



THE ENDURING VALUE OF ANTIQUES: A Brief Tutorial for the Millennial Generation (and Any Others)

William Hildreth

SINCE PURCHASING Mill House Antiques over eight years ago, I feel as though I have lived a lifetime in the world of antiques. Little did I know on that April morning in 2008 when I shook hands with David, who sold me the business, that the impending economic downturn and paradigm shift in tastes were about to occur.

But the journey from then to now has been most instructive. What I appreciate today more than ever is that to own a true antique is to preserve a piece of someone's past. It also presents quite a responsibility—for, in a way, those of us who sell and own antiques are custodians of history. As I have discovered, many of the young people who come through Mill House's door see antiques as irrelevant and void of any value other than perhaps

a monetary one. However, there is much more to antiques. There is a history to preserve. Knowing the history behind a particular piece enriches that responsibility. For example, have you ever seen a Regency sideboard with ebony inlays that normally would have been made of satinwood and olive wood in the shape of fans or shells? Such was the impact of Lord Nelson's death on the English public that cabinetmakers mourned his death with the use of ebony inlay.

Having grown up with a passion for antiques and history, I have always had a deep appreciation for fine furniture and the decorative arts and what they represent in a historical sense. It has been a lifelong learning experience that continues to this day, which is why I love this business—it's one of continuous education.

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Each antique has a unique history and provides a looking glass into the past.

This brings me to the title of this article. Over the past year, I have had numerous conversations with leading interior designers and architects about where design is going and about their clients' tastes, interests, and sophistication. What I found most interesting is that universally there is a feeling among these leaders that their younger clientele lacks an understanding or even an interest in being educated about antiques. This is not to say that all their clients who are under the age of 50 are this way; but there seems to be a common enough thread for them to highlight this fact. "The younger generation has a fear of antiques. Antiques have become intimidating objects," commented interior designer Thomas Jayne.

It is not that this new generation of clients is truly uneducated. Rather, it appears that it has had less exposure to antiques than preceding generations. "So much of taste is about exposure," noted Timothy Corrigan, a designer. "The more you learn about different things, the more you learn to appreciate them." There is, in fact, no better-educated generation than today's Millennials, generally considered to be those born between 1982 and 2004. They have by far the highest number of college and postgraduate degrees of any generation to date. Yet, they are a generation whose values and actions seem to be sometimes in conflict. More than any other generation, Millennials have embraced the environment and are committed to mitigating global warming. Yet, they are in a sense the "disposable" generation—a generation brought up on rapid technological change that continually renders obsolete most technology-based products, which are then discarded.

What does this have to do with design and antiques? Well, it is this mentality that has shaped the way this generation approaches both. Their approach to design is transitory. Like a phone, their interior décor is subject to frequent change. Millennials purchase furniture with the notion that it's cheap and disposable—like a cell phone. The French architect and designer Robert Couturier feels that Millennials "are not aware of the history or the culture of furniture, nor do they want to know. They don't care."

If you look back at the post-war period, mid-century design makes perfect sense. It picked up where Art Deco had left off due to the interruption of World War II. Our country was front and center on the world stage. Americans had sacrificed much during the war and now their pent-up demands required satisfaction at all levels. Home construction took off. New neighborhoods were erected practically overnight. These homes had to be furnished. The clean and simple designs of mid-century furniture were easy to manufacture on a large scale and every department store had it. Designs by Eero Saarinen and Florence Knoll could be easily reproduced and in quantities to satisfy this postwar demand for "new" and "forward-looking" design. America was breaking out from its past. We were cutting ties with Europe. Design was to be



Above: At the Architectural Digest Design Show, Mill House exhibited how the mix of the old and the new, whether through the use of bold textiles, modern art or the inclusion of modern furniture can be juxtaposed with the classic designs of the 17th and 18th centuries.

our own—and represent this country's bright future.

Yet cynicism took hold of the country in the 1970s, and we once again looked back to Europe. We had chintz and prints in the '80s and French country in the '90s, followed by the mid-century revival in the early 21st century. We are now in a period often referred to as "modern" or "transitional," characterized by the blending of traditional and modern styles. Though tastes are clearly running more modern, there seems to be a hint of traditional pieces being blended into the mix. One furniture company refers to it as "classic made current."

