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Trick or Treat: Reproduction or True Antique

In the realm of antiques, reproductions are commonplace...

By Martine M. White ASA, AAA

As far back as the early 19th century, cabinetmakers were diligently recreating copies of 18th century furniture. Today, there are few artifacts in any form that cannot be purchased as a reproduction whether honestly replicated or purposely created to deceive. Modern furniture manufacturers are known to take pride in producing perfect replicas of Queen Anne, Chippendale, and Federal period styles. Just as Classical music has remained mainstream, the furnishings of the Classical period that evoked a grandeur lifestyle have also maintained a place in the hierarchy of traditional design tastes. Although the old chair company, Lambert Hitchcock, was established as early as 1825, today their 110,000 square foot factory in New Hartford, Connecticut still produces furniture in the Sheraton taste. Their distinctive stenciled chairs with hand-woven rush seats and mortise-and-tenon joint construction are still signed with the original trademark to guarantee authenticity.

The clergyman, Wallace Nutting, renowned for his hand-tinted photographs that captured early 20th century America, was also a manufacturer of early American furniture reproduc-



Wallace Nutting Reproduction: Chippendale Corner Cabinet, branded "Wallace Nutting"

tions. During the peak of his photography studio business in 1912, while having 200 colorists employed, he was fervently involved in creating antique furniture reproductions. Wallace Nutting's mission in producing furniture was to "produce the best forms, put together in the finest manner..." and "...to make correct pieces of their period available" even at the expense of losing thousands of dollars in the process. In fact, his reproductions were so correct that on occasion unscrupulous dealers would artificially age his furniture and sell it as "period" for a hundred times the purchase price.

These great copyists should not be confused with fakers, who re-created antiques and falsified age by drilling worm holes, re-surfacing veneer, recladding and creating furniture hybrids. A classic case of antique forgery is the recent John Hobbs deception that has shaken the antiques world from Madison Avenue to London in May of this year.

The allegations involve the prominent London antique dealer John Hobbs, known for superb and astronomically priced English and Continental furniture, who was accused of selling fakes by his long-time restorer. Detailed workshop records provided by Mr. Hobb's restorer of twenty-one years reveal photographs that illustrated how he transformed plain, inexpensive pieces of furniture into high-end antiques that frequently retailed in the high six figures. Using materials from the carcasses of old wardrobes and linen presses, Mr. Hobbs allegedly falsified antiques and sold them to high profile international clients such as Oscar de la Renta, as well as wealthy American clients. Mr. Hobbs held himself up to the public as such a high-end dealer that no one ever questioned his integrity. The high premium clients frequently paid was an assurance of getting the very best. Several high profile New York decorators have spent millions of their clients' money on the basis of this false assurance, relying on Mr. Hobbs' honesty. Workshop records reveal period wardrobes with aged patinas referred to as "breakers" that were used as the staple ingredient. Original plain framed mirrors were embellished with decorative panels and lozenges transforming them into "Italian 19th Century" Geometric Mirrors priced at \$115,000. Surprisingly in 2007, an "authentic 18th Century" Spanish sil-

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Honore Daumier, oil on board,
(French, 1808-1879)



Dubious Daumier Monogram

vered mirror from John Hobbs, collection had even sold at Christie's in New York for \$192,000.

As opposed to fakes, honest antique reproductions are acceptable in furniture. However, paintings and most forms of art are exempt from this status. To an art collector, a copy is a forgery with little redeeming value regardless of whether the quality is high. While commissioned furniture reproductions with celebrity provenance can realize tens of thousands, a quality reproduction painting exhibiting accuracy and beauty pales in comparison.

Perhaps this justifies the anger and lawsuits that have resulted from art purchases at cruise ship auctions. As reported in the July 16, 2008 New York Times article by Jori Finkel, one of the biggest art auction players is Park West

SALES OF COASTERS, BRISTOL, whose at sea auctions bring \$300 million in annual revenue. Although onboard art auctions are a good source of entertainment, many Park West customers claim they were hoodwinked into spending tens of thousands on artwork that has marginal resale value. While the artwork was described as "good investments" being offered at "40% discounts," further investigation by the purchasers revealed that the value and rarity of the works were misrepresented. A true account of a Park West customer, Dr. Srinivasan, is published on FineArtRegistry.com where the Pittsburgh cardiologist describes his experience of purchasing "Better World" by Peter Max for around \$30,000 while on a Celebrity cruise in August of 2007. While Dr. Srinivasan was told that the painting was an "original" and "worth \$50,000" he was dismayed to discover afterwards that "variations from the same series were priced as low as \$3,000 to \$4,000".

