

# the antiquarian

ANTIQUES, COLLECTIBLES & RESTORATIONS

## Advice from a Stripper

By CINDY LUNAU

After 25 years of working in furniture restoration, I'm often asked "Is this worth refinishing?" Or the variation "What's this worth?"

My personal observation is that the same principles apply to furniture as to real estate. The price is determined by a willing seller and a willing buyer. Perhaps the more important questions are 'What is it worth to you?' Is it useful? Is there a family connection? Sentimental value?

Genuine antiques can lose value with refinishing. But on the other hand, is it useful to you in its current condition? Do you really want that finish, that upholstery, etc? Would it be better in a museum or simply as a showpiece? I've run into genuine 'antiques' on less than six occasions. In those cases, a good cleanup on the surface, and a more thorough new finish on inner surfaces for useful storage represented a compromise.

Can you save money by having old furniture refinished rather than purchasing new? Often you can find a replacement for similar

dollars, but it may not represent the same quality. Generally speaking, it may cost as much to refinish a piece as to purchase a replacement from a mass supplier. It is difficult for local craftsmen to compete with off-shore merchandise on simply the basis of price. You may wish to be aware of words like 'cherry finish' that may translate into cherry colour, but not cherry wood or even wood at all. How is it constructed? Can it be repaired or refinished? Will it hold its value? Unless you know wood and construction, it may be difficult to judge. The value may be exactly what you paid.

If you are considering doing the restoration yourself, keep these three R's in mind - Repair, Remove, Replace. Do-it-yourself projects can be labours of love and very satisfying. Or they can be time-consuming, disappointing, and painful.

**Repair:** Quite often a good portion of the cost of restoration is in 'hidden' repairs. This is especially true with chairs that almost always require gluing. On bureaus, it is common to rebuild drawer sides that have worn down through years of use. Veneer may need to be patched. Paint can hide serious flaws. I'd rather not touch a piece,

than skimp on repair work. It is the basis of future usefulness and satisfaction. Proper repairs require equipment and expertise.

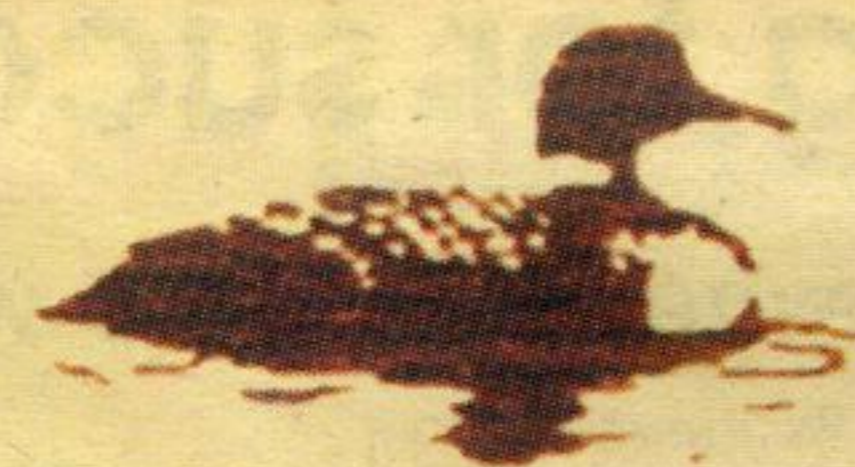
**Remove:** Taking off the old finish is messy, smelly and hard on the hands. It's not the remover itself that hurts; it's the chemical reaction when the remover hits the old finish. Make sure you have lots of room, lots of supplies, lots of time, and good ventilation.

**Replace:** If you've made it this far, it's time to replace the old finish with a new look - dress the furniture and enjoy the results! (Or perhaps you're discouraged and ready to replace the entire piece.) Finish the preparation with sanding and a good dusting. Airborne particles are your enemy at this point, so select a fast drying finish. Stains, varnishes, urethanes and lacquers can be highly volatile, so ensure you have good ventilation and disposal. It's often said that a good finish can camouflage poor workmanship, but a poor finish can distract from great craftsmanship.

If you decide on a professional restoration, use the same principles you would for any purchase or repair. Shop around. Get estimates. Ask for references. As in any trade or profession, reputable folks are happy to answer your questions and generally give free estimates and advice.

Back to the original question ... is furniture worth refinishing? I'll admit I'm partial to older furniture. Perhaps it's respect for age as I get older ... or simply that I love the reaction when people ask "what do you do?" and I can reply "I'm a stripper."

*Cindy is the owner of Loon-Woods Ltd., located in Nassagaweya (rural Milton) and specializing in furniture restoration and custom finishing. She can be reached at 519-853-3772 or cindy@in.on.ca.*



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