

DOES IT PAY TO...

Have Your Antiques Appraised?

BY BROOKE SHOWELL

Old and valuable—or just plain old? It can be hard for the untrained eye to tell, and nobody wants to sell Granny's candy dish for \$2 at a yard sale when it's really worth \$200. But a professional appraisal costs upward of \$75 an hour. If you're considering shelling out for a pro, here's what you should do first:



Look for clues

- ▶ **Label, brand or signature** Check for identifying details as to who made your antique. If your chairs are designed by, say, Herman Miller, you'll be able to see from a quick Internet search that they could be worth a pretty penny.
- ▶ **Quality and materials** What an antique is made of and how well it's crafted are both important in determining value. Even if your antique mantel clock is in good working condition, if it's made of wood laminate rather than mahogany, it doesn't make sense to appraise it. But if you're unsure of whether that antique cutlery is silver plate or sterling (they may look identical, but the difference in their value is large), an appraisal is worth it.
- ▶ **Family ties** Experts caution that personalized items like family bibles—which may be very old, beautiful and meaningful to you—aren't worth much (unless you have a famous ancestor). The same goes for family trees or journals.

Consider condition and number of pieces

Mold and water damage can decrease an item's value, so a warped wooden table probably doesn't merit an appraisal. Cracks can also be problematic, but it depends on the object. (An 18th-century plate with a big chip, for example, is still worth an appraisal because it can go for several hundred dollars.) Also note: A single chair or candlestick holder won't be worth nearly as much as a set or pair.

Do your own detective work

Now that you've made a list of important details, take note of similar pieces on auction sites such as liveauctioneers.com or in pricing guides like kovel.com that list current market values for antiques. Scour collector's blogs to see if there's a hobbyist who is willing to chat. If it seems like your item might be worth a lot more than the price of the appraisal, go for it.

How much will you pay for an appraisal?

The cost depends on several factors:

- ▶ **The amount of time it takes** If the expert is familiar with the item, it might take just a few minutes, or weeks if extensive research is required.
- ▶ **If you get a written report** Documentation usually costs more than a verbal appraisal.
- ▶ **Where you have it done** Taking the item to the appraiser or sending her a photo should cost less than a home visit.

EXPECT TO SPEND
\$75 to \$550
PER HOUR

Try for a free appraisal

They're hard to come by, but worth seeking out. Search for *Antiques Roadshow*-style appraisal clinics in your area (antiquesroadshow.com). Also, some dealers and experts have websites with a Q&A section where they'll answer a limited number of questions gratis, if you send in a photo and description of your item.

BOTTOM LINE

Since the cheapest expert appraisal is around \$75, only hire a pro if you've done some preliminary research that indicates you'll see a decent profit.