

Score Great Deals On Antiques

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POSTED: 1:49 pm CDT September 20, 2007

Some things get better with age.

Antiques are of one them. An item's value often goes beyond the price tag and it doesn't hurt if the piece is in good condition.

About.com antiques guide Pamela Wiggins remembered she and her mother were shopping in an antique store and her mother spotted a bowl and said, "That's Prussia," which is a type of porcelain she collected by R.S. Prussia.

Wiggins' mother examined the bowl, found it to be in perfect condition and thought for sure she had seen it in one of her reference guides. Wiggins said her mother wasn't sure of its value, so they drove 45 minutes home to double check her book.

"The value given was close to \$1,500. We raced back down to the shop before it closed and I went in to purchase it. Another woman was holding the bowl and admiring it at the time. My heart sank," Wiggins wrote in an e-mail interview. "Luckily, she sat it back down on the counter and my outlook improved. I scooped it up and took it to the shop owner who happily took my \$125 and wrapped the bowl for me. Needless to say, my mother was thrilled with her find and valued the bowl as part of her collection for many years."

Learn About Your Favorites

Finding that gem involves knowing what to look for. Developing a trained eye by learning details about antiques you are interested in will tell you when to pounce on a great find. It also helps shoppers to avoid getting ripped off.

"Do your homework before shopping. Know what's collectible in your area of interest. Know the current market values for those items so you can recognize those sleepers (or good deals) out there," Wiggins said.

For example, collectors of Fiستaware or Van Briggie pottery would want to check out some reference books that tell them how to identify pieces, how they are priced, how old they are and what pieces are considered rare.

She suggested keeping reference books in the car and using them before making an expensive purchase.

"Don't be afraid to ask questions of antiques dealers, but use your common sense and best judgement as well. If something seems brand new, it probably is. If you're not sure if it's been repaired, walk away," she said.

How Old Is Old?

So when is something considered an antique? It depends on whom you ask.

Wiggins said that technically, it means anything that is more than 100 years old. For her, antiques date prior to World War II.

"Styles were markedly different then in everything from furniture to ceramics to jewelry. Items from the 1940s on are collectibles in my book," she said. "But if you ask a dozen antiques experts the same question, you'll probably get a dozen different answers."

Where To Look

There might be a trade off between finding a deal on an antique and simply getting a great addition to an existing collection. Wiggins said buyers should keep their mind open to both when antique shopping.

She said there are still good deals to be found.

"They're harder to find than they used to be, but if you're diligent they'll turn up. On the other hand, if you're a collector of something specific, sometimes paying more to get a really super piece for your collection is reasonable and expected," she said.

Antique auctions can be shopping option. Wiggins said it's a good idea to get there early for a preview. She said auctioneers don't generally disclose flaws in items during the bidding process so it's the bidder's responsibility to examine everything prior to the sale.

Wiggins makes a list of the lot numbers she is interested in bidding on and sticks to that list. She also sets a maximum price she's willing to bid on each lot and sticks to that when the bidding starts.

"This way I don't bid on items I haven't thoroughly inspected and I don't get caught up in the bidding frenzy and pay too much," she said.

Is The Price Right?

Price can vary depending on several factors such as demand. Wiggins said that sometimes antique dealers price items that they prize highly because they want to hang onto them for a while.

A seller's motivation to move items quickly also comes into play with price. She said that happens more at estate sales, flea markets and antique shows than at antique malls and shops.

Shoppers can research prices on their own. Wiggins said she uses eBay as a resource for wholesale pricing and to see what types of items are bringing higher-than-average prices. She said buyers can get a simple overview of asking prices by searching online malls such as Ruby Lane or TIAS.

Price can also depend on the shop itself. Wiggins pointed out that in an antique mall the price is pretty much what the dealer is expecting to get for it and the mall staff does not have much leeway on discounting.

She said that in a private shop, at a show or flea market, a price tag can often be the beginning point of negotiation on a price that is comfortable for both the buyer and the seller.

"Always ask a dealer for their best price when you're dealing directly with them. Sometimes they'll surprise you and offer more off than you expected," she said. "But yes, getting a good deal often means shopping where the dealers tend to shop -- flea markets, estate sales, garage sales, online auctions, etc."

An exception to that is if the buyer is getting a true bargain.

"Go ahead and pay the asking price and give the dealer a break. You're coming out ahead anyway, so there's no use to pinch pennies in that type of situation," she said.

Tips

- Do your homework before shopping.
- Know what's collectible in your area of interest.

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- Do your research prior to making a purchase.
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