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Caring for Antiques

Care and Restoration of Antiques:

Preserving the Past
FOR THE FUTURE

BY ROSEMARIE T. ANNER

Preserving the Past **FOR THE FUTURE**

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The fascination with antiques, particularly American antiques, shows no sign of abating. While the artifacts of other continents have long been in vogue here (consider the use of Oriental carpets in the colonial homes of the well-to-do), our country needed a few centuries under its belt before we could appreciate the legacy of our own artisans. The trouble is, we had too few artisans so their work is hard to come by. The collector fortunate enough to have acquired a beautiful piece of America's past, therefore, must bear the burden of a double mandate: Enjoy the antique now, but preserve it well for future generations.

That applies not only to Americana, but also to all antique furniture, paintings, rugs and textiles, porcelain, silver and gilded objects, in fact, to just about anything that makes its way to the hallowed stages of the international auction houses.

Several admonishments, universally held by antiques dealers and restorers alike, have become mantras in the trade: Beware the devastating effects of intense sunlight and an overly dry environment; avoid like the plague all glue and tape (Scotch and masking); remove jewelry while cleaning or handling your treasures (rings can chip porcelain, bracelets can scratch wood); save the dishwasher for hardy, nongilded flatware and dishes; be sure that care is immediately sought for a damaged piece; and above all, use common sense, and if there is any shred of doubt, call a reputable restorer before you act.

But finding a reputable restorer is no easy matter. Dealers are understandably reluctant to reveal names, first, because the restorers themselves sometimes don't have time to deal directly with the customer; and second, because in some cases the dealer can earn a fee (ten percent of the cost of restoration is customary) for taking a damaged piece to a restoration studio himself.

Yet, Greenwich sits in a favored position, within easy access to dozens of respected restorers and conservators. What follows is a sampling of some prominent ones who don't mind sharing their names with us.



Rena Krishtul spent two months restoring the shattered pierced covers of this pair of early nineteenth-century Meissen urns. Forty percent of the paper thin flowers on the ten-inch covers had to be recreated. Petals can easily be crushed by fingertips.

Porcelain

The most difficult conservators to find are in the field of porcelain restoration. At one time, Rena Krishtul of New York City and her architect husband Nathan only accepted commissions from purveyors of antiques. Since she opened her trade to the public thirteen years ago, clients have been flocking to her studio in Manhattan.

Rena earned her master's in fine art in the former Soviet Union, with a concentration in porcelain. She became a restorer when she discovered that there was really no one around who could do the work to her satisfaction. She can restore original gilding on an antique porcelain and resurrect an eighteenth-century Chinese vase from fragments, a talent very much in short supply.

At least twice a year, says Rena, wash the porcelain in a half-and-half solution of Top Job and warm water; brush with a soft two-and-a-half-inch painter's brush from the hardware store. Then blot dry with paper towels or a soft cloth.

Forget that you own a dishwasher. "Anything you cherish, wash by hand," says Letitia Brooks of Sotheby's. "And remember, everything is breakable."→

On delicate pieces with lots of sculpted work, use a hair dryer to “blow the water away.”

“It’s not the detergent that’s the culprit in damage,” says Rena, “and it’s not the chemical; it’s physical mis-handling that causes chips. And pressure.”

Even dusting can create problems on delicate pieces or porcelains that are gilded. The gold is a soft unstable surface that is easily removed with repeated wipings. Always use the softest cloth (old diapers are great) you can find for dusting. Be gentle. And never use chlorine bleach to treat stains. Reach for ordinary peroxide, which will clear away the tea stains in your good china cups. Removal of the salt buildup in cachepots, that hard crust that remains after a plant has been watered, is best left to the professionals.

If a piece does get broken, don’t attempt to glue it together because glue can get into the pores of the porcelain, rendering satisfactory restoration almost impossible. Improperly done, the glued parts will grind against each other causing further damage. Scotch tape is just as bad, taking gilding and paint with it when it’s pulled off.

Madonna once brought a pair of magnificent nineteenth-century vases converted into lamps into Rena’s studio. Tape had been used to anchor the electric cords and broken pieces to the lamps. “It was very, very expensive to restore the 24K gilding that lay under the tape,”



It took Rena Krishtul to reunite the colored glass pieces of a micro-mosaic from the third quarter of the nineteenth century. Fully restored, the mosaic was reset into its black frame. The twelve-inch piece commanded a \$30,000 price tag at an art gallery.



Rena remembered. The singer should have wrapped the broken pieces in tissue to bring them to the Krishtuls.

On another occasion, Rena went to the apartment of a well-known philanthropist and art collector to appraise antique porcelain birds and was appalled to spot "a stack of eighteenth-century plates forty dishes high that had been untouched for years. Can you imagine the weight of thirty-nine plates on the bottom one?" she asks. "It had hairline cracks all over it."

Stack antique dishes no more than six high and put any repaired dish on top, she advised. Place felt between dishes, so that the rough foot rim of an upper dish does not scratch the design of the one beneath it. Dish supports are a good idea, adds Letitia Brooks, as are bubble wrap and lots of tissue for packing. Line up the dishes vertically in the packing carton, rather than stacking them.

Keep fragile porcelain like pre-Columbian artwork, or any with sculpted flowers and delicate petals, under a glass dome, says Rena, who with Nathan developed her own techniques to restore porcelain. And when you pick up a very old piece, use your whole hand to slide it from a table onto your other hand (fingertips can crush flower petals, and tea spouts and handles have come off in the hands of the startled owner). If you want to go beyond washing and dusting and learn how to repair, you are in