighteenth century textiles by encasing them in a specialised netting to hold the fibres together until they go to dust.

Then, and only then they will no doubt reproduce them.



Restoration means bringing something back to original condition. But what level of restoration is acceptable without the piece being de-valued is the most important concern?

So, in the case of antiques this where you really need expert advice, especially if you are a first time collector. You need to build trust with a recognised dealer, who should be able to guide that process. Again, dealing with people who are members of an association is really the only means of protection from unscrupulous practice.

Improvements on general household items were often made, not necessarily as a means of deception, but through a desire to add to a pieces function or conform to changing fashion and taste. This happened a great deal with country furniture, particularly dressers when they became fashionable as part of the craze for the English and French style in the 80's.

Today because so many were changed and also because of emotional entanglements (everyone's granny had one) their originality always needs to be considered carefully. If you are just buying a 'look' then that's fine but do NOT buy it at an ANTIQUE price.

For both antiques and art provenance usually adds value.

PROVENANCE



This is all about the history of the piece, generally coming from a collection that has been well documented and can be traced back to its origins.

These pieces always fetch a higher price. It means the piece has a recorded and documented history and, if the person who owned it has achieved some 'fame', then its value would increase.

However, we must add a word of caution as in some instances it would be necessary to establish that while the piece was in the possession of this person of 'fame', if any alterations were made to it, other than regular maintenance.

*A late George III / Regency period mahogany settee of small proportions
Courtesy Martyn Cook Antiques*

If so, were they at what would be considered by experts as an accepted level of restoration or repair.

This is particularly relevant if you read Paul Barry's book "*The Rise and Fall of Alan Bond*", published by Bantam Books.

Mr Barry reported Mr Bond purchased antiques and often altered them to suit his personal taste, thus devaluing them on the world market when they came to be resold.



OTHER CONSIDERATIONS

Much of the furniture in Australia was for a long time, English or European and then in the nineteenth century, wonderful Chinese copies of English and European styles arrived.

Initially furniture was brought in with, and for the early English settlers, then for those emigrating here for over a 100 years and before and after WW I and WW II when so many people poured into this country from England, Europe and Russia.

Dating antiques (decorative arts) in England and Europe during its evolution, furniture was often linked to the dates of royal houses, or their monarchs, in an attempt to coincide with a particular movement in decorative style. This however, often did not always coincide with recognised stylistic change.

English dealer/author Percy Macquoid at the turn of the twentieth century, in a logical attempt to classify English furniture defined it by the main type of timber used during a particular period in English history i.e. Oak c1500-1660, Walnut 1660-1720's, Mahogany and Satinwood 1720-1830.



Superb Brass Inlaid Regency Table courtesy Martyn Cook Antiques

That had its difficulties. There was years of overlapping, with stores of old timber available well past the designated dates.

There were also many more timbers being used, especially during the 18th and 19th centuries, when exotic timbers were arriving in England and Europe from the Americas. Then you have local idiosyncrasies.

Throughout the United Kingdom for hundreds of years some craftsman and their customers simply preferred good strong English oak as it was durable, conducive to their appreciation for 'sensible living' and recognised as being quintessentially English



LETS TALK ABOUT TIMBER

Each timber has its own history and it is often complex.

Most timbers have to be tested to reveal their true identity, and many different timbers were dyed/stained to resemble others.

We will take Oak as an example. Oak is a hardwood whose sapwood is prone to attack by the furniture beetle (woodworm). The timber of British trees was different from European growth of the same species, the differences subtle.

English Oak is a rich light brown in colour, hard, heavy, strong and durable, which hardens and darkens with age. It was considered far more unpredictable because of its crooked growth, but it was also strong and attractive and so was used often in the traditional timbered house or the ship building industry.



European oak was renowned for its straight and true growth. It has a showy, bright, well-figured grain, which was especially suited to the manufacture of wainscoting and was imported into England in large quantities so used for other applications as well.

