

# Content Analysis: Authenticating Provenance of Antique Furniture

By George Somerville Colpitts | March 28, 2016

## **A piece worth millions or hundreds? The tricky business of identifying antique furniture**

As any viewer of the popular TV show Antiques Roadshow will tell you, the identity of an antique determines its value. The true identity of a piece can mean the difference between an item worth thousands of dollars and another worth a fraction of that.

Given the high stakes, proper identification of antiques might seem a task solely for experts but there are a few best practices that contents claim experts can learn to get within the ballpark of a valuation — before escalating the claim to experts. Sometimes the authentication of a piece by a signature or a maker's label can give the claims pro a vast amount of information about who made the piece, where it was made, and the approximate age.

But more often an adjusters' time is best spent in determining the object's provenance, defined as a record of ownership of an antique which can then be used as a guide to its authenticity and quality.

## **Document, Document, Document**

Documentation to establish provenance includes estate inventories, photographs, or documented inclusion in a museum exhibit or a respected publication. Invoices and auction results from well-known and respected antique dealers and auction houses are also useful for determining provenance.



Photo credit: Thomas Livingston Antiques catalog

Take for example this secretary pictured here– a Chippendale mahogany secretary from Newburyport, Massachusetts. In this case the insured was able to present an article written in a book that actually pictured and discussed the piece. This type of information is tremendously useful because it gives validation as to what the piece is, where it was made, and the quality and condition of the item.

Unfortunately this level of documentation is relatively rare. More often adjustors are presented pieces with an associated family history. In these cases, pieces are handed down through the family and the original information is lost. Claimants often do a Google search, find a similar item with a high value, and assume that is the piece.

Unfortunately without proper documentation, these claims can be difficult to validate. The art and antiques world is enormous with a number of different fields and countless specialties. Experts in the specific field are often required to identify and evaluate particular items. It's almost impossible to do a proper valuation without having some expertise in these specialties.

Complicating matters are the auction houses which sell these items. There are thousands of these outlets and their motto is caveat emptor, also known as “buyer beware.” Auctioneers are under pressure to sell items for a high value and not everything they say is necessarily accurate. Dealers and decorators also may lack the expertise necessary to properly identify an item. Take their recommendations with a grain of salt except for the well-known and well-respected businesses.

## The Importance of Origin

It seems logical that a piece's origin shouldn't matter an inordinate amount in determining its value but, in fact, it is a significant component of an item's price.

Probably the most prominent example of this in the antiques world is the difference between the values of American furniture and English furniture.

Most people might assume English furniture, crafted with high quality and in great quantities in the antique age, is more valuable than American antiques. It's true that this is sometimes the case.

However, in England there were 100-fold more master craftsmen than in America for most of the early American history right up into the late 19th century. As a result, American furniture of high quality from this period is rare and as a result can have a significantly higher dollar value.



Left: photo credit: CHRISTIE'S

Right: photo credit: G. Sergeant Antiques, Woodbury, CT

Take for example these two pieces in the photo above. On the left-hand side is a Samuel Field McIntire carved dining chair from Salem, Massachusetts. Samuel McIntire was one of the first great furniture carvers in the Americas. On the right side is an English chair which, to the untrained eye, looks similar and of equally high quality.

The principle difference between these two pieces from the point of view of an antiques dealer or a collector is the rarity, the connection with the past, and, in this case, particularly America's past. When these pieces were made in the late 18th century or

early 19th century, there were few American cabinetmakers working at this quality level.

As a result, the piece on the left has a connection to the American past that is extremely desirable and it is reflected in the price. This American chair is valued at about \$40,000 – \$60,000. The beautiful English chair on the right is valued at a fraction of that, at about \$2,500.

## **What to Look For**

The first thing antiques dealers or collectors do when examining an antique or a piece of furniture is to view it from a distance, specifically the decoration and the wood. Both these things will sometimes give us an idea of where a piece was made and the quality of a piece. For example, if the piece is made out of teak, we know it was most likely made in Asia. These two attributes can also give us an idea of whether it's a formal piece or a country piece. This gives us an initial direction to pursue in identification.

Next we draw closer to inspect the object more closely. This involves pulling drawers out and looking at the back, underside, and insides of a piece of furniture. Looking at these parts can give us clues to the age and the quality of construction of a piece.

It can also reveal if there's any damage to a piece. It's much more difficult to hide replacements, restoration, and repairs to a piece in these secondary surfaces, which are not finished and do not have a varnish or a lacquer to them.

With secondary surfaces like these, the wood has not been sealed and, just as with silver, it tarnishes through oxidization when left out. The principle is the softwood on the backs and undersides of an antique that will oxidize and darken over time and it's easy to spot replacement and restoration work with this in mind.

In contrast, the principal, outside surfaces are often cleaned and restored to maintain beauty. While the more hidden secondary surfaces are often left untouched making it easier to establish a history of the piece unedited.

The inside can also show important information about the construction of a piece. The quality of construction, skill of the cabinetmaker, the age, and even the origin of an antique can sometimes be determined by examining the insides.

With these basic guidelines in mind, it is important to reiterate just how important it is to properly identify antique furniture. The price differential in pieces that are similar in appearance is enormous.



Photo credit: CHRISTIE'S

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In the photo above, the desk on the left is from the Goddard Townsend Workshop in Rhode Island, probably the most important and prestigious of the early American cabinetmakers. There are roughly 11 or 12 of these desks in existence. A verified piece like the one on the left sold several years ago at auction for just over \$12 million.

The piece on the right is a beautiful handmade replica. Crafted in an identical style and from a distance it's difficult to see a difference. However this reproduction sells for roughly \$20,000, a price tag considerably less than \$12 million. The point should be clear – when establishing the provenance of antique furniture, you can never verify enough.

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