

FREE DECORATOR: SARA RUFFIN COSTELLO



## Really Fine Prices for Fine Antiques

**WHILE SEXY MODERN DESIGNS**, like midcentury Karl Springer coffee tables and John Vesey steel chairs, are going for fat sums, prices for period pieces are down from their '80s peak. "Now is the time to buy good antiques," insisted Guy Regal, the Manhattan antiques dealer, over lunch a few weeks ago. According to Mr. Regal, the market for period pieces, including 18th-century Louis, authentic English Regency and Irish Chippendale, is ripe for the picking. "There's a glut of important, dowager furniture out there and not a lot of demand, thus, a pricing free fall," he said. Consider this: A pair of Louis XVI fauteuils that were \$35,000 15 years ago just went for \$10,000 at auction.

It's all great news for those with spare cash and an expert's knowledge of what to look for. I, on the other hand, am a touch short on both. But I am curious, and I do love a deal.

One trip to Mr. Regal's space at the chicly renovated Newel showroom on 53rd Street and I was ready to (pretend to) invest in Old World. His inventory is refined glitz—like if Jackie O were a table. Walking through the aisles, all that buffed mahogany reminded me of Cold War-era Sunny von Bulow décor, in a good way. The scale and seriousness of the furniture was inspiring and would offer a nuanced jolt to any room short on history. For those of us who obsess about living rooms, it's exciting to bring home a glossy, gilded antique, like an Italian secretary desk, and redefine it for the 2010s against a more subdued backdrop. Plus, this subgenre is not as gray granny as you might think—like it or not, '80s vapor is thick right now. Trend followers have been blogging about old master fluffers like Mark Hampton and Mario Buatta with nostalgic longing, hoping for a neo-"Dynasty" revival. Style setters like Carolina Herrera Jr. have been layering in the old lady pieces for years—her laid-back house in Spain is a triumph of festive fabrics, modern upholstery and old-guard furniture.

Fresh off my trip to Mr. Regal's showroom, I paid a visit to my favorite purveyor of objets, boyishly academic James Sansum of his eponymous gal-



**FOGEY FURNITURE** Unlike maxed-out midcentury modern, serious pieces like this Regency desk in architect Gil Schafer's apartment can be had for a song.

lery on New York's Upper East Side. He, too, believes now is a prime moment to invest in fine antiques. "There are bargains to be had in most areas of antique European furniture," he said, "with English Georgian and German Biedermeier offering style and quality for the buck. Both were synonymous with the much maligned aesthetic of the 1980s. Yet their architectural forms and beautiful materials make them especially poised for a resurgence."

Another reason to buy a fine antique is that one really good piece can carry a room—when you have the best materials and authentic craftsmanship, you don't need much else to distract. But

still, dropping \$20,000 on a highboy (even if it is a good deal) is scary. I asked Mr. Sansum, who has art and design degrees from Parsons, Cooper-Hewitt and Harvard, to illuminate how one might dip a toe into the market. "My advice to the neophyte collector is be curious," he said. "If you see a piece of furniture that intrigues you, go online to 1stdibs and look for similar pieces. Once you have established a style, period and country of origin then look for books by experts in the field."

You'll want to do a lot of research before pulling the trigger on any pricey piece. I have been training my eye in 18th-century French decorative arts at



This 1790 Russian desk from Guy Regal Antiques can be had for half what it cost in 1995.

This Russian 18th-century Breakfront was \$180,000, now \$80,000.

the Wrightsman rooms at the Metropolitan Museum, and at the Cooper-Hewitt's archives. I've hit the shows: the Winter Antiques, the International and the Avenue—all at the Park Avenue Armory. I'm always looking outside of my league, as Mr. Regal has taught me: "If you only look at what you know, your eye will be stunted."

I have also been visiting Sotheby's and Christie's online catalogs as if they were museums, as Sensai Sansum advised. One auction in particular he directed me to study was the February 2009 Yves Saint Laurent sale of furniture, art and objects. "It was vast in its range of tastes, but cohesive in its quality and personal approach," Mr. Sansum said. "These types of sales are important to expand one's aesthetic vision of periods and styles, but more importantly to see curious juxtapositions of disparate elements. That is the genius of an inspired collector."

This week I have a date with an English center hall table I met online. I can't stop thinking about it and am reminded of Mr. Regal's thoughts on collecting: "When you fall in love, you have to be ready to commit—otherwise you'll be looking over your shoulder, haunted for the rest of your life." This may just be The One...

*Ms. Ruffin Costello is a design consultant and style journalist in New York.*

### THE BARGAINS

- English Georgian
- German Beidermeier
- Arts and Crafts
- Russian Neoclassic
- 18th- and 19th-century Irish, Italian and French anything

### FINDING A GOOD DEALER

#### IN NEW YORK:

- **Carlton Hobbs** Best of English and continental, [carltonhobbs.com](http://carltonhobbs.com)
- **James Sansum** Curated continental, [jamesansum.com](http://jamesansum.com)
- **Cove Landing** Poetically assembled 18th- and 19th-century English and continental, 212-288-7597
- **Dalva Brothers** 18th-century French, [dalvabrothers.com](http://dalvabrothers.com)
- **HM Luther** Clean, sophisticated Neoclassic, [hmluther.com](http://hmluther.com)
- **Newel** Large collection of 17th-20th century, [newel.com](http://newel.com)

#### IN CHICAGO:

- **Rita Bucheit** Beidermeier, Empire, Vienna Secession and Art Deco, [ritabucheit.com](http://ritabucheit.com)

#### IN LONDON:

- **Apter-Fredricks** Very fine English, [apter-fredricks.com](http://apter-fredricks.com)