

The Secrets of Lady Pidgeon

An Interview with Lady Pamela B. Pidgeon,
Director and Owner, Great Brampton House Antiques Ltd., Madley, United Kingdom



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EDITORS' NOTE

More than 30 years ago, following the retirement of Lady Pidgeon's first husband, Francis Howell, from the British armed forces, the couple purchased Great Brampton House as a residence, but developed it into a business to finance its

restoration and refurbishing. Major Howell died some 16 years ago, and in 1993 she married Australian Sir John Pidgeon.

COMPANY BRIEF *Set on 30 acres in Hereford, England, Great Brampton House Antiques Ltd. deals in rare antique furniture and art, including a large collection of fine English furniture; Louis XIV, XV, and XVI pieces; and oil paintings of the 18th and 19th centuries. It also operates an interior-decorating service.*

In the antiques business there are many secrets an expert needs to know in order to determine a piece's worth and authenticity. What are some of yours?

The first rule is always to ensure that the piece is on the market legitimately. Unfortunately, things sometimes find a home but are later revealed as stolen. So I never buy "at the door," for instance. If someone brings me something, I don't look at it on the doorstep. Instead, I like a seller to approach me and ask: "Will you please come see an antique I'm selling? I think it's a 17th- or 18th-century piece." I try to get some description in advance, to make sure that the journey is worth my time or the time of a key staff member. Then, after we've viewed the piece, perhaps we'll make a purchase.

Do you ever feel that some clients aren't worthy of owning fine pieces?

I think some clients fail to appreciate how wonderful antique pieces truly are. But if someone doesn't realize how good a piece is, it's my duty to tell him, particu-

larly if he's planning to sell it. If a piece is worth much more than the £10,000 he's asking, I'm prepared to pay whatever it's really worth. Ultimately, being straightforward and honest with people is the essence of any good business.

It's often said that fine antique furniture shouldn't be refinished or repaired. As such, should you keep a piece in its original state even if it's damaged?

Anything that's worth keeping for posterity should be preserved, but if restoration is truly needed, it should be done by an expert. But, of course, it all depends upon the piece. There's no point in spending £5,000, for example, on a piece of furniture that won't ultimately be worth that price. Generally, I don't knowingly buy pieces that have undergone or will require major restoration work. Fundamentally, it's very important that we sell only very good pieces of furniture in their original condition.

What can people do to protect their furniture from the potential damage wrought by central heating?

They can buy humidifiers, but the best thing one can do is to fill the house with lots of fresh flowers, which release humidity into the air and thus help to prevent wood furniture from splitting. Plus, flowers are a wonderful decorative element. They immediately transform a house into a home.

Also, these pieces occasionally need to be waxed with pure beeswax. Some products may have a wee bit of turpentine in them, but I prefer waxes that have only a bit of oil, if anything. In general, antique wood pieces don't need to be waxed frequently, but if they're kept in a particularly dry atmosphere, they should be waxed more often. Again, the best approach is to use common sense.

If a chair or sofa is worn, is it better to leave the original fabric on or to have it reupholstered?

It depends largely on the piece's worth. Oftentimes, if a piece's original tapestry looks shabby, I'll have it removed and cleaned, and then I'll take the piece to a museum restorer, who will do any necessary repairs on both the wood and the upholstery. Such pieces usually come back in excellent condition.

What are the basic rules to remember when caring for the fine paintings you sell?

A really good painting is always worth investing in, but in general, it shouldn't be cleaned very often. For example, I have a Gainsborough that my mother gave to me about 40 years ago. I've never touched that painting, and it's still in very good condition. It's also important to note that



if people smoke a great deal in their houses, their paintings will become darker over time. If people must smoke, I suggest that they limit their smoking to one room of the house – such as the library, which is often paneled in wood. Then, they won't discolor the walls or their paintings.

Furthermore, frames make a big difference, adding greatly to the overall appearance of paintings. And if a frame is of the same period as a painting, even if it's not the original frame, it may command an enormous price. Gone are the days when you could buy a beautiful gilded frame for £1,000! ●

The Gold Room