Antique Furniture Identification Basics by Timothy Puro

1. Introduction

Purpose of presentation is to define what an antique is and give you some tools for determining age of your furniture. We will also talk about furniture construction and furniture styles. Armed with this knowledge, you will be able to make a better educated guess as to the age of your furniture.

What is an antique?

Depends on who you ask. Israel Sack, a dealer of fine early American furniture, says that an antique is anything made before about 1820 -1840. (1840’s the beginning of factory made furniture). Under this definition, Victorian, Centennial revival and arts and crafts furniture don’t count. Some say, “Anything over 100 years old.” Antique malls stretch the definition even further. If it is “old” (i.e. your grandma owned it) it is an antique. This includes collectible factory furniture such as 40’s-50’s modern furniture such as Heywood Wakefield or regional favorites such as Willett.

Is old furniture better than today's furniture?

Maybe. There was a lot of poorly constructed furniture made for the masses over the years. Poorly constructed furniture from the 1880's is still poorly constructed furniture today. However, some 1900's furniture is better constructed than some "fine furniture" being sold today in furniture stores. You can find some real values buying older, well constructed pieces vs. buying new "curb furniture”.

So how do I tell how old my furniture is?

Learning how furniture is constructed will give you clues as to the age as well as the quality of the furniture. You can learn a lot about a piece by examining drawers, testing the finish, looking at saw marks and examining fasteners.

Nails

*Hand forged* or *rose head* nails used between 1650 and 1800.

*Cut nails* were used between 1790 and 1900. Modern *Wire Nails* with round heads were first manufactured in 1885.
Screws
Most screws made before 1840 were cut by hand, can have little or no taper and sometimes have no points on them. Slotted head shiny screws are a sure sign of new work. So are Phillips head screws. They were invented in 1938 for the automobile industry.

Dovetail joints – used to hold drawers together and sometimes used in cabinet and case construction.

Hand cut dovetails can be narrow or wide and the dovetails generally feature a scribe mark to aid in the cutting of the joint. Dovetails were cut by hand until machines started doing the work by 1900.

Machine made dovetails are very uniform and cannot be as thin as hand cut dovetails.

Knapp Joint - This pin and crescent shaped machine made joint was designed to replace the hand cut dovetail. Named after its inventor, Charles Knapp, the joint was used from 1871 through 1900 and is a good indicator of Victorian and Eastlake style furniture. The joint’s demise came as Colonial furniture styles became popular in the late 1890’s. Fashion dictated that the drawers have dovetail joints.

Solid Wood or Plywood? - Single wide boards generally indicate a piece made before 1880’s or before. Most virgin timber was cut by then and wide boards were scarce. Plywood as a recently modern invention. While chair parts glued up of thin sheets of wood have been manufactured since the 1700’s, the first patent for what we think of as modern sheet plywood was granted in 1865. But plywood for use as a building material and furniture manufacture wasn’t marketed until 1910.

Most factory furniture from the 1920’s on have lumber core plywood dust panels, drawer bottoms, backs and even sides, doors and tops. Before plywood, drawer bottoms were made of solid pieces of wood. Handmade furniture drawer bottoms are often tapered at the sides to fit into grooves in the drawer sides.

Saw Marks – Circular saws, introduced in the 1850’s and perfected in the 1880’s, made factory furniture assembly possible. Look for swirling marks on the edges of boards on the back or inside of furniture like this ))))))). Before the circular saw, logs were cut into boards by hand using a pit saw which leaves
marks like this "\\\\\\ or a mechanized *sash saw* which leaves marks like this "|||"|||"|||"|||. Boards cut by a hand saw or bow saw show similar parallel saw marks.

**Planer Marks** – The other machine that made factory furniture possible is the machine rotary planer. The *rotary planer* machines wood to an even thickness and leaves subtle, uniform washboard like marks on the surface. While these marks can be removed by sanding, most factory furniture will show evidence of planer marks on the insides and backs of the furniture. The rotary planer was invented in 1824, perfected by 1860 and was in common use by 1880. *Hand planed* marks show a gentle undulation on the wood on exposed surfaces and a rough, chipped appearance on backs and drawer bottoms.

