



THE TRUTH ABOUT “BROWN FURNITURE”

Furniture and decorative items that fit well into any room in any home will always be in style

WORDS JAMIE ALLPRESS, ANTIQUE DEALER

Every day, at least one customer walks into my shop and asks, “Does brown furniture still sell?” We took all of our Victorian/Edwardian/Deco/French furniture to auction and got nothing compared to what we paid for it in the ‘80s or ‘90s, so how can you be doing so well?”

My reply: “Did you have anything resembling the stock in my shop?” Their answer is always no. Then I say, “What brought you into my showroom?” Their replies are, “We liked your window display” or “We saw your furniture at our friend’s home.”

The fact is, each week, scores of couples are downsizing, moving into modern

apartments or townhouses where their large, fancy, heavily carved, out-of-style pieces simply do not suit. As a result, they throw them into an auction room where the other dozens of couples have sent the same style of furnishings.

Some of the younger generation may view these auctions, but do not want anything to do with all of that so-called “brown furniture”, ruby glass, fancy porcelain, silver plate etc. Many years ago, however, their parents delighted in paying exorbitant prices for their huge banquet-sized dining tables, sideboards, credenzas, chiffonniers, davenports, music Canterburys and sets of “old balloon-back chairs”.

As I type this, I shake my head in disbelief; the prices were outrageous. Some tables sold for more than \$30,000, sideboards more than \$20,000, and sets of chairs up to \$20,000, all over-restored to look like polished toffee. By comparison, you could buy a house at that time for less than \$100,000 that now sells for well over a million.

It’s no wonder, then, that people are now confused about their “brown furniture”. To make things clear, there is no comparison between all of the outdated Victorian furniture and my beautiful classic-lined English and European country furniture. Thirty years ago, when I started out, it was



difficult not to deal in Victorian furniture, as it was “all the go”, and is what I had grown up learning to buy, sell and restore from age 11. The temptation was certainly there. However, my love for English period and country furniture far outweighed my desire for higher turnover.

In the early ‘90s I took part in my first antique fair – the Caulfield Antique Fair – a great show in its day. I took a long, narrow stand to show off the stylish lines of my collection of furniture, art and decorative items. I put a lot of effort into my stand, as I always have, compared to the other jumbled, overstocked stands.

At the end of the fair I was devastated as I did not make one sale. Yet, all the fancy furniture dealers were rolling in money and sales. I held my head up and persisted. Looking back at the photographs of my first stand, I see a Georgian country oak

chest of drawers that I sold for \$1200; now a similar piece in my showroom is \$8800. An 18th century English oak dresser base, then selling for \$3000 to \$5000, is now worth \$20,000 to \$30,000.

There is no need to continue citing examples. Clearly, the answer is that I was well ahead of my time as there were very few other dealers like myself, and many have now since retired or passed on. My style of furniture is now very popular, a little like a classic suit or a classic car; it never dates. It will always look stylish, however cluttering your home with antiques is still unattractive.

The photographs here show you how well my furniture and decorative items fit into any room in any home in the 21st century, including 19th century French fruitwood farmhouse tables, 18th century English country oak dressers,

17th century English oak coffers, 16th century Flemish carved panels and rare wood-block and hand-coloured copper engravings and lithographs from the 16th to the 20th century, beautiful Flemish bronze chandeliers, French Art Nouveau chandeliers and Italian Murano glass masterpieces. This is all timeless style. Rare, unique pieces will always have an important place in the market.

So, in future, when you hear the term “brown furniture”, it doesn’t relate to me in any way.

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