

# ARE ALL OLD THINGS VALUABLE?

by Francine Proulx

A quick response is that on average 7,000 people show up for the *Antiques Roadshow*, 50 items are videotaped and only about 30 items are televised. One of its appraiser states only about five percent of items brought in is highly valuable.

Age is only one aspect to determining value. One analyzes numerous features of an antique when appraising its worth including:

**Overall Appearance:** In addition to identifying the period and style of the antique, an appraiser looks at the form, the lines, the proportion, the scale, the ornamentation, the material, texture, the finish and color. All of these make up the aesthetic quality of the object. As the late noted expert Charles Montgomery asked, "Does it sing?"

**Craftsmanship:** How the antique was made gives clues to its age and quality. An appraiser looks for traces of the tools and types of joinery used. Was it done by hand or machine? Are all parts original or have some been replaced or repaired. How well was that done? How does it compare with similar objects – good, better or best?

**Attribution:** Probably 90% of antiques are not signed by the maker. The existence of a signature and label do not guarantee authenticity. Deception is not uncommon.

Objects are attributed to a particular maker by identification of unique characteristics in form, design, construction or ornamentation. Objects can be identified as having been made by the same craftsman without knowing who he/she was until a signed piece is found.

The ability to attribute an antique to its maker, particularly a well known one, could increase the value 10 times or more than a comparable object by an unknown maker.

**Rarity:** The fewer that were made or survived, the greater the value of the antique *if* there are willing buyers for it in the marketplace.

**Desirability:** The value is affected by social, economic and technological trends. An example is silver. Today's market is not as strong as it once was. People do not have the time to

maintain it, society is more casual, new silverplate resists tarnish and the value of silver by the ounce is lower than in the past.

**Provenance:** What is the history of the piece? Who owned it? Where? Oral family lore is not always accurate. So written documentation is important. If made and/or owned by a famous person and this can be documented, it will enhance the value considerably.

**Condition:** This is probably the *single most important factor*. Today original patina – the coloration that comes with age and wear -- is more desirable and hence more valuable. In country furniture the worn look might make the object appear less attractive. Yet, this feature may be the key to putting the value of the antique in the five to six figure range.

Once the object's appearance, craftsmanship and condition are inspected and documented, the appraiser then researches the other factors. After analysis of all the information, a value is determined. *Just remember*, particularly with family heirlooms, that sentimental value can far outweigh the monetary worth.

Francine Proulx is an independent personal property appraiser. She holds certificates in Appraisal Studies and Connoisseurship in Fine and Decorative Arts from GWU. She is affiliated with Quinn's Auction Galleries. Francine can be reached at 703-395-7015.