

Introduction

Wooden furniture has been around for several thousand years. Although museums house many beautiful examples of antique furniture, most of it remains in private hands and homes. To safeguard this furniture as it is passed from one generation to the next, proper care is essential.

There has been much discussion about the care and treatment of antique furniture. In the debate between use and preservation, one side argues that furniture should be functional and presentable and, therefore, whatever is needed to make it usable should be done. This has often meant stripping and refinishing. The other side talks about preservation and the historical importance of the furniture, including the original finishes, stains, and paint that often reveal information about the times in which the furniture was crafted. Techniques are now available that allow old finishes to be refurbished, thus preserving historical accuracy while restoring an attractive appearance.

Causes of Damage

The main causes of damage to wooden furniture are careless handling and environmental conditions.

Light is a natural enemy of all organic materials; it is especially harmful for wood because the damage is cumulative (meaning it gets worse over time) and irreversible. Light can turn light woods dark, and bleach out dark woods. It can also affect the finish, stain, or paint on the surface—leaving it discoloured, opaque, cracked, or brittle.

Wood is composed of cellulose (a molecule with an affinity for water) and it is porous; as a result it is vulnerable to humidity. When moisture in the air increases (i.e. humidity rises), wood absorbs water and swells a little; when the air dries out (i.e. humidity decreases), wood gives off moisture and shrinks. These responses to changes in humidity weaken glue joints, can cause wood to split or crack, and may damage its finish. High humidity can also promote the growth of mould.

Insect infestations are another problem. In favourable conditions, some insects will burrow into wood, eat their way through the wood grain, and lay eggs; as the larvae mature, they tunnel out to the surface leaving exit holes. Any sawdust-like material found under a piece of furniture could signal active insects.

Water spills will cause cloudy white patches on wood finish.

Handling

Always check furniture for damage or loose joints before moving it. Remove objects from the surface and then remove drawers, shelves, and doors. Elements that cannot be removed should be secured with soft cloth (cotton) straps. If the item has a marble top, remove the top and transport it in a vertical position

Be sure to pick up furniture at its strongest point, e.g. lift a table by the apron or legs instead of the top, and grasp chairs by the seat instead of the back or arms. Lift furniture rather than dragging it across the floor (dragging places extreme stress on the legs and feet, which could cause them to break off or the joinery to come apart).

To transport furniture in a vehicle, cushion the items from contact with the vehicle and from each other. Cabinets should travel empty and upright, wrapped in a cushion that is tied with a soft cord so that empty drawers stay in place. Chairs should be treated similarly, while tables are best transported top down, on a cushion.

The finish of furniture can be protected with custom-made tabletop cushions, glass tabletops, or drink coasters. If glass tops are used, place small felt tabs between the glass and the tabletop to ensure that the glass does not stick to the finish.

To prevent accidental water damage, do not place potted plants on furniture, use coasters for drinks, etc.

Do not place furniture in direct sunlight (the use of blinds or curtains will help limit direct sunlight). Avoid placing pieces next to fireplaces or baseboard heaters, or over heat vents.

Attics, basements, and garages are not good places to store furniture because of fluctuating environmental conditions.

Cleaning and Repair

A wide array of products (ranging from oils, waxes, and sprays to home remedies) is available for furniture care. However—contrary to popular belief—wood does not need to be ‘fed’. The best way to care for furniture is simply to maintain a stable environment. No amount of oil or other materials will keep wood from drying out if the humidity level is too low.

Some commercially available products actually do more harm than good because they change over time and react with the finish. Some furniture polishes leave residues that produce unsightly build-up and can affect finishes.

One of the best ways to clean wood is to dust regularly with a slightly dampened cloth. However, a lot of furniture made before World War I is sensitive to water and should be dusted only with a dry cloth. After dusting, buff the surface with a dry, soft cloth. Unfinished wood should not be wet-cleaned.

A good-quality paste wax designed for furniture can be used to add a protective layer to the wood finish and give it a soft shine. Do this only once a year and apply the wax sparingly. Do not use spray polishes or lemon oils as they can leave the surface tacky, which attracts dust.

If possible, remove metal hardware before polishing it because the abrasives or ammonia in the metal cleaning compounds can damage the surrounding wood and finish. Alternatively, protect the wood next to the metal fitting with a piece of Mylar. Coating the metal with wax will protect it from corrosion and decrease the need for frequent cleaning. Museums and historic houses no longer polish metal hardware but simply buff it with a clean, dry cotton cloth. This produces a soft gleam and minimizes wear and tear on the hardware.

If furniture is found to be infested with insects, isolate it and wrap it in plastic; then consult a conservator for advice. Furniture that needs extensive repair or cleaning should also be referred to a conservator.

Stripping wooden furniture is not recommended. Original finishes are part of the historical value of a piece and are preferred over heavy restoration (remember that half the value of new and old furniture is in the finish). It is generally wiser to maintain an original finish than to refinish a piece, depending on the condition of the remaining finish. Once an original finish is removed it cannot be put back. There are some new cleaning materials that will enhance original finishes, but these are best left to professionals.