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decorating

with antiques



WANT TO GIVE YOUR HOME PERSONALITY AND PIZZAZZ? THINK VINTAGE.

By Marybeth Bizjak
Photography by Dave Adams

Several years ago, Carmichael resident Debbie Martial flew to New York on a mission: to buy the perfect chandelier for her dining room.

She found what she was looking for in an antiques shop on 62nd Street: an ornate glass fixture with elaborate beadwork. Unnerved by the cost—"it was so expensive," she recalls—Martial went home empty-handed.

But back in Carmichael, she couldn't get the chandelier out of her mind. An inveterate collector of antique furnishings, she still lamented the loss of a wonderful old mirror she'd once passed up. So she called the Manhattan store (yes, the chandelier was still available) and had it shipped out.

Today, she says, "it's one of my favorite pieces."

As Martial knows, it can be uniquely satisfying to decorate with antiques. According to interior designers, antiques dealers and homeowners who buy antiques, old pieces have a history, a sense of sophistication and a patina that brand-new furnishings simply don't.

"Antiques add an extra layer of character, texture and interest to a room," says Sacramento designer Nikke Van Derheydt-Sosnick, who likes to punctuate contemporary interiors with antiques to make a big impact.

Decorating with vintage pieces is a great way to personalize your home, adds antiques dealer Debra Jensen, owner of Ormolu Antiques & Interiors in Carmichael. "Antiques are unique," she explains. "You just can't get the same effect with something new."

Collectors cite the allure of buying a piece with a past. "It's like having a little story in your house," says Van Derheydt-Sosnick, calling collectors the "caretakers" of those stories. "You're preserving history. When you buy an old piece, you give it a second life." Local antiques dealer Michelle Sekula agrees, calling it "the ultimate recycle." "We don't own anything," she elaborates. "We're just its guardians while we're here on Earth."

Above:
This cabinet by L. & J. G. Stickley is a rare piece from 1907. Antiques dealer Michelle Sekula filled it with American art pottery from the early 1900s.

Opposite page:
Antiques dealer Michelle Sekula uses a mix of antiques and reproductions in her own home. Here, she paired a 1917 wicker sofa and a Victorian embossed-leather and glass screen with a reproduction of a late-19th-century carpet. From the ceiling, she hung a mahogany long-deck boat, circa 1910.

A leaded-glass fire screen, circa 1901, is like a piece of art. Over the mantel, Michelle Sekula hung an 1898 oil painting by Joseph John Englehart.



In addition to experiencing the romance of buying and collecting antiques, you can save money decorating with vintage furnishings. Jensen explains that well-crafted antiques are a bargain compared to comparably made new pieces, noting that “to recreate the techniques, materials and labor used in the old days is prohibitively expensive today.” And while experts caution against buying antiques strictly as investments, well-made old pieces generally hold their value much better than do new furnishings.

So how should you go about buying antiques for your home?

First, educate yourself. “You’ve got to know what you’re doing,” warns Van Derheydt-Sosnick. “Things are so easily reproduced today that you can really get in trouble if you don’t know what you’re doing.”

To learn about antiques, go to places where they’re sold—antiques shows and stores, flea markets and auctions—and talk to the experts. “Find somebody whose style you like and whom you trust,” advises Sekula. To educate your eye, visit websites and museums that feature antique furnishings. (Locally, the Crocker Art Museum is a good place to start.) You can even learn a lot by watching PBS’s popular “Antiques Roadshow,” says Van Derheydt-Sosnick.

Once you know what you like, buy the best you can afford. “I don’t care about age as much as quality,” says Jensen. “Condition is everything.” And she notes, a piece in its original condition generally is worth more than a refinished piece. But unless you are buying investment-quality antiques, don’t be afraid to refinish a piece if it will enable you to actually use it. “If an antique table looks like a piece of junk, it has no value,” she explains.

Jensen prefers antique case goods—wood furnishings such as tables, chests and bureaus—to upholstered pieces such as old sofas, which tend to be uncomfortable. And don’t fall into the trap of believing that just because something is old, it necessarily is good. Says Jensen: “They made a lot of junk, and a much smaller quantity of fine things, in the old days—just like now.”

Sekula recommends buying furniture that catches your eye. That’s exactly what Van Derheydt-Sosnick did when she fell in love with an enormous 200-year-old carved-oak armoire from a French chateau that she



found in a Los Angeles antiques store. "It spoke to me," she recalls. "It said, 'Take me home!'"

Buying antiques is one thing; incorporating them into your décor is another. Almost without exception, the experts caution against filling your home exclusively with antiques—too boring and predictable. "You're living in the present," explains interior designer Susan Christman of Christman & Associates, whose business is based in Sacramento and San Francisco. "A house needs to be of today—too many antiques are simply oppressive."

Instead, it's chic to mix the old with the new: Today's eclectic interiors benefit from an artful contrast of eras, styles and materials. For client Syma Greene, for instance, Christman designed a living room with all new furnishings except for one: a charming Danish commode from the 1800s. "I absolutely love it," says Greene, the widow of State Sen. Leroy Greene. "The artisanship is just marvelous, and it adds to the room's beauty."

Christman likes English antiques (particularly George I and George II), early American case goods, Italian furnishings from the 16th and 17th centuries, and Asian pieces, especially Japanese screens and tansu chests, which she says work with just about any décor. But she shudders at the mention of Victorian antiques. "My least favorite era," she says. "So ornate and overdone. And the small scale is all wrong for today's big houses."

Whatever your décor or style, adding antiques keeps decorating interesting. Martial sums up the appeal like this: "I love the thrill of the hunt," she says. "You never know what surprise you're going to find." ●



In Syma Greene's living room, an antique Danish commode provides a charming contrast to the otherwise contemporary furnishings.