In speaking with designers and architects, it is clear that there is debate about whether mid-century has seen its last days for this cycle. If you go back to the 19th century, almost every possible style was revived—Gothic, Renaissance, Chippendale. As is always the case, the revivals were followed by a new movement. In the late 1800s, this was the Arts and Crafts movement. It was in turn followed by Art Nouveau, which is seen as a transitional period between the various periods of revival and the modernist styles taking hold in the early 20th century. In many ways the Art Nouveau period is similar to the transitional/modern style in which interior design now finds itself—the mixing of the old and the new.

There is some certitude about the next trend in interior design according to these designers. Clutter is gone. No more collections. Clean lines in the furniture and clean rooms are the order of the day. As one designer put it, nobody has time or desire to clean tchotchkes and put them back in a certain order. "That's what their parents had and my clients don't want that!" says another. In the words of interior designer Bunny Williams, "It's all about the mix. Mix is good." Fellow designer Miles Redd concurs,

“The current fashion is to mix antiques with modern.” I just hope this is not a short-lived fashion trend!

Mid-century is a design trend that abhors mixing. I liken mid-century to wearing a plaid suit. Forget about wearing a striped shirt with that suit. The same can be said of mid-century, which allows no room for antiques. As one designer, whom I shall not name, said, “Mid-century is easy to do. Not much thought goes into it. It’s a whole look. You can’t introduce other design elements. Mixing takes time and skill.”

However, mixing the old and new is nothing new. In fact, Italian architects and interior designers have been mixing the modern with antiquity since the 1960s. Beyond the world of fashion, Italy has been applying its national sense of modern design to furniture and the decorative arts for years. With the enactment of laws to preserve the ancient buildings that dominate Italy’s cities and countryside, Italian architects and interior designers were forced to preserve the living history that surrounded them. For decades, they have been deftly converting the ancient into the modern and created interiors that demonstrate a seamless mix of antiques with the sleek, contemporary furniture for which Italy is so well known.

Are we there yet? Have we learned how to balance that mix of the old and new? Is there a renaissance of the classics, but interpreted in a modern vein? How does that explain the new movement of “fine design”? Designer Brian McCarthy finds that some of his clients “are turning to the artist to design their current furniture, thus producing a unique one-of-a-kind look.” Echoing McCarthy, designer Alex Papachristidis sees the future being “about one-of-a-kind, custom-made, artisanal furniture.” For Papachristidis, “it’s about mixing antiques with beautiful sculptural pieces of furniture.”

In many ways, antiques are similar to fine design. They are not mass-produced like the furniture and accessories of the mid-century era. Quite the contrary, antiques are one-of-a-kind pieces that were handmade without the aid of a computer or a laser-guided lathe or planer. Sure, sometimes a pair was required.

But mass-produced—never.

So if the new trend is the mixing of the old and the new, how will those members of the millennial generation that are indifferent to antiques come to appreciate them? Couturier believes that “this generation has no respect or appreciation for antiques” because it is comprised of people who, unlike previous generations that acquired wealth later in life, are wealthy from a very young age. Designer Juan Montoya laments that “there is too much mass production in the marketplace today,” and that the superior craftsmanship of antiques is not appreciated by this new generation of clients.

This is a refrain I often hear from former clients whose children are not interested in the antiques they acquired over the decades.

Interior designer Linda Ruderman mused that many of her younger clients “don’t want anything that looks like their parents’ house. So antiques are not an option.” Architect Peter Penoyer finds some clients just want “instant interiors” rather than ones that have developed over time, stocked with objects and pieces like antiques collected over a lifetime of living and traveling. He cautions that instant interiors lack a story. They are of the moment and risk looking dated quickly.

Yet, universally, these top designers and architects see the pendulum swinging

back to antiques. Albeit not to a full-fledged return to the design trends of the 1980s and 1990s, but rather to a healthy inclusion of antiques among modern-focused designs. In fact, not long ago Mill House participated in Architectural Digest’s Design Show, in which we used one of our custom Queen Anne-style bureau bookcases to illustrate how well antiques and their newer cousins mix with the bold textiles and clean designs of today’s marketplace.

