

How to flag “gems” in antique shops

Telltale signs for spotting high-quality period furnishings

By Tina Koenig

With furniture and with decorative objects, one person's junk is another's treasure. Yet it is possible to discover a real and valuable antique (or two) by shopping thrift shops, antique stores and markets.

The most successful antique hunters shop frequently. They shop early for the best items and late for the best deals. Antique furniture can be very valuable but there are also many fakes and reproductions. Carol Prisant, a former antiques dealer and author of books on antiques, including encyclopedias for the popular television series, *Antiques Roadshow*, provides a primer for making the most of your hunt for furniture treasures.

How can shoppers educate themselves?

“Shopping for antique furniture is like shopping for clothes,” says Carol. “Like clothing, you want furniture to be stylish and comfortable—even if it’s old. If you are standing in a shop and see something you like, ask the dealer what it is. Then take out your cell phone or tablet and look it up online.”

Many experts suggest that buyers choose a period that they like and learn as much as they can before shopping. According to Carol, that approach is not always practical. “Set your tastes based on what you are likely to find where you live. If you live in the French provinces it is unlikely that you will find high-end French 18th century pieces as that’s not where the wealthy people lived.”

How can you tell if an antique is old?

The best way to tell if furniture is old is to look at the joints and hardware. “Ask if you can see a drawer or turn the piece over,” advises Carol. “Are the joints secured with staples? Are there large, ugly screws on something that’s supposed to be Chippendale? That’s a red flag because screws were not used or countersunk back then.” Carol suggests shoppers ask if the furniture is made with veneers (a sheath of thin wood laid over an inexpensive base) as this also indicates an earlier piece of furniture.

How can you tell if an antique is real?

Carol places a huge emphasis on buying “signed” pieces. Signed furniture means the manufacturer put their name on it, usually in the form of a metal plate, label or by burning it into the wood. “I was recently looking at a Knoll chair on eBay but it did not have a label. I passed on it,” she said. “If you plan to collect good furniture it should have a label. It makes it more valuable.”

What are easy repairs and what should not be tackled?

Carol explains that there are lovable flaws and there are investment killing flaws. “If you hope your children will sell what you buy for a profit then don’t buy furniture that has been completely refinished. Don’t buy anything with a flaw that affects its use such as a chair with cane that needs replacing. It’s too costly to repair. You can buy a completely stripped frame and it has no effect on the value. But upholstering is expensive so know the cost you are taking on.”

Carol hasn’t always followed her own advice. “I have bought furniture that needed repairs. I knew they were a good buy because of that. If you love something, buy it and

put it in a corner. Take advantage of the good price and someday you will be able to afford the repair. You will feel wonderful when it's done."

How do you make the best deal?

As a collector and former dealer, Carol has been on both sides of the transaction. "If I see something that's out of my range, I give the dealer my card and say, 'If you ever feel that you'd like to sell this, here is my price range.'" She never insults dealers by pointing out flaws to lower the price.

Where are your favorite places to shop?

Carol loves browsing the famous flea markets, like Clignancourt in Paris or London's Portobello Road, but says they no longer offer great finds. She believes that thrift stores and side-street shops are the places to uncover gems. "Shop the item that a dealer doesn't specialize in, as he or she may not know what they have. For example, if a dealer has a lot of mixed furniture in a town outside of Paris, you might find a great Italian painted chest. Always look for the anomaly in the shop."

There's a famous story about someone who found a copy of the Declaration of Independence taped to the back of a print. "It's not likely you'll find a needle in the haystack but it's possible. That's the thrill of it."