

# local REAL ESTATE

## Formula for restoration

By Lillian Cox | SPECIAL TO TODAY'S LOCAL NEWS

VISTA — In 1975 Mary Cortmyer marked her 18th birthday by purchasing her first antique. She arrived at the store with \$100 and left with a wicker rocking chair. The owner gave her a bargain price to encourage her youthful passion for antiques.

"She said to me, 'Someday you'll be an antique dealer,'" Cortmyer said.

Cortmyer said she was destined for a life surrounded by antiques, even though the road was a circuitous one. It led to a 20-year career as a corporate accountant before she decided to enroll in an upholstery class at Palomar College 10 years ago.

Today, Cortmyer has carved a niche for herself as a popular antiques restorer and instructor at Palomar College. Her mission: to engage others in her love of antiques.

"Antiques are works of art," she said. "For the artisans who created these pieces, this was their life."

Cortmyer offers suggestions for do-it-yourselfers who may be unable to take her class.

"If you have an antique, you first need to identify it by either referring to books or the Internet," she said. "You can also take it to a local appraiser or send a photo to Sotheby's auction house in New York."

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Cortmyer restored this Queen Anne chair without stripping it. "Some people want their antique to look new," she said. "When you do that you remove character from it."

# Antiques

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She said that furniture refinishing means removing the finish. Restoration means improving or restoring the existing finish.

Stripping furniture is considered a cardinal sin by Cortmyer and many other antiques restorers.

"Some people want their antique to look new," she said. "When you do that, you remove the character from it."

In addition to damaging the wood and removing the color, Cortmyer cautioned that many furniture strippers give off toxic fumes.

April Bellini, who owns Bellini's Antique Italia in Solana Beach with her husband, Jacopo, agrees.

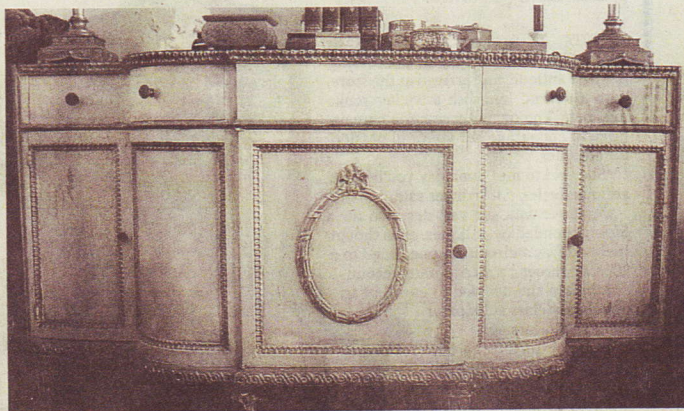
"You don't want to chemically strip furniture," she said. "There's a natural patina in aging. When you remove it, it loses its value. Take off the dirt and grime, but not the stain and shellac."

Cortmyer teaches her students the least invasive way to restore antiques and offers her recipe for a homemade furniture reviver.

After restoration, she suggests following up once a year with an application of a quality paste wax such as Black Bison by Rockler.

"Many spray furniture polishes are damaging, especially to antique furniture," she said.

Cortmyer and Bellini say a common misconception perpetuated by television programs such as "Antiques Roadshow" is that museum-quality furniture loses its value



Antique restorer Mary Cortmyer advises do-it-yourselfers that gilded and painted French furniture such as this commode are not made to be stripped. "Sometimes you can use milk paint," she said. Lillian Cox

when it's restored.

"If something is not functioning, you are only improving the antique by making it usable again," Cortmyer said.

She said the most common damage to antiques usually involves the backs and legs of chairs, which can become loose. Other problems include loss of the veneer or the finish from aging and crazing.

"Many people are afraid to take on an antique restoration project," Cortmyer said. "They don't realize that everyone is talented at something. There's a part of restoration

that they'll be very good at."

Such skills could include staining, upholstery, making seamless repairs or even creating replacement parts such as a foot for a chair or sofa.

She said the amount of restoration one performs is a personal decision.

"You may think that an antique is too far gone," she said. "In that case, get a second opinion, and remember that it's only wood."

Lillian Cox is a freelance writer who lives in Encinitas.

## Antique furniture reviver

Mary Cortmyer says a furniture reviver can save numerous hours of work as well as the high cost of refinishing.

**Note:** The finish must be original to the antique. It will not work on items with a modern polyurethane finish.

Mix equal quantities (½ cup each is more than enough for a large project):

- mineral spirits
- denatured alcohol
- boiled linseed oil

Place mixture in an old water bottle or jar with a tight lid, and mark the container clearly with a permanent marker.

This mixture tends to separate, so shake it before each use. When it's shaken, it will be a yellow creamy mixture.

To apply, pour the mixture onto a clean, soft cloth and polish the surface. Do not allow the mixture to puddle up, as it will soften the finish.

Wait 24 hours, then apply a good paste wax and buff. You should see a remarkable difference.

As with all chemicals, see manufacturer's recommendations for disposal.

**Discard all cloths used in the process as follows:** Immerse in water, spread out flat and leave to dry outdoors. When they are fully dry, dispose of the cloths in an outdoor receptacle, preferably metal.

**Warning!** Chemicals are deemed combustible when combined.