

The 90's renew emphasis on home and family

It has been called the nesting instinct, redomestication, and other less cozy terms than what it really is: It's the renewed emphasis on home and family. Jetset is out and couch potatoes are in.

We can see it in advertising: "Homestyle" is to the nineties what "instant" was to the eighties - the buzzword for promoting foods. The popularity of easily assembled and dismantled furniture - almost

disposable, it is so characterless and inexpensive - is declining in favor of antiques and more solid, permanent pieces. Magazines on home decoration are more popular than ever.

Like most trends, the return home undoubtedly has its roots in economics. College students can't afford to leave home and pay for places of their own and remain living with their parents. Young newlyweds postpone buying their first home and do the same. With more, things should get merrier, so old rooms are revamped, storage space sought or created. Those

who do buy houses are careful to protect and improve upon their investment, adding on everything from saunas to greenhouses.

Homeowners today are nervous about the economy and prudent with their spending. Buying a second home or a summer home is put off till next year or the next, and many are spending their vacations at home.

Tips for buying antiques

We've all heard stories of antique collectors unearthing million dollar items at flea markets and auctions. But what about the average person who would like to own furniture and furnishings with character, charm and authenticity?

Despite the recent nationwide surge of interest in antique furniture and decorative arts, many people simply don't feel confident buying antiques.

Bernard Kerr, owner of New York's Hyde Park Antiques, America's foremost source for fine English furniture and decorative arts for the past twenty-five years, offers ten tips that can help the novice collector, as well as the experienced buyer of antique furnishings, with the fundamentals of determining authenticity with increased confidence and peace of mind.

1. "First, decide what it is that you respond to, be it English, American, or French. Concentrate on that one style. Read everything you can about it, look at the best examples in museums, and buy what you like.

"One of the most important things to remember in buying and collecting anything is that you must like it. If you collect things just because you think they'll increase in value, you'll never enjoy the aesthetic pleasure inherent in collecting.

2. "Handle objects. Especially in the case of furniture, feel surfaces, turn things upside-down and examine the underside.

"Of course, only an expert can tell for sure, but if you turn a piece over, and the workmanship is too pristine, you know that it may not be very old. Likewise, if you're told that a piece is in original condition, and you see replacements, you know the piece has had work done to it.

3. "Look for wear. A hundred year old chest of drawers, for example, will show signs of wear both on the sides and underside of the drawers themselves, as well as the runners in the chest that the drawers slide into.

4. "Examine the hardware and the locks on pieces. If there's a lock on a drop-top desk, then there's got to be a key hold. Sometimes these are covered up with new hardware. New hardware is acceptable, but only if you're made aware of it.

5. "Ask about restoration. Remember when you begin to look for antiques that most pieces currently available have had some form of restoration done for them. The phrase 'original condition' should thus be taken with a grain of salt.

"What most people simply don't realize is that pieces in their original condition are often not suitable for use. The mercury on the backs of old mirrors, for example, chips off, and few mirrors in 'original condition' can serve their original function. If you want to hang such a piece as a work of art, that's fine, but if you want a looking glass, you'll have to find a restored piece.

"Likewise, as most homes were heated with wood or coal-burning stoves which generated a lot of soot, the gilding on the frames of an 'original' mirror will doubtless be black. Therefore almost all antique gilt mirrors have been regilded.

"Another example of the irony of 'original condition' is painted furniture. Wood naturally expands and contracts, and responds to changes in the humidity; the paint on old furniture flakes after a certain amount of time. If you see a two hundred-year-old piece of painted furniture that isn't almost completely devoid of paint, it has been restored.

"Antiques are old - that's what gives them their charm and character. They are supposed to look old. To expect that an antique chair will look pristine simply doesn't make any sense. You want things to look as though they have been used and carefully cared for by generations of people. If they are worn or cracked, no matter, as long as they can still be used.

6. "Find out where the piece was made and who owned it. Owning an antique is like bringing a piece of history into your home.

"If the dealer is knowledgeable, he should at least be able to tell you approximately when and where a piece was made. Most important furniture and objects will have what is known as 'provenance,' a kind of pedigree that tells who originally commissioned or bought a piece, who made it, where it was made and when, plus an indication of who the successive owners were.

7. "Learn to identify secondary woods. As you become more adept at identifying periods in furniture and the materials typically used

during those periods, you'll be able to use secondary woods as another guide to authenticity.

"Secondary woods are those materials used to make the backs, undersides and drawer linings - any hidden part of a piece. For example, extraordinary English mahogany furniture may have mahogany or cedar as a secondary wood, but oak is more common. American furniture typically has poplar or pine as a secondary wood.

"A knowledge of secondary woods also helps to determine how much restoration has been done to a piece. Wood contracts and expands according to the humidity in the air. Sometimes the bottoms of drawers in old pieces shrink to the point that there are significant gaps.

"These often are remedied by filling the gap with a strip of wood. If it's a different kind of wood, or one that's a noticeably different color, then you know that repairs have honestly been made.

8. "Be careful from whom you buy. Unless you're a professional, buying at flea markets and the like is strictly at your own risk. If you're looking for things for purely decorative purposes, that's fine, but if you're serious about establishing a meaningful (and potentially valuable) collection, buy from someone who can date and guarantee a piece. Dealers also should reveal how much restoration was done.

9. "Find a dealer who is willing to buy back or trade back at a later date anything he sells. Many people's tastes change as they grow more knowledgeable. Reputable dealers should be willing to establish such a relationship.

"After all, there is a finite number of worthy pieces available, and if a dealer wants to be able to supply his clients with good pieces at all price levels, it is worth his while to maintain contact with his clients as their collections develop. For the same reasons, it is wise for the client to seek out a dealer whose taste and expertise he trusts, and to develop a longstanding relationship with that dealer.

10. "And finally, don't be afraid to make mistakes. Even the most expert dealers get fooled, and it's usually when decisions are made too hastily. But even a goof can be all right, if the piece pleases you; it's just the price that stings."

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