



MARY HELEN MCCOY

Fine Antiques

CARING FOR FINE ANTIQUE FURNITURE
~ One of the World's Leading Experts Tells How ~

CHARLESTON, S.C., Dec. 3, 2008 – If you have the good fortune to own fine antique furniture, you have a responsibility to preserve it for future generations. Mary Helen McCoy, founder and president of Mary Helen McCoy Fine Antiques, a director of The Art and Antiques Dealers League of America and one of only 15 U.S. dealers to be a member of the prestigious Syndicat National des Antiquaires, offers these tips for caring for antique furniture:

Wood

Most furniture has a coating which protects it from use, moderates the interaction of moisture with the wood and provides a pleasing appearance. Many furniture pieces have a wax coating, which requires occasional maintenance by a professional. When hiring a furniture conservator or professional restorer, always check references first. If maintaining a wax coating yourself, apply a good beeswax-based polish with a soft cloth that will not scratch the furniture. Polish sparingly and preferably leave on overnight before rubbing well. Twice a year is more than enough. Regular dusting with a soft cloth is all that is needed in between. If the furniture has a hard coating, it should be cleaned with a damp cloth, followed immediately with a dry cloth. Never use spray polishes as they may contain silicone and other materials, which contaminate the surface and can lead to a sticky surface.

If a piece requires conservation, she recommends hiring a qualified professional, such as Yuri Yanschyshyn, professional associate, American Institute for Conservation and studio head of Period Furniture Conservation, LLC in New York City. To find a qualified conservator in your area consult The American Institute for Conservation Web site, <http://aic.stanford.edu>.

Most furniture is made of wood and as Yanschyshyn explains, "Wood is a complex organic substance responsive to changes in temperature and relative humidity." He suggests, "A practical maintenance goal for many areas of this country is to keep temperatures at 60-70 degrees F with a relative humidity level at 45 to 55 percent." Regular use of a good humidifier in winter and an air conditioner in summer will protect furniture from extreme fluctuations. Use window coverings to protect wood furnishings from the damaging effects of too much sunlight, which over time may result in uneven fading.

Marquetry

Marquetry pieces should be checked for the stability of the veneer especially in winter when the air is dry, as changes in climate or humidity can affect these pieces. Try to maintain a proper interior climate if you have pieces such as these. If the veneer is loose, then proper care should be taken to secure the veneer using the correct glues recommended by a professional. Many surfaces can be French-polished in the traditional

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18th-century manner. Do keep these pieces away from heating vents and direct sunlight. Dust carefully with a soft cotton cloth. A little dust will not hurt the furniture, so you do not have to dust all the time. Leave polishing of marquetry to a qualified professional.

Bronzes

It is best to seek the advice of a furniture conservator or professional restorer to the cleaning of bronzes. Household cleaners can inadvertently damage the patina on them.

Seating

Seat furniture can last many years if properly restored by a qualified professional. This should include taking the chair or sofa apart and reassembling using pegs and glue that would have been appropriate. The upholsterer should then remake the proper seats and backs as would have been done before. Webbing should be used on the bottom. Tacks were often used on seat furniture, which may cause the rails to be brittle. The restorer or the upholsterer may have to strengthen the wood in order to use nailheads again.

Gilding and paint

Unfortunately there is not much of the original gilding or painting left on much of the furniture we see today. Many of the natural carved wood Parisian pieces on the market today may have been painted or gilded when they were first conceived. Among those pieces are chairs, canapés and consoles. To restore these pieces consult a qualified conservator.

Drawers

There are always problems with drawers and it is perfectly fine to repair them so that they operate. However, a furniture conservator or professional restorer should do the work to keep the drawer as original as possible.

Cast metal feet (sabots) and furniture legs

If a sabot is missing from a piece of furniture you should have the replacement match what was on the piece originally. Broken legs can be repaired properly as well by a good restorer or conservator.

“As time goes by, more and more furniture will need restoration to keep it alive and well,” Mary Helen McCoy advises. “Furniture should always be maintained and conserved, not over-restored or embellished. We are stewards of these pieces for a short while and we should enjoy and respect each piece,” she says.

Mary Helen McCoy Fine Antiques exhibits in prominent, national and international fine art and antique fairs. The firm is one of only 15 dealers in the United States to be a member of the prestigious Syndicat National des Antiquaires (SNA). It is also a member of the esteemed Confédération Internationale des Négociants en Oeuvres d'Art (CINOA) and The Art and Antique Dealers League of America for which Mary Helen serves on the Board of Directors. Mary Helen also serves on the Board of Trustees for the Birmingham Museum of Art.

Mary Helen McCoy Fine Antiques is located at 120 King Street in Charleston, S.C., and is open Monday to Saturday, 10:00 a.m. to 6:00 p.m. For more information, call 843-577-6445, fax 843-577-6447, e-mail MHMcAntq@aol.com or visit www.maryhelenmccoy.com

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