

Bargain Restoration - Trick or Treat?

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By DiAnna Tindell



People associated with art, antiques and collectibles all too often hear stories about a great deal on a rare piece, only to find out later that the object has previously been restored. It should not surprise anyone that many antiques have been restored in some way. After all, time does take its toll on objects as well as people.

What is disturbing, though, is that vendors are often willing to charge a purchaser the full book value for a piece without first disclosing that it has been restored. Of course, many vendors may be unaware that the object has been restored. Or, they may lack the experience and background to discover beforehand that a restoration has taken place.

If you have been searching for a particular piece and finally found it, should the fact that it has been restored influence your decision to buy it? Any item that's been around for a long time has probably sustained some type of damage that has needed repair. Many of the finer galleries, antique shops and private collectors find that a restored object is perfectly acceptable as long as the restoration is professionally done and will enhance, not detract, from the value of the piece.

How can you tell if an object has been restored? A poor restoration can usually be spotted by sight or touch. An unskilled restorer may fail to properly match colors, do a poor job applying paints, forget to include age cracks or normal stains, use materials that can't give the restored area the texture of the original, etc.

In other instances, as in an older restoration, the products used will have aged and show signs of flaking, discoloration, fading, scratching, mildew or a rattle inside the object caused by filler shrinkage. Be careful, however, not to mistake natural firing imperfections in the original for a shoddy restoration.

Some of the processes involved may damage a restored area. This is important to keep in mind if you intend to return the item for a refund. Many pieces are sold by the vendor "as is". If this is the case, you might attempt to negotiate at the time of purchase a return of the piece in the event a restoration is discovered.

Any object may be "dirty" at the time of purchase. This can impede your ability to visually inspect the object's condition. Therefore, it would be wise for you to ask the vendor to clean the item prior to purchase. Because an effort at simple cleaning could damage a previously restored area, you should not attempt to clean the object yourself.

A commonly used test to detect a restoration is known as the "black light test" (ultra violet light). It is believed that by holding an object under a black light, any inconsistencies in the makeup of the collectible can be detected. (Note that today's new restoration techniques may not be detectable at all). In addition, you can produce inaccurate results if the light bulb lacks sufficient wattage or the room where the test is being conducted isn't dark enough.

Moreover, some objects will indicate an inconsistency simply because that is the nature of the item. Thus, by depending solely on the black light, you may mistakenly back away from the purchase when it was not restored. Of course, an X-ray would give a more precise reading. While such a method might prove practical for a museum, the cost would probably be prohibitive for the individual collector.

A normal source of light test should be effective on those items with a translucent quality. Simply hold the piece up to a bright light to examine it. If the surface has been restored, shadowing, lines -- or dark areas -- should be visible. This may not hold true, however, for areas on an object with more mass or less translucency. In addition, a restoration project that involves nothing more than a "touch-up" of paint may not be revealed.

Many pieces in original condition will have a resonant "ring" when tapped properly. Should an attempt to ring such an object result in a dull and deadening thump, you might consider checking the piece for stress cracks or a previous restoration. New restore products and techniques can produce the ring.

It can be a difficult process matching metallics such as gold, silver, pewter, copper, pearlized lusters, brass and bronze. Therefore, a restoration may be detected by comparing various areas on a piece which have a metallic design, looking for differences in finish, texture and tone.

Also, be aware that a restorer may sometimes cover a damaged area with a metallic color as the simplest means available to avoid matching colors. It is always wise to do your research and know your piece. While this may sound silly, a restorer may not hesitate to remove matching parts that he is unable to recreate.

There are solvents available that can be used to test the surface of an object. But care must be taken to choose the correct solvent for the restoration process involved. Use of the wrong solvent will result in damage to the area being tested (or, it will not test correctly). For instance, a Q-tip dipped in mineral spirits or turpentine will not be a true test for an area restored with a lacquer-based product.

Other solvents used for testing include acetone, various thinners and some cleaners. A sharp exacto knife can be used in a scratch test of surfaces such as hard porcelain. However, if the knife is used on a soft or metallic covered surface, the knife will probably cause damage to the original surface.

Finally, the smoother and more translucent the surface of the item, the harder it is to attain an invisible restoration. So, if the object looks that good, perhaps it should be left alone. Pieces with rough, varied surface textures and sculpted areas of various heights can more easily hide a restoration.

A soft, pastel or dull bisque surface is easier to duplicate than a surface with a deep pigment glass-like finish. The high gloss glaze will sometimes exhibit what is referred to as an orange peel finish, while a dull glaze can be too shiny in spots.

Remember, restored objects cannot always be spotted easily. Ten years ago, most would consider a restored purchase non-disclosed as a trick. In today's market, I have seen restored items purchased well over book value at auction. So, the opportunity to purchase a valuable piece at a bargain price due to a little restoration could be considered a real treat.

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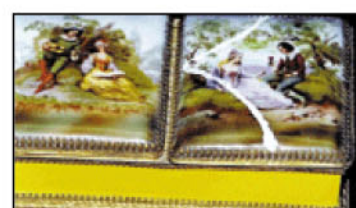
Prussian blue cameo bolted urn, needing a handle.



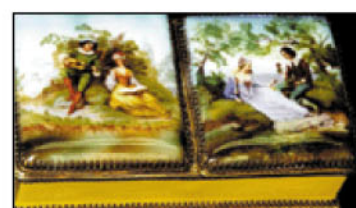
Newly created handle with white primer. Copy molded from available handle.



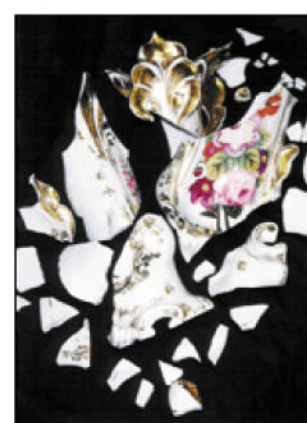
Fully restored urn, now with two handles.



Portrait Cameo trinket box showing white line fill smoothing break areas of right lid damaged in three sections.



Same trinket box with damaged area(s) restored to near perfection. If purchased, would it be a trick or treat?



Old Paris 3' tall vase (ca. 18th century), shattered.



Vase, repaired, with new parts added as part of a major restoration effort.