

A Fine Misnomer!



Flushing the astrigals

My dictionary tells me that the word 'fine' means of the highest, or of very high grade or quality; free from imperfections: choice, excellent; delicately fashioned; highly skilled or accomplished; trained down to the proper degree; ornate or elegant. Modern day marketing has diminished the term and in doing so I believe, has contributed to a lowering of consumer expectations. It is necessary to be able to distinguish fine furniture from good and lower qualities of furniture whether you are buying antique or new furniture. It will greatly impact on the inherent value of the piece and its longevity.

There is nothing wrong with purchasing furniture of lower quality, if that is what the client wants. This article focuses on how consumer expectations of fine quality have been inappropriately and deceitfully lowered. That is, it highlights that a lot of medium and good quality furniture is being incorrectly marketed to consumers as fine furniture. Advice is offered to potential consumers of antique and custom fine furniture, as well.

Contemporary master craftsmen of true fine furniture usually have small owner-operated businesses where they can focus on applying the traditions and skills of custom furniture making. By keeping the business small, they



Custom designed three drawer filing cabinet with hand crafted solid timber runner mechanism

Reproduction of a c.1860 cedar library chair



The process of traditional hand carving



Hand dovetailing



Hand finished silky oak bedside table

finished item will be of the highest quality possible. Fine furniture manufacturers can make any item of furniture, whether it be a reproduction or a custom-designed piece, because they have the knowledge, the skills and the traditional hand tools.

Constantly I have clients come to me who are amazed and relieved to hear that what they want is possible in custom fine furniture. Previously, when they have consulted businesses that say they manufacture fine furniture, they are told that various things are not possible. For instance, they will be told that a certain timber or timber character is not available, or that authentic traditional fittings are not available, or that the joinery process they desire is not possible or not as good as what their state of the art technology machines can produce; or that the custom decorative carvings, turnings or inlays are no longer able to be done.

What is actually happening is that most furniture manufacturers are saying that if it cannot be done with their mass purchased materials, machines, and assembly line staff, and finishes, then it cannot be done at all. Often the sales staff aren't even trained in the skills of the trade. Furthermore, they are convincing too many people that what they do is the best possible. I would have thought most people would be able to tell that this is not true, but as I said before, I have grossly underestimated the impact of this mass scale misinformation on furniture consumers.

Fine furniture is a term that has been

inappropriately assigned to assembly line furniture and antique furniture, regardless of the innate quality therein. The term, fine furniture, should only be used when referring to furniture of excellent design, which has been virtually handcrafted and hand finished; made from the finest materials and hardware and using the finest skills in furniture craftsmanship.

Good quality furniture is usually the top line offered by good furniture businesses, both past and present. Though it is assembly line rather than custom made furniture it would still be constructed from top quality materials using good workmanship. Excellent designs which don't skimp on construction detail are also typical characteristics. The finish is usually a spray job, but usually the highest quality of non-traditional materials are used, and they are usually hand finished.

Medium quality furniture is the next level down. This furniture would be well made, but some details aren't as good a quality as they might be. Joinery systems may not be the best possible, and they may not actually be put together as well as they could be. The undersides of furniture may want for attention, but in the main, the furniture is sound. The finish is usually off the spray gun only, and the material applied is usually of medium quality.

Low quality furniture has low quality construction details and joinery and the hardware is usually of poorer quality. Drawers tend not to fit as well, and the finish is usually just a quick spray job with no handwork at all.

Poor quality furniture is the cheapest kind of furniture. It usually is nailed or stapled together without proper drawer guides. A minimum of hardware and what is there is cheap and probably won't last long. Substitute wood products are the main material, and the entire piece may be covered with plastic film, paint or a spray over plastic.

Small and large sized businesses and good and not-so-good tradespeople have been around since this work first began centuries ago. Varying incomes have always been a characteristic of our society as well. So it should come as no great surprise if some antiques don't necessarily fall into the fine furniture category.

Good quality can be quite satisfactory for up to 50 years, and perhaps even longer. But without proper maintenance it will not stand the test of time to the extent that fine furniture will. I have come across items of fine furniture which have been maintained in impeccable condition for over 200 years. They still have their joints and original French polish finish in magnificent order. Not that this is a common situation. Transportation and variable climatic conditions play havoc with even the best maintained fine furniture.

Medium quality furniture is prevalent in antique furniture too. This is because even the more provincial or common antique furniture is valuable to antique collectors. But because it is only of medium quality, it is more likely to need considerably more repair and maintenance than a good or fine piece of furniture.

When thinking of buying fine furniture be aware that the large stores may heavily promote the term fine furniture, even though with the very best of intentions they would not have the quality controls and skill to make fine furniture. Typically, when you hear the term fine furniture in this context, at best you would only be getting good quality furniture.

If you want something to last you should seriously think about making the extra investment now towards true fine furniture. It will appreciate in value, and will require less maintenance, (or replacement!) than good or medium quality furniture. It is also nice to know that the piece will last you for the remainder of your lifetime, and even through your children and grandchildren's lifetime. This is not just a piece of furniture – but an heirloom. ■

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