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when you just can't let go...

When your love for that table is so enduring that losing it would only lead to heartache, consider what these experts have to say about restoration.

"Anything can be repaired, but how much do you want to spend on it?" asks Romeo Assaf as he wanders among the splendid objects in his shop, Provenance Antiques and Design in Huntington. "The key is the quality of the piece, how much work it needs and how beautiful it will look. Sometimes I tell people, 'This is not worth fixing.' I don't buy everything that's my taste, but I do buy for quality. Old doesn't make it valuable."

Assaf grew up in the business—his father was a dealer—and specializes in the increasingly rare 200-year-old art of French polish. With cheesecloth, he rubs five or six thin layers of shellac into the wood, smoothing with fine steel wool. The result, he says, is a radiant surface that will endure and even improve for thirty to sixty years, with only a swipe of a soft cloth for maintenance.

For missing hardware, "rarely do we find a perfect match," he explains, so he substitutes salvage pulls or recasts the originals. Assaf stops at a magnificent kidney shaped Regency style server from the 1930s. He eyes it approvingly, for its warm patina and functionality. "This piece we stripped," he notes. "We took it apart, re-sanded the joints and re-doweled it." No article of furniture should ever be submerged in stripper, which stresses the wood sometimes beyond tolerance.

Indeed refinishing at its best frees the inherent beauty of wood that has been obscured by stain or lacquer. As examples, an Empire dressing table, circa 1820, in rare bird's-eye maple, or a wonderful rosewood envelope table. "I'm not cheap," Assaf asserts, "but my quality and craftsmanship aren't like anyone else."

Provenance Antiques & Design
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Jon Schneller is the fourth generation head of A. Schneller Sons, Inc., the venerable New York City

furniture design, drapery and refurbishing firm founded in 1881. He and his wife, Pam, devote their careers to making furniture that is, quite simply, the best, for clients who have taste and judgment.

"Historically, there has been a trend for quality to be lost, particularly by the end of the 1990s," says Jon Schneller. "But there's a whole new group of people understanding good quality and design. The older group grew up with decorators in their houses, and the materials had more time to evolve. They collected art and had decorators from Europe. Their decorators knew how to live in a house, to provide flow from room to room, to relax and entertain."

The Schnellers reverentially name some of the masters of design, such as Sister Parish ("she knew instinctively how to live in a house") and Albert Hadley, for whom the firm has worked, and their worthy inheritors, including Bunny Williams and David Easton.

"They have great manners and are courtly," observes Pam Schneller. Both Pam and Jon believe that an accomplished decorator can have a strong and guiding influence on an architect.

"Good decorators earn every penny they make," says Jon firmly. "They know their clients, and for performance, quality of work and presentation, you get your money's worth." Considering the high prices of new furniture, Jon Schneller notes that custom pieces, only ten to twenty percent higher, are a fine alternative. "It's like a good suit," he says, "with custom construction, hand stitching, and down cushions." More importantly, however, a fine item of furniture, in pristine condition, is more like a work of art. "My first criteria is, if you like it, and can afford it, you should have it—buy it. You're going to walk around it every day."

Jon Schneller's imagination is steeped in the splendor he has seen. "It's been a real privilege to get into these houses and see these projects put together by a fantastic team and a great group of artisans," he says respectfully. "Mrs. Whitney's house, Greentree, Mrs. Astor's house in Tarrytown, the Englehard house in Far Hills. I was hanging curtains for Mrs. Whitney on Sutton Place and looked around a roomful of thirty masterpieces."

A. Schneller Sons, Inc
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Ken Ellis, manager of the furniture restoration department of North Country Furniture, a division of the Alexander Wall Corp., constantly deals with the unthinkable: flood, fire or smoke damage that can wipe out an entire household. The firm's immense warehouse in Ronkonkoma is filled with the fragile remains of furnishings, wood and upholstered, and rugs—and all the poignant memories they bear.