

THE BOSTON PHOENIX

November 2005

NEWS & FEATURES

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Old school

Turn to vintage and antique stores to furnish your new pad
BY GENEVIEVE RAJEWSKI

Not LONG after you finish unpacking your boxes and milk crates, they're sure to find you. Catalogues from the likes of Pottery Barn, Crate & Barrel, and Williams-Sonoma piled up in your mailbox — addressed to your mysterious predecessor "or current resident."

But there's no need to pine after pricey tables, dressers, lighting, and other furnishings "inspired" by vintage or antique pieces, when you can opt for the real deal. Antique and vintage pieces have considerable advantages over copycats — not the least of which is that they are often less expensive.

"It all comes down to the craftsmanship, really," says Mara Loeber, owner of Absolutely Fabulous. "Antique furniture has better wood and hardware. You'll find dovetailing, whereas most newer pieces are simply hammered — not perfectly fit — together. And more work, such as intricate carvings, has also been put into a lot of older pieces. Even with old '50s kitchen tables, you'll find that the Formica top and bolts are much thicker than those found on reproductions."

Colin Nealon, owner of Consignment Galleries, agrees. "The furniture up through the 1940s was usually solid wood. If it had a veneer, the veneer was over solid wood. Newer furniture may look good, but often a piece labeled as 'cherry' is actually cherry-stained particle board."

Better quality is also seen in vintage housewares, says Nealon. "You often don't realize this unless you compare the old versus the new. But take, for example, old sterling-silver flatware, which is far more substantial than what is currently produced."



BRICK AND CLICK: Boomerangs offers traditional secondhand stores, along with an online auction of donated furniture and housewares.



GRANDMA'S ATTIC: Absolutely Fabulous, in Cambridge, sells an eclectic mix of antique furniture, vintage clothes, and boutique-y housewares.

Brooks Morris, owner of Buckaroo's Mercantile, notes that, quality and cost aside, the uniqueness of vintage pieces helps individualize décor. "Smaller, collectible pieces are an inexpensive way for people to mirror their personality in an apartment," Morris says. "After all, many people only live in a place for a year or so. They either don't want to or aren't allowed to spend time and money painting their apartment. However, some interesting antique glassware can do double duty as a decoration for the shelves in their kitchen."

When it comes to what type of vintage furnishings to buy, the experts agree that quality and individual taste are more important than time period. Similarly, saving money has less to do with a piece's era than its quality.

"The better the quality, the more expensive a piece is," says Loeber. "However, you can find good antiques from any period — many of which can be cleaned up. You'd be really surprised at what you can do with polish. You can save pieces without having to re-stain. Rockler Woodworking, in Cambridge, carries Italian Craftsman polish, a really professional polish that will take a beat-up piece and really mask any nicks and scratches."

Likewise, Loeber notes that missing hardware shouldn't deter you from buying a piece you love. "You can find really wonderful vintage hardware at flea markets and junkyards. The important thing is to stay to good woods."

Of course, once you're ready to scout for vintage furnishings, it can be difficult to know where to look. The following offers a road map to some of the more interesting places around town.

Cambridge

For starters, head to Inman Square, where you'll find two shops with a revolving selection of vintage wares. **Absolutely Fabulous** sells an eclectic mix of antique furniture in addition to vintage clothes and new "boutique-y" housewares. A 1950s-era red-topped Formica diner table (\$200) surrounded by a set of four orange diner chairs from the same period (\$125), would nicely fill out a kitchen nook. If you have room only for an island, you could opt for a set of four red-vinyl-and-chrome bar stools (\$225) instead.

Some may swoon over Absolutely Fabulous's Art Deco walnut vanity with three-panel mirror (\$475), which could make even bed head look like it belongs on the silver screen. However, the store also sells a less costly and perhaps more practical Art Deco dresser (\$115) that could infuse a bedroom with some of the same glamour. Other standout dressers include a 1920s mahogany dresser (\$165) with subtle detail, and a more rustic, pink-painted bureau (\$115). If the smoking ban has cost your favorite local lounge some of its allure, swank things up at home with a retro black-and-chrome standing ashtray (\$45).

Where to find it:

• **Absolutely Fabulous**, 1309 Cambridge Street, Cambridge, (617) 864-0656.

• **Antiques on Cambridge**, 1076 Cambridge Street, Cambridge, (617) 234-0001; www.antiques-on-cambridge.com

• **Boomerangs**, 716 Centre Street, Jamaica Plain, (617) 524-5120; 298 Washington Street, Brighton; www.aac.org

• **Buckaroo's Mercantile**, 1297 Cambridge Street, Cambridge, (617) 492-4792; www.buckmerc.com

• **Cadia Vintage**, 148 Salem Street, Boston, (617) 742-1203.

• **Consignment Galleries**, 363 Highland Avenue, Somerville, (617) 629-4900.

• **Rewind**, 1736 Washington Street, Boston, (617) 424-7677; www.rewindinboston.com

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