Oak you will find also appears in all early accounts of inventories in great houses. However it is rarely distinguished by the use of the word English or European. Its use continued from the Middle Ages well into the eighteenth century as it fluctuated in popularity.

During the great revival period of popular medieval styles, or as it is stylised, a return to the tradition of 'arts and crafts' during the late nineteenth century oak furniture was made again and, often in the old styles from the Tudor period. With over a 100 years of age an Oak piece made in the nineteenth century means that it is classified as an 'antique'. But, is it in 'period'?

What is 'period'?

PERIOD CONSIDERATIONS

If you say it is in 'period' we are talking about the dated time span generally accepted as the norm i.e. the piece of furniture was made during the established and recognized decorative style span for its main timber. Does that make it more valuable? The simple answer is YES

The most popular period for the use of oak was between 1500 and 1660. This period encompassed the reigns of the Tudor Kings and monarchs of the House of Stuart, coming toward an end of its popularity when Charles II returned from exile in Europe to England in 1660 and walnut from France and then later the Americas, became very popular.

Oak then from the nineteenth century, while copying the styles from the Tudor period, will not fetch anything like the price of a piece of oak furniture in good condition from 1500 - 1660.



Let's now take a piece of furniture as an example of another consideration



ATTRIBUTION

A chair designed by renowned English cabinetmaker Thomas Chippendale (1718-1779) highlights the importance of attribution.

Thomas Chippendale was a master craftsman, as well as a designer. Furniture made by his hands, or in his workshop (proven) is very valuable.

You can today only attribute a chair to Thomas Chippendale or his workshop, if you have supporting documentation.

Chair designed by Thomas Chippendale in the 1st Edition of his 'Director', 1754.

Place of origin: England (north-west, made) 1754-1780 (made) carved mahogany, courtesy V & A Museum at London

Furniture with documentation is not only highly desirable, but worth a fortune and so expensive that today it is mostly in museums or major collections.

A chair however, could have been produced by one of his contemporaries, to one of Chippendale's designs, as he obligingly published his *Gentleman & Cabinet Maker's Director* in 1754 and it was available by subscription to his rival/fellow craftsmen. (see example).

If the age of the wood, the construction methods used, the decoration and proportions of the chair all point to the fact that it was made during the period in which it was originally designed then it would be a chair that was in period and in the Chippendale style. Without that all-important supporting documentation you cannot say it was by the master cabinetmaker Thomas Chippendale or, from his workshop.

If the chair was made around 1860 to a design by Chippendale taken from his 'Director' and of the exact proportions as dictated in his pattern book by either machine, hand techniques, or a combination of both, it would not be 'in period' but would still be classified as an antique, and should be described as 'in the manner of Thomas Chippendale' or, 'in the Chippendale style'.



Phillip Reinagle painted Mrs Congreve and her children in their fashionable London Drawing Room in 1782. Everything in the room from the paintings to the chairs, mirrors, porcelain and textiles is of sheer quality, in both design and manufacture.

The carpet is highly desirable, probably being an early example of what generically has become known as Axminster, named for the town where carpet weaver Thomas Whitty set up shop in 1755 and produced simply splendid woven carpets of superior design and quality

So the term 'antique' can be somewhat ambiguous and could mean the twentieth century when many fine pieces were still being made in traditional styles from Mr. Thomas Chippendale's Director. They certainly fit the description, are nearly one hundred years of age and certainly look the part.

PURISTS AND ANTIQUES

Purists are adamant that using the term 'antique' means you are talking about an item made before 1830, the date that coincides with the death of George IV of England, the end of the 'Georgian period' (1714 - 1830).

The Georgian period encompassed the reign of George I, II, III, the Regency of George, Prince of Wales and his later reign as George IV, which is seen as the cut off point when master craftsmen last made furniture by hand.

By then the Industrial revolution that had begun with the beginning of the world's first cast iron bridge over the river at Coalbrookdale in 1780, was gaining momentum.

Before the nineteenth century artistic innovation developed slowly guided by an aristocratic elite who attained, and established high standards through patronage.