**Hardware, Hinges and Knobs**

*Cabinet Hinges*
The introduction of the modern looking butt hinge dates to 1820. Before 1820, hinges were made one at a time by a blacksmith. The first butt hinges were made out of cast iron and were 1/8” thick. By 1840, cast iron hinges became thinner (1/16”) as manufacturers tried to squeeze more hinges out of each pound of iron. By 1880, the use of cast iron in the making of butt hinges was discontinued in favor of stamped steel. (1/32” thick)

*Knobs*
Wooden knobs threaded and screwed into the drawer front are pre 1860’s. Glass knobs are an 1820’s invention and were first used extensively in Empire furniture.

*Catches*
Cast Iron catches became available in 1870. With the introduction of the cast iron latch, cabinetmakers abandoned the wooden turnstile that was used for centuries to hold cabinet doors closed.

*Veneer* – Some of the most beautiful furniture ever produced is veneered. Hand cut veneers are thicker than machine cut veneers (1850+). Some 1920’s and 30’s furniture have paper veneer banding called Veneerite and by the 1950’s paper and vinyl “veneers” were wrapping hi-fi cabinets and TV sets.

*Finish* – *Shellac* was widely used in furniture manufacture from the 1820’s through the 1920’s. Old shellac is easily identified by the way it crackles in an irregular pattern. The solvent for shellac is alcohol. If alcohol completely dissolves the finish, it is shellac. *Lacquer* was introduced in the 1920s and rapidly became the favorite finish of furniture factories. Lacquer crackles with age in straight lines. The solvent for lacquer is lacquer thinner. If lacquer thinner completely dissolves the finish, it is most likely lacquer.
Internet Research – If your furniture has a label, do an Internet search. You might be surprised what you find. Since Grand Rapids Michigan was an important furniture manufacturing center in the late 1800’s through the 1950’s, do a Google search under History of GRAFMA (Grand Rapids Area Furniture Manufacturers Association). You will be directed to a history of the organization and listing of manufacturers and when they were in production.

Patent Dates – Sometimes table extension mechanisms or hardware will have patent dates or patent numbers on them. A patent grants the patent holder protection for 17 years. You can research patent numbers on the web at www.uspto.gov.

Postal Zones & Zip Codes on labels– In 1943, to counter the loss of experienced postal employees to the war effort, the Post Office introduced a zoning system in 124 of the largest post offices. Under this system, postal zones were identified by one or two numbers placed between the city and state in a mailing address such as “Chicago 7 Illinois”. In 1963, the Post Office introduced a Zone Improvement Plan using “ZIP” codes.

Put Your Knowledge to Work

A great way to put this knowledge to work is to examine a drawer. Ask these questions:
1. Is the drawer bottom solid wood or plywood?
2. Is the drawer held together by some sort of machine made locking joints?
3. Are dovetails machine made or hand cut?
4. Are the nails round head wire nails or square head cut nails?
5. Are boards rough planed? Do boards show signs of circular or pit saw marks?
6. Does it look old?

Furniture Styles – There are good books on identifying furniture styles. Here is a brief description: Early American (1650 – 1750) includes massive Jacobean inspired furniture, and the more simple and refined William & Mary and Queen Anne styles. Federal (1750-1810) includes high style, refined designs in the Chippendale, Hepplewhite, and Sheraton styles of furniture. American Empire (1810-1840) is identified by large columns and s-shaped scrolls. Shaker furniture (1820-1880) is simple well made furniture with little or no ornamentation. Victorian (1840-1900) is sometimes large and ornate or can be more angular and subdued in the Eastlake Victorian style. Arts and Crafts or Craftsman furniture (1880-1920) is signified by mostly oak construction, straight lines and beautiful quarter sawn veneers. True Modern furniture (1900 +) has sleek uncluttered lines.

It is important to note that the Federal and Early American styles of furniture were revived in 1876 and again around the turn of the century. Both high end works by famous cabinet makers were copied as well as period country cabinet maker work.