

# ANTIQUE COLLECTING

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## What is the Future for the Antiques Industry?

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Antiques dealer, Edd Thomas

Antiques dealer Edd Thomas is one of a new breed of young experts who are revitalising the industry. In a new column he contemplates the future of ‘brown’ in a 21st-century world

In the distance I hear the slow peel of hardly-audible bells. Funeral or celebration, it’s hard to discern. All but the selectively deaf must have heard the steady ringing for some time – a decade or more – but none has been able to understand its true meaning. Is it mourning the dying breaths of a long and noble tradition of antique furniture in this country, or heralding the arrival of a new wave of interest? Every day I hear both sides of the story. On the one hand: “Brown is finally dead,” on the other “Brown is starting to make a comeback.” For the general public, used to unambiguous sound bites, things must be even more confusing.

## Saying Goodbye to Antique Industry?

Why is it so hard to foresee the future of our antique furniture industry? Is it, like our mining industry (with all the memories of happier glory days) just hard to say goodbye? Perhaps. That our proud heritage of furniture design, stretching back hundreds of years and emblazoned with the genius of countless designers and makers deserves to be remembered is unquestionable.

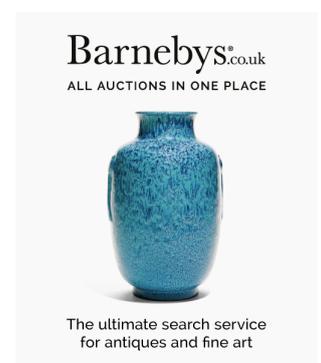
But do we each need to keep a piece of it as a shrine in our homes as well? The best way to preserve any tradition is to embed it into our daily lives, but from Morris dancing to pargetting, that’s not an easy thing to do. The Victorians’ Arts and Crafts movement tried to revive medieval skills and stories but even that brave spark faded over time. What came after, the birth of art deco and modernism, bore little resemblance to what Morris and his smock-wearing crew had made it their life’s work to achieve.

When I see people forecasting the revival of brown furniture it is usually with the justification that it is such good value now. ‘Embarrassingly cheap’ might be the words on their lips and, in many respects, they are right. The value of an antique chest of drawers (hand constructed, lovingly maintained and wonderfully aged) is often measured directly against its modern Ikea descendant. I regularly have clients who tell me the virtue of their new purchase compared to modern chipboard. But, strangely, the same people use the price of the despised chipboard as their value marker as well! To say brown furniture deserves to have a revival because it is cheap is missing the point. Bedpans are also cheap, but I’m not expecting them to burst back on the scene any time soon.

Perhaps it is finally time to let brown furniture go?

## Reinventing the Feel

Or is it just time to reinvent it? If embedding something the fabric of our lives is the best way to keep things alive, then the object being preserved needs to maintain a relevance to our 21st-century world. This is an area where the antiques industry can learn from others. Both the burgeoning fashion and music industry thrive on an oscillating rhythm of reinvention and reinterpretation. To them constant rediscovery and subtle realignment is what keeps things fresh. Even



they don't pretend that anything too radical has come out of either industry in the last few years, yet we all sit on tenterhooks waiting for their next unveiling.

In part the revival has already begun, overpainting in distressed white or upcycling furniture into something different may not appeal to the purists, but does show an effort to keep an item fresh and in circulation. Let me say now that I'm not a fan of either approach but I can admire the creative flair of the modifier.

Reinvention does not have to be about extremes. In fact it works better when it focuses on small but defining elements. The basic button down shirt, a staple in shops since who knows when, has stayed ever present by reinventing the 70s flared collar, 50s check or 20s studded buttons time and time again.

## Off The Antique Pedestal

Antique furniture, finally removed from its untouchable pedestal, could learn to adapt. I'm not saying that every piece of Chippendale should get a respray, the best will still sit in museums and collections untouched, but that the general mass of uninspiring pieces (that form the bulk of what we own in our homes) could for instance be updated with inspiring new metalwork, creative new (but impermanent) polishes that highlight different elements of the grain etc.

If that's all still too much to bear, then it's down to us to lobby modern designers to attribute more of their prized motifs to the past... "oh, I got the sweep of the legs from Sheraton, the poise from Bullock..."

While some people will still choose new, it may inspire others to safely dabble in the past.

Lastly, as the world of antiques slips further and further into the realm of fashion, the importance of interior designers can't be overstated. The modern world is about showing how a group of random objects can actually gel together. We need to be braver about disconnecting the look of the Victorian parlour from the objects contained within.

Let me leave you with one final thought. We usually view our antique items as an unwavering absolute, but is that how the original makers saw them also? Those working in oak have always done so under the knowledge and understanding that the timber will darken, bend and crack itself over time into something it never was at the start – that's reinvention. If we could ask those designers and carpenters of the past if they'd prefer their item to remain untouched but destined for the skip, or constantly reinterpreted for successive generations, which do you think they would choose?

*For more details on Edd's Wiltshire-based business visit [www.eddintheclouds.com](http://www.eddintheclouds.com)*

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