The assurance of inherited tradition and wealth gave the aristocracy a sense of stability and confidence enabling them, over a great period of time to accept change, progress and innovation, while actively promoting a developing culture.

That patronage subsequently often ensured artistic freedom for the artist or craftsman, whose immediate practical needs such as housing and food on the table were attended to so that they were able to concentrate on attaining the highest level of achievement or as we would say today, fulfil their potential.

Now famous Renaissance sculptor/architect/artist Michelangelo, as a young man particularly, had the Medici one of the wealthiest families in Florence to support and encourage his talent.

Today great individual patrons have all but been replaced by a 'new aristocracy' i.e. philanthropic foundations governments and/or large corporations with the ready necessary.





INDUSTRIAL REVOLUTION

Advanced building techniques were a direct result of the progress of the industrial era that started in the last 20 years of the eighteenth century and ran throughout the nineteenth century.

This inevitably meant a loss of artistic spontaneity and an erosion of hand skilled techniques. The introduction of machinery into furniture making effectively 'killed off' the value previously placed on the skill and handwork of a master craftsman.

By the early nineteenth century the standards of excellence in taste and style set by the landed gentry and aristocracy in England during the eighteenth century were acknowledged and widely recognized. The burgeoning newly rich middle class population of Victorian England was choosing suitable furnishings for their own new town and country houses, built via the new prosperity.

The gradual erosion of design standards were overlooked by a market dominated by a need to aspire to impress, seeking reassurance in styles that were well tried and familiar. It was these that became the most popular.

Mass manufacture meant cheaper prices and by exploiting poorly paid labour you could/can create exceedingly high profits - a great motivation for producing furniture whose role models came from established and well-known designs.

The Victorians loved to improve furniture.

They often took eighteenth century pieces that had a lovely patina, stripped it away and polished it to look like the new with hard glass-like surfaces. If you can find one of these eighteenth century pieces they do not have the same value as pieces that have retained their original condition.



Everything comes back to Condition

There are then many factors to consider when assessing a piece of antique furniture and why one piece of furniture can be very much more expensive than another, while often looking very similar. As a prospective purchaser or collector if you understand these differences, you can then decide your own path and establish just how pure you may wish your pieces to be.



Collection of Antiques, Martyn Cook Antiques

These days its quite in order to choose something as wonderful as cut glass chandelier simply for its decorative qualities, enjoying the fact it has some age and charm and will not only light up but also grace just about any space it occupies be it modern, contemporary or traditional. If you want to collect antiques or art with investment potential in mind, the differences can severely affect re-sale value and would need to be taken into consideration.

CARING FOR ANTIQUES

Inevitably, from experience this is the main question everyone asks so I will answer it here and now.

As a rule of thumb consults a dealer in whatever it is you are collecting about how to care of it. Dealers of silver usually sell the right sort of polish you should be using and dealers of furniture the same and so on.

Some supermarket products will actually do the reverse. They will destroy condition, the most important aspect of your antique piece in respect to its value.



FURNITURE

For furniture modern waxes containing silicone should be totally avoided. They build up a film on the wood, which manufacturers claim will protect it. However it actually stops the timber from breathing and over time will lead to cracking.

Timber is a 'living thing' and even when harvested and manufactured continues to move with exposure to different temperatures and age. Keeping its grain in good condition is important to its continued value as an antique. Make the investment in the right waxes. It is important to retain original condition wherever possible.

If you have been using a silicone based cleaner you will have to strip off the silicone first before you can re-wax it. There are special products for this, consult your dealer or an expert on restoration or contact the antique dealers association in your state.



Silver Tureen c1880 Silver-plate with an ebonized stopper and handles. Manufactured by Hukin & Heath London. Marks H 8" 20.3 cm) x 9" (22.9 cm) (at lid). by Christopher Dresser

A WORD ABOUT DESIGN

Good design is valuable in any period.