The beauty of antiques is that they add depth and texture to today’s modern, clean environment. In a world where the top 10 most popular colors are 10 shades of white, brown furniture has a place. In a monochromatic environment, everything blends, nothing stands out. Designer Jeffrey Billhuber put it succinctly: “Today, when you mix a signature piece with a modern piece, there is a conversation going on. A signature piece can anchor



Above: Pair of English Oak hall chairs in the Gothic style with mirror images carved into each chair’s splat. Foot rail stretcher base. Circa 1800.



a room and surround it with sensitivity.” Design must break the monotony. It needs to be layered so that the eyes do not glaze over but seek out the nuances in the mixture of old and new. Both the designer and the client must feel a passion for their project. With passion comes education and knowledge. But love must come first.

When clients are selecting an antique and I see them struggle with the decision, I always ask if they love it. I tell them they must love it first and need it second. Sometimes the love is greater than the need. Part of loving an antique is learning about it—how it was made, the woods and techniques used, the oddities about it that give it character. In describing the antiques that fill our showrooms, I always refer to them as decorative antiques. I explain to my clients that decorative antiques are to decorate a home and be used every day. I never use the words “important” or “rare,” as they are overused and empty.

Almost every piece has a story. As an antique dealer, my excitement grows when I can bring a piece from a different culture to Mill House and share it with others. I have spent a good part of my life living and travelling overseas. There is an excitement in visiting another part of the world—experiencing different

cultures, cuisine, architecture and the ways in which people live their daily lives. It has been a learning process. I love to learn something new and in return to share my knowledge with others. As an antique dealer, my excitement grows when I can bring a piece from a different culture to Mill House and share it with others. The story of a piece could be about having lunch at an English pub in Lincolnshire that ended with the purchase of a shipbuilder’s model that rested on a shelf high above the bar. Or, the story could be about the late evening purchase of a wonderful library table and chair from an art dealer in Budapest who used them in his office.

I am often asked why I purchased a certain antique. Sometimes it is quite easy to point out the rarity or aesthetic nature of the piece. Other times, it is not so easy to explain why exactly one is attracted to a particular piece of furniture or a chandelier or a painting. Having an eye that discerns is an innate quality, like having a voice for song or a talent for liberating a fine sculpture from a block of rough stone. I trust my eye and my sense of what will be interesting to others. There are pieces I acquire that are not aesthetically pleasing but are pieces of art—the intricate carving, the delicate inlay, or the highly-skilled craftsmanship are what make it unique and desirable.

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Above: French Cylinder Desk with crotch mahogany drawer fronts and cylinder. Outfitted interior with satinwood inlay and crossbanding on drawers and compartments. Decorative French motif on center door and adjustable writing surface in felt. Circa 1820.

Right: Welsh stained pine potboard dresser on turned supports. Oval brass hardware adorns three drawers separated by unique striped inlays of mahogany. Multi-layered crown features wide dentil moulding. Circa 1790.


Below: Mahogany George III architect's desk with brass lion's-head ring pulls. Two adjustable slant drawing boards—one with a pop-up book support, the other covered in felt. Properly outfitted with two brass girandole candle cups, numerous drawers and pen and ink compartments. Circa 1740.



This is where I agree with top designers and architects. Gleaning design tips from a television show like *Mad Men* is not necessarily the best way to go about interior design. Just following something that is a trend at the moment can be shortsighted and expensive. There is a reason we have classics, whether they are movies, books, plays and, yes, even furniture. They grow and thrive over the test of time.

There is no question that the mix of modern and antique opens up endless possibilities. Each interior becomes inimitable and, it is to be hoped, timeless. However, the one constant that still holds is that it takes time to learn about and understand antiques. It also takes time to trust your eye and your own aesthetic when purchasing pieces of art that can grow and thrive over time for your enjoyment. The payoff is great in terms of intellectual stimulation and increased knowledge. For some, this may not be



important; being on trend is satisfying enough. For those who want to learn and be exposed to history that has been captured through the decorative arts, to enrich and come to trust their aesthetic sensibility, seasoned design professionals can help to bridge gaps in their knowledge and encourage that burgeoning passion. 

William Hildreth is the owner of Mill House Antiques in Woodbury, CT. Mill House has been providing fine antiques to interior designers and collectors for more than 50 years. Special thanks and appreciation go to the following designers and architects who took time from their hectic schedules to be interviewed for this article: Jeffrey Bilhuber, Timothy Corrigan, Robert Couturier, Thomas Jayne, Brian McCarthy, Juan Montoya, Alex Papachristidis, Peter Pennoyer, Miles Redd, Linda Ruderman and Bunny Williams.

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