



Collectibles Calamities: 9 Major Mistakes to Avoid When Buying Antique Furniture

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Shopping for antique furniture can be tricky unless you're a true expert in craftsmanship and provenance. Is that gorgeous console with the fretwork a real find—or a fake masquerading as the work of an 18th-century English craftsman?

In some cases, it might not matter to you. But you also don't want to pay through the nose for something that's not worth it.

"Simply being old doesn't make something valuable," notes **Darla DeMorrow**, author of "Organizing Your Home With Sort and Succeed." "And sometimes rather odd, boring, or even surprising pieces turn out to be worth more than you'd guess."

To decide whether the armoire you're eyeing is worth paying for (and then hauling home), we've asked the experts to help you polish up on the most common mistakes when buying antique furniture.

1. Hagging all wrong

If you're in a casual setting, like a flea market or thrift store, hagging is generally accepted, explains **Carole Marcotte**, an interior designer at Form & Function in Raleigh, NC.

But if the store sells well-curated, restored pieces and feels more like a boutique, proceed with caution.

"A dealer selling in an actual shop may not be willing or able to take much off the price compared with someone at a flea market, because the store owner has higher overhead and usually better quality furniture," points out **Gillian Zonruiter**, owner of Streets of London Antiques in Cary, NC.

Start by asking whether the seller can do better on the price, suggests **Julie Muniz**, a curator and art consultant with ArtMuser.com.

"This way, you're asking for permission to haggle and allowing the seller to set the rules," she says.

2. Disrespecting the proprietor

Of course you wouldn't be flat-out rude, but be wary of lowballing.

"It's potentially insulting to an owner who's worked hard to present antiques that are well above a junk shop's offerings," Marcotte says.

And remember: Cash is always the best way to get a good deal, notes **Beverly Solomon**, proprietor of Beverly Solomon Design.

Some other cardinal sins of etiquette:

- "Never commit the sin of backing out after you've been offered a good price," Soloman urges.
- "Don't ask the store owner to hold the piece for you," DeMorrow adds. (Even if you promise you're coming right back with a truck to haul it, the owners may worry you won't come back and that they'll lose the sale to another shopper.)
- Don't overshare: "If you brag about your plan to remove the trim and paint the whole piece black *and then* try to negotiate a price, the current owner might be horrified and less likely to strike a deal," DeMorrow says.

3. Skipping a second opinion

Not sure if the piece is worth it? Get help from another source.

"Take several good pictures and send them to a trained appraiser, if you can," DeMorrow suggests.

Before you do that, walk around the entire piece and ask that it be pulled away from the wall, she adds. Open all the drawers and even turn it upside down, if possible.

"You want to get a clear view of what you're buying," she says.

4. Arriving unprepared

Before you head out to shop, do a little homework on what *actually* makes a quality piece that can last a lifetime.

For instance, look for trademark qualities such as dovetail joints (interlocking notched pieces) and solid drawer bottoms that aren't bulging, DeMorrow says.

You also should seek out aged solid wood over inferior, pressed wood under veneer, Zonruiter adds. And if you can spot [the rare black walnut](#)—you're golden.

5. Expecting perfection

If the piece has lasted over 100 years, it's going to show some wear and tear.

"If you're looking for perfection, choose a new reproduction, not an antique," Zonruiter says.

How do you know the difference between damage and wear and tear? Look for signs of use that are consistent with how the piece is used. "The finish on chair arms, for example, might be worn off where people placed their hands," Muniz says.

You can fix up scratches with Howard's Restor-A-Finish, but keep in mind that patina and small nicks are expected and part of a piece's history, Marcotte says.

Unless you're a wood pro, steer clear of items that have been chewed by pets, show water damage, or are rickety.

"Professionally regluing a piece can be quite pricey," DeMorrow says.

6. Holding out for the real deal

Sure, you can search for the maker's stamp or signature, but don't place too much weight on it—some pieces don't have them, or they may have worn off over time.

"This mark is typically found on the back or bottom of furniture or on the inside of drawers, but its absence shouldn't be a deal breaker," Muniz points out.

We won't lie: Unless you're dealing with a reputable seller, establishing an item's provenance can be challenging. But don't get discouraged.

"Once in a great while, you'll find an original gem," DeMorrow says. "But honestly—if you love it and will use it, the history may not matter."

7. Buying a money pit

Perhaps you feel like you've scored a great deal on a piece that feels like it could be the subject of the next "National Treasure" movie. But look closely before you buy—and beware of the extra effort and money you may need to pony up.

"Is there missing hardware, and if so, can you match it?" Marcotte asks.

You might also need to tighten screws, clamp a wobbly piece, steam clean a stain, or have the item reupholstered. Not in the budget? Pass on the piece.

8. Taking the piece too literally

The fun of antiques is showing them off in different places in your home, and using them in different ways than they might have been intended decades or centuries ago.

A large sideboard might rock in your crafts room, and a dresser could hold linens in a dining nook, DeMorrow suggests. An old bed frame could be made into a bench for your foyer. And a steamer trunk might make a good coffee table. The possibilities are endless!

9. Buying—and then not using the piece

The most common mistake on this list? Not having a place to put the furniture when you get home.

An antique should be loved and shown off, so if it's calling your name, make sure you use it.

"Putting it in storage for 'some day' or as a future project isn't fair to the piece," DeMorrow says.