In the late nineteenth and early twentieth century during the so-called Art Nouveau, Art Deco and Modernist movements, splendid furniture and beautiful objects were produced, often hand crafted, beautifully rendered, superbly finished and, in wonderful proportion.

England gained an enormous reputation for over 200 years for the sheer quality of its 'sterling' silver, which was highly regulated to

retain its quality and stamped by its makers. With the advent of what we style 'modernism' at the highpoint of the industrial revolution in England, production of silver plated objects reached a zenith of popularity.

Then along came Dr Christopher Dresser who had a rage for simplicity – a lack of complexity – with no embellishment or difficulty and he was completely radical in his age.

A botanist, designer and writer he became one of the first, and in many people's estimation, one of the best 'industrial designers'. His guiding principle was surely, less is more as revealed in this Soup Tureen made for the burgeoning upper middle class market. Today his objects are highly sought after, especially by museums.

PURCHASING ANTIQUES

For the potential collector, interior designer or architect, looking for long-term investment for clients, as well as decorative pieces particularly suited to contemporary interiors the furniture and objects from this period not only deserve attention, but also represent exceedingly good value.

If you wish to purchase antiques or art establish a relationship with a renowned dealer who has gained a professional reputation. Even better if they are a member of the [Australian Antiques & Art Dealers Association \(AA&ADA\)](#)

A word of caution - do not purchase items containing ivory or tortoiseshell to bring back to Australia you could be buying a lot of trouble. Many materials are now listed on the endangered species list for worldwide heritage.



Pair Regency Chairs, covered with a contemporary fabric, Martyn Cook Antiques, Rushcutters Bay, Sydney

The argument about tortoiseshell and ivory is ongoing. If you purchase pieces made from, or containing some of these materials, they could be confiscated and/or destroyed if you try to carry them through many customs areas.

You need to immerse yourself in the world of antiques and art, visiting auction viewings (not buying) looking at all the very best dealers stock (if you don't see the best how can you learn to judge quality at a reasonable price) by reading and attending courses.

Enjoy the journey! Otherwise what is it all about?

CAREER IN ANTIQUES?

I have written this introduction to assist those wanting to go down this path as a career and so have not pulled any punches. It won't be enough to just have a passion for this career, you will also need endurance, persistence and a stubborn streak to survive.

For all those people in the trade who are consulted by investors, the only way to theory and practice are often poles apart.

How do I become a Dealer?

Becoming a dealer of antiques is no easy task. A large sum of knowledge, together with a good deal of professional experience, is required. It also helps to know people in the trade.

Some of the most respected dealers in the world were, at first collectors, who pursued their personal preference over many years before becoming dealers.

Others gained an apprenticeship with some of the great dealers of their day. Great dealers are always happy to talk with people who share their passion.

So if you are determined you need to get out there and get your network going by visiting dealer's shops and talking to them about their antiques.



[CINOA](#), is the international body for antiques dealers worldwide. It is based in Europe.

In the **USA** there are many different guilds and associations to choose from. Contact the [USA Antique Dealer Association](#), which lists the dealers in your state.

In the **UK** there is [BADA](#) and [LAPADA](#)

In Australia obtain a list of the Dealers in each State of Australia from the [AA&ADA](#) website.

Martyn Cook in Sydney has a diverse collection of wonderful things for you to view and we thank him for allowing us to use his antiques in this introduction.

[Contact Martyn Cook Antiques](#)



WHAT IS IT ALL ABOUT?

The use of antiques in traditional or modern settings will always be desirable; the lure of the past is strong. The very nature of their delightful idiosyncrasies is very appealing.



The variety of choice available in lovely decorative pieces, such as the colour, warmth and mellowness of aged wood, the gentle softness of old gilding, the variety in exotic inlays and now extinct materials, all produced by craftsmen who refined their skills into an 'art' form is generally enough incentive.

When all of these attributes are combined with the 'thrill of the chase' then, antiques are really quite irresistible.

Carolyn McDowall, The Culture Concept Circle, 2014