

# Antiques Whisperer

*Gary Leon takes his time with treasured antiques*

BY JASON A. ZWIKER | PHOTOGRAPHY BY HOLGER OBENAU



It was blackened with age and broken down, the client explained, but it had been in his family since it was made and was near and dear to his heart.

Gary Leon recognized the fine craftsmanship of the armoire. It was Late Empire, made specifically for his client's family by a German cabinetmaker. A treasured heirloom, it had a long and storied provenance.

Over the next several weeks, the piece was restored in Gary's workshop. Where repairs were needed, antique wood was precisely matched to the original. Shellac, handmade in the shop, was French polished in, to bring out the beauty of the wood.

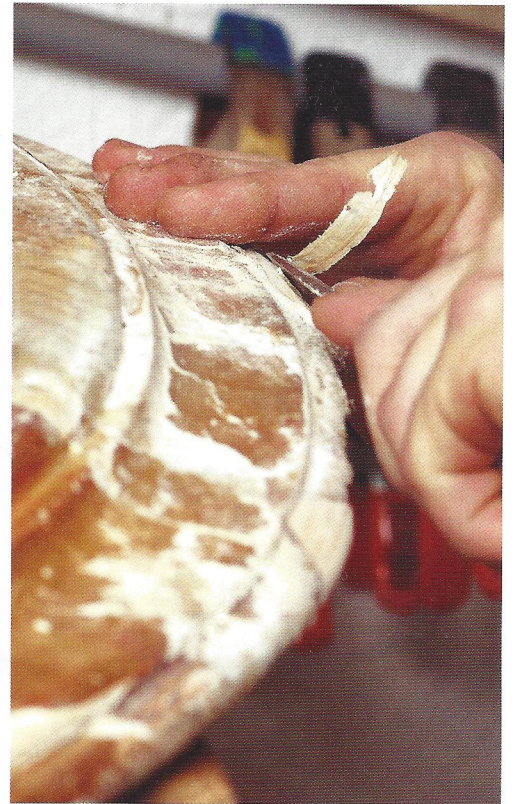
"It's a lost art form," Gary says quietly. "A lot of guys will use synthetic sprays. We don't." A single glance speaks volumes of why he does not. The long hours spent carefully preparing the shellac from scratch and working it in is essential to the quality of the result he achieves.

He divides his time between buying and selling antiques for clients—keeping his finger on the pulse of the major auctions at all times—and restoration.

Gary's appreciation for antiques goes as far back as he can remember. One of his earliest purchases, as a little boy, was an aged barrel and a stack of history books that he chanced upon while riding his bicycle on Long Island. As a young adult, he took the next logical step and began to learn the art of restoration.

He worked in a handful of smaller shops before securing a position in the crème de la crème of the New York antique world: Hyde Park. It was the perfect opportunity for him to perfect his skills, working on some of the





Carlyle. Gary said he'd be happy to help. After they set the piece in place, Gary waited in the vestibule while the driver slipped back inside.

"I could hear him chatting and having a beer with someone. Finally, he came out and asked me if I was interested in some side work. I said sure, and so he invited me in to meet the guy. It was Paul Newman."

"He had a beautiful Regency cellarette that needed to be restored and a fabulous small side table that was given to him by Gore Vidal as a wedding gift. That's when my career really started."

He went into business for himself and established a reputation for exquisite quality. He worked on pieces destined for museum collections and the White House while building a client base that included several prominent names in the movie industry and financial world. He did extensive work with Bill Cosby's famous collection of Shaker furniture, including rescuing a set of Shaker chairs that were found floating in the comedian's flooded basement.