Although the signature on a work of art can be fluoresced with a black light to determine if it has been added after the creation date, some elaborate high-priced pseudo-antique pieces are so perfectly executed that even the museum experts are fooled. On the other hand, some antique furniture frauds are so crudely made, a little common sense is all that is needed to detect them. Fortunately there are some guiding principles that can help identify a true antique and the distinguishable marks of fraud.

While signs of wear can be faked, it is more difficult to reproduce patina, which is the discoloration and mellowing of wood that occurs over time from exposure to oxygen and sunlight. While this patina develops on the outer case that has absorbed years of sunlight, the

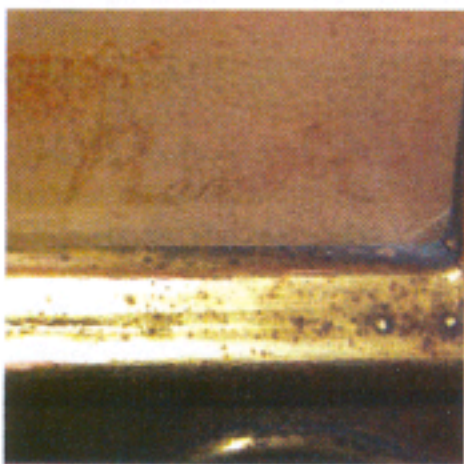
interior of secondary construction should have a pale uniform appearance in comparison and not disguised with wood stain.

Besides characteristic mortise-and-tenon joinery and early doweling, 18th and early 19th century cabinetmakers used wider boards in construction. This can be observed on the tops and end boards of chests.

Shrinkage and expansion is a significant characteristic of aged wood. Over a period of time, any board will shrink considerably at right angles to the direction of its grain. This is quite easily detected with a measuring tape. As a result, an antique circular tilt-top table should vary in dimension from 3/8" - 5/8" in diameter.

Cabinetmakers of the past finished their boards by hand using a convex bladed plane as opposed to a circular saw that was in common usage after 1860. The slightly wavy appearance of hand-planed boards should always run with the grain and can also be detected by hand on a drawer bottom. Beware of tiny ripples running across the grain, which strongly suggests the use of a mechanical planer.

Peg construction was common in period antiques and these hand-made dowels should never appear perfectly



Spuriously signed Renoir

round and, as a result of expansion, they should also pop out slightly above the wood surface.

Foremost, typical wear from general usage is an important indication of an authentic antique. Wear is commonly seen on certain chair stretchers, finials and on the leg tip in the form of drag ware. If there is a question of age, a caliper can be used to measure the diameter of a chair leg to determine if the manufacture is recent. A perfectly circular chair leg indicates recent manufacture.

Although the amount of wear is dependent on the hardness of the wood, all case pieces should show wear and losses to the base. Often this wear was extreme and resulted in altered plinths and replaced feet. Alterations and replacements can be easily detected by observing a variation of wood grain or patina.

Handwrought nails can also be used as a practical guide to determining age. Although nails have been in use for centuries, the early nails were hand-forged with large heads formed by hammer-strokes into the so-called "rose head" nail or they may be flat with no head at all. Cut nails came into use in the late 18th century and were stamped from a sheet displaying a uniform taper on only one side. The other two opposing sides are parallel. Wire nails with a flat round head and sharp points came into general usage after 1860 and indicate a later vintage.

Even in today's economic uncertainty, the past fifty years have witnessed practically an uninterrupted increase in the value of true antiques and fine art. However, a high price tag doesn't always guarantee protection from being deceived. Remember, your only safeguard against the not-so-real McCoy is

to require a receipt that states emphatically that the object or painting purchased is of the origin, period, and date represented. Be aware of the merchant that provides you with an appraisal in lieu of a receipt. An appraisal written by the gallery or dealer where the article was purchased is often considered biased.

BRJ

Martine White, of *Bernards Appraisal Associates*, in Basking Ridge, NJ, is a *Senior Certified Appraiser of Antiques & Decorative Arts* with the *American Society of Appraisers* and the *Appraisers Association of America*. Ms. White has been appraising property in the metropolitan area since 1988. Martine and her associates specialize in appraising antique furniture, silver, paintings, decorative art, and Oriental rugs. To contact Martine, call (908) 221-9097.

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