

# The Future of Antiques: A Conversation with Todd Schwebel

*When Todd Schwebel was a kid, he'd pass over the more popular Sports Illustrated for Antiques magazine. Long before the advent of virtual bulletin board sites like Pinterest.com, Schwebel would dog-ear magazine pages, making notes and pointing out to his mother which chair or table he wanted to have someday. An eighth-generation Illinoisan, it was his grandfather who regularly took him to country auctions downstate, where Schwebel would spot bargains for Empire and Victorian pieces when he was still a teenager, sparking an interest in high-quality antiques that would stay with him all his life. -GV*

Todd Schwebel thinks there is a big problem for antiques. Though he's been a collector since he was just a teen, his passion is hardly the norm among his contemporaries. Antiques have fallen so far out of favor with today's sleek, design-minded, transient audiences, Schwebel doesn't know how they'll ever come back in style. It's a crisis that has repercussions far beyond nostalgia, or the fate of a few aging antiques dealers. When Schwebel and I met recently in River North, I wanted tips to share with younger collectors about beginning an antiques collection. We ended up having a conversation about the cultural challenges facing the industry and whether there's any way to save it before it's too late.

In the late 1980s Schwebel bought a 1906 Kenwood residence, which had been the only freestanding house in Chicago designed by architect Benjamin Marshall. In 1921 the Norton family, who owned the house, hired Howard van Doren Shaw to increase the home's size as well as add his own signature touches. By the time Schwebel bought the house, it was in disrepair; he painstakingly restored it and filled it with period-appropriate antiques. 20 years later he did it again for clients who purchased the same house for their young family. Formerly an antiques dealer specializing in early 19th C. American antiques, today he runs The Schwebel Company in River North, a design firm that provides architectural and design services nationally. The firm has also won many



A Schwebel library done in the Adler style, in Chicago's Gold Coast.

awards for historic preservation. Schwebel still sells investment-quality American antiques, fixtures, and decorations, and he's a go-to expert for individual collectors as well as museums. Devoted to American style, antiques from our nation's history are a key part of his creations. Schwebel's business takes him most often to the east coast. In 20 years situated in River North, among many contemporary art galleries, Schwebel says he hasn't made one walk-in antiques sale, something he attributes to a profound lack of interest in Chicago.

As Schwebel sees it, many valuable antiques important to our city's history will soon be too far away to get back. Antiques aren't in fashion; people either buy cheap furniture they can thoughtlessly toss some day, or the same trendy, expensive furniture their neighbors have, which will never appreciate in value. Schwebel feels that by blindly following brand-name, mass-market designers, people feel their taste is publicly validated. Explaining, Schwebel says, "I've met people whose parents have wonderful collections of antiques - including really beautiful, quality pieces - and the adult children just don't want them. They don't appreciate how quality pieces are significant. So, pieces go to auction and are bought up by those who do know."

Schwebel points to Samuel Marx, a well known mid-20th Century Chicago designer, whose elegant pieces, he says, have been siphoned to collections on the coasts: "So much of his work has left Chicago and the North Shore because there isn't local interest anymore. It's striking work, and collectors in LA and New York have snapped it up at auction here. It's really hard to get that back now, so something's been lost from Chicago." In general, quality pieces that can still be had cost more than people want to spend if they don't have the knowledge. "Since there's no real respect or authority on the topic of antiques here," Schwebel says, "I think in some ways it's a reflection of what's wrong with our culture. We don't value history. We don't recognize the treasures we have here - not just older, but even pieces from the 20th Century. One person I do give lots of credit to is Leslie Hindman for how she's gotten antiques out there. Ultimately we still need more leadership on a cultural scale."

Schwebel suggests, "I think because of a branded, 'celebutante,' media culture people have these fleeting tastes." Even those who are savvy manage to be influenced by others' taste, opting for what is easiest, rather than what takes the time and effort to build up.

There are several forces working against antiques, according to Schwebel: "Antiques are a forbidden zone for some if they don't have the opportunity to learn." He adds that



Picture perfect restoration of a Benjamin Marshall/Howard van Doren Shaw Residence in Chicago.

would-be-collectors end up turning away from or sometimes fully against historic pieces. Depending on the period, antiques' cultural and political associations can be a minefield for collectors, since pieces are tied to history in sometimes complicated ways, for instance where some European colonial pieces are concerned. It is up to collectors to make educated decisions about what they choose to own.

The bottom line, according to Schwebel, is that people aren't being told about antiques often enough. He believes we have a duty in Chicago to support our decorative arts and to preserve local collections. Younger than east coast cities, much of our identity is split between a gritty past and modern architectural marvels. However, we can't throw everything over in favor of the new. "I worry that some day other aspects of the city's cultural scene will also be threatened," warns Schwebel. He points out that without enough diversity in patrons' collecting passions, area museums will suffer, losing out to high profile institutions and collections on both coasts.

How would Schwebel begin to address the antiques problem? "You'd need a critical mass of younger people interested to make a difference. One solution is to fight fire with fire." By embracing the very celebrante culture that's chipping away at history and individual taste, the thought is that a TV show featuring a high profile designer or collector couple could turn the tables. Antiques Roadshow is a good but staid example of what Schwebel has in mind, he says, because it imparts real information. However, many show guests are hoping only to discover hidden value they can cash in. A better, more social show would be about creating collectors vs. consumers.

Antiques appeal to collectors in part because history is built into objects crafted by hand, which have stood the test of time. Pieces used for reasons now obsolete may still be enjoyed as a way to tangibly recall history and culture.

Antiques are never really out of style, though favored periods change. It takes personal devotion like Schwebel's, plus time and investment, to develop a collection. Such a commitment can tie you passionately to history in ways that will support the future.