

“REVERENCE IS DUE TO THINGS WHICH ARE OLD”

(Erasmus, quoted in Hayward 1956 pii)

As we can see from this quote the concept and appreciation of antiques is as old as history itself. More recently antique has been defined as " A decorative object, piece of furniture or other work of art created in an earlier period , that is collected and valued for its beauty , workmanship and age (Collins 1989 p65).

This is somewhat of a simplification as there are also many other considerations when considering the worth of a given piece, either in terms of academic importance or fiscal value. Bennett (1990 p13) points out some of the most relevant; "Is it known when and by whom the piece was made and where it has been since? (Provenance), Is the piece in keeping with recognized stylistic features? Is it a fairly common design, or unique? Is its construction compatible with that of pieces with which it is supposed to be contemporary, or is it altered or made-up? Is it functional and are its decorative features intact? Finally are colour and patina fine and mellow?" In defining what it is about antique furniture that requires conservation-restoration rather than just plain repair, we must now examine what beauty and workmanship, as cited above really mean to the owner of a piece of antique furniture.

Rodd (1976) summarizes this in a list of three parameters;

- 1; A handmade article
- 2; restriction as to the original finish
- 3; Loving care in the home

A " hand made " article is however a partial misnomer, as the hands merely guide the tools. It is the subtle marks left by these tools however, that provide a great deal of clues a collector, dealer and indeed a restorer look for when attempting to assess whether an article is indeed handmade (Peterson 1975). As Hayward (1970) explains, when an article is handmade by one man from beginning to end he not only selects each and every piece of timber according to its grain and quality, but with the acquisition of experience refines his skill to an extremely high level.

Restriction to original finish is, by definition, a very subjective matter. Rodd (1976) points out that any piece of furniture that has survived 100 years will have been subject to a great variety of polishes containing ingredients such as; stale beer, French polish, olive oil and vinegar, and almost certainly some proprietary waxes. This finish is often referred to as "patina", and of course, loving care in the home is a major factor in its formation and condition, and indeed the overall health of a piece. It is usually a lack of this final ingredient that leads to a restoration becoming necessary. Restoration is difficult to define and has been defined as "The act of restoring, or state of being restored, as to a former or original condition, place etc. " and " The replacement or giving back of something lost, stolen etc." as well as " Something restored, replaced or reconstructed." (Collins 1989 p1302)

Almost all of the above definitions have an impact the ethics or rationale of Professional conservation-restoration. The former interpretation seems the most pertinent, and as Hayward (1967) points out, research of the style and construction techniques of that earlier period are absolutely necessary for a professional restorer to replace missing parts / finishes to an ethically acceptable standard. Reconstruction is also an arguably necessary practice among conscientious professional restorers and museums alike, the point at which a reconstruction becomes necessary and conservation becomes inadequate being the subject of much debate, and it could be argued that all restoration is indeed intrinsically a form of reconstruction.

Research shows that there are multitudes of different approaches to preserving an object, West Dean College explain in their 1997 prospectus that any given intervention will normally involve varying degrees of restoration and conservation.

This concept of conservator-restorer appears again in literature published by the Museums & Galleries Commission (1995), Conservation Unit. They clearly state "Conservation and restoration are aspects of the same process. This Document explains that both restorers and conservators have largely the same ethical and practical goals. It is generally accepted that both strive to secure the integrity of an item, possibly with supporting evidence of its history and / or manufacture. Practical methodology is always biased toward the possible future need for reversal preserving the original object as far as practical limitations allow, and both disciplines rigorously record their work for possible future reference.

Conservation tends to focus more on the causal effects of Deterioration, deterioration prevention and a deeper appreciation of an item. Plowden (1987) defines conservation as the consolidation of what is already there, whereas restoration is the replacement of missing or damaged/decayed parts.

The Museums & Galleries Commission (1997) publish the current U.K.I.C. code of ethics which contains much exploration of the individuals responsibilities toward this, and the next generations cultural property. This document is some 10 pages long and is generally accepted as a code of practice among those establishments throughout Europe and the U.K. who deem their artefacts important enough to warrant such a document.

The U.S.A however looks to the "The American Institute for Conservation of Historic and Artistic Works", Known as the "A.I.C.". They also publish a code of ethics, which is used by museums and galleries, and also by the private sector creating, in the author's opinion, a healthy continuum within the field. It seems obvious that most pieces that find their way into the public sector spend much time in private hands before they are deemed important enough for institutional purchase.

In Europe however the private or commercial sector, look to " B.A.F.R.A." to provide a mechanism for quality control. This is an acronym for the "British Antique Furniture Restorers Association", founded in 1978, by a group of students from West-Dean college, in recognition of the growing need for an organization to provide the antiques trade and general public with a directory of tried and highly skilled furniture conservator-restorers. B.A.F.R.A. have strong ties with the above mentioned U.K.I.C. being a founder member of the Conservation Forum This organization not only promotes the " High esteem " and " Good name " of the British conservation restoration profession. They also have a strong educational remit to actively sponsor the welfare of our heritage, through eight affiliated colleges in the U.K.

The lyf so short, the craft so long to lerne (Geoffrey Chaucer, 14th Century,cited in Rodd 1976 p6)

Chaucers words clearly show this commitment to ongoing education has always been an integral part of the true craftsman's attitude and approach. Wenn(1974) suggests students should thoroughly acquaint themselves with reputable and authentic articles through diligent experience and ongoing study.

The A.I.C code of ethics states " It is the responsibility of every conservator to remain abreast of current knowledge in his field and to continue to develop his skills so that he may give the best treatment circumstances permit " (McGiffin R 1983). In a field as diverse as the one under current discussion, this quest for knowledge is often borne out of necessity rather than pure intellectual appetite and is an important part of the problem solving approach.

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