



Downtown businessman Richard Wheeler offers a class to help demystify the world of antiques

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THE LESSON, learned long ago, was painful.

Richard Wheeler had bought a green stone statue for \$75, and soon he was sitting across from a dealer who asked, "How much do you want for it?"

Thinking a nice profit was in order, Wheeler said, "\$275."

The guy practically ripped the money out of his wallet. Wheeler later learned that the statue was jade, and the dealer resold it for \$2,800.

"It didn't really make me mad because I learned a good lesson," Wheeler said. "Find out what it is before you sell it."

It's not a mistake Wheeler, 47, has repeated in the 27 years he has been dealing and appraising antiques.

Now he's offering classes to help others learn what constitutes a good antiques deal and to navigate the sometimes sharky waters of what doesn't.

Wheeler, owner of Art and Antiques at 114 Hanover St., will talk specifics about furniture; silver; brass, copper, iron and other metals; glass; pottery and porcelain; painting and prints; daguerreotypes, miniature portraits and silhouettes; and folk art.

The Wednesday-evening classes will be taught at Wheeler's downtown Fredericksburg home, Feb. 12 through April 23. "It's fun to see people who are really interested and really want to know a little more" about antiques, Wheeler said.

Wheeler has built his career on risks and successes, instinct and solid knowledge. At the heart of it all is a love for antiques as physical links to interesting people and times.

In Wheeler's home--which he shares with 13-year-old daughter Addison and a cat named Karen--are tables, chests and chairs, busts and portraits, porcelain and pottery from the 1850s and earlier. Many are Virginia-made.

They're beautiful and valuable, but they're also a part of everyday life. Nothing is too precious to serve its original function.

Once, when Addison had an outdoor birthday party, Wheeler used a pair of silver sugar tongs with the Ball coat of arms and of the right age to have been owned by Mary Washington, George's mother.

He left the tongs out back on a picnic table, then forgot about them overnight. He doesn't recommend doing that, but the tongs, rescued the next day, were fine.

Wheeler is nonchalant, too, about allowing the cat in his rooms of antiques.

"She's a very good cat. I had one Chippendale chair she would not leave alone, and I just sold the chair because I didn't want to sell the cat."

Wheeler caught the antiques bug when he was about 10 years old and a budding fan of Thomas Jefferson.

"I can almost remember exactly when I got interested," he said. "In fourth grade we went to Monticello on a field trip,

and a teacher or chaperone said, 'This is really neat, but aren't you glad you don't have to live like this?' I thought, 'No!'"

He started buying antiques as a high school student with an interest in photography. At the time, there was little collector interest in daguerreotypes--silvered photographic plates from the 1840s and 1850s. Wheeler thought they were "the most fabulous form of photography ever."

Once he had a good collection, he needed a cabinet to put daguerreotypes in, and "it kind of snowballed." He soon was seeking out furniture and other period items to complement the collection.

As his daguerreotype library grew, collector interest also caught fire, and over the years a \$40 example appreciated to a \$5,000 value. Years later, he sold all but one to the Chrysler Museum of Art in Norfolk--and made a gift of that last daguerreotype, his favorite.

In the meantime, though, he had become adept at buying and selling other antiques. For a time he held other jobs as well, including managing a chain of record stores and playing in a punk band in Charlottesville.

"But I never sat behind a desk," he said.

Eventually, he realized it was possible to make dealing antiques his full-time job. He moved to Fredericksburg several years ago in part because of its central location for an antiques business, with easy access to Richmond and Washington.

The work requires frequent travel, to auctions, estate sales, and antiques shows, and to people's homes to do appraisals. But the business offers him the freedom to set his hours and work when he wants. "Some weeks it's 60 hours, and some weeks I probably work 10," he said.

Hard-earned knowledge is important, but luck does sometimes play a role in the antiques business. And when an opportunity arises to buy something exceptional, "a lot of times you have to make an instant decision," Wheeler said.

It's risky, but instinct and knowledge don't often let him down. Once at an auction, he bought a pretty pottery poodle because it looked familiar--like a picture he'd seen of Bennington poodles, 1850s Vermont-made figurines of considerable interest to collectors.

Competition was keen, and he ended up spending about \$400 for the poodle. Afterward, he asked a woman who'd bid against him what she knew about the piece.

Nothing, it turned out. She'd just thought it was cute and wanted to use it as a doorstep.

Wheeler asked a few friends about his purchase, and all said they didn't think it was one of the Bennington poodles.

At that point he realized, "If I threw this in the river and never thought about it, it wouldn't come back to haunt me."

But just to be sure, he got out a book he knew would include a picture of the poodle. And there it was--a poodle just like his, with its shaggy mane and smiling mouth holding a basket of fruit--on the cover.

The poodle is a favorite of Wheeler's daughter, who named it Chester, so it's not for sale. Instead, it has a place of honor on a side table in the living room.

There's pleasure, too, in seeing the beauty and value in an object someone else considers tired old trash. "You're rescuing something from God knows what," he said.

Wheeler has bought a family portrait from a descendant who didn't like the looks of it, and a silver samovar from a woman whose great-grandmother had smuggled it out of Russia. He once bought an 1820s chest of drawers just minutes before it was to be stripped of its well-worn original finish.

Then there are pieces that have value beyond form and function--things whose specific history sets them apart.

Wheeler recalled a Maine Antique Digest story about the sale of a Sheffield wine cooler a few years ago. The piece would have been worth about \$2,500, but meticulous documentation proved it once belonged to George Washington--and it sold for closer to \$200,000.

Even an unproven likelihood that a piece brushed greatness lends an air of romance.

A table in Wheeler's dining room came from a home owned by a branch of Old Virginia's venerable Randolph family, Wheeler said.

"Always in the back of my mind is that it's not impossible that Thomas Jefferson sat down here, or George Washington leaned on it."

For more information on Wheeler's classes, call 372-7258.

Archived at

http://www.fredericksburg.com/local/downtown-businessman-richard-wheeler-offers-a-class-to-help-demystify/article_92e82163-5b88-5bad-ba04-c4524c9e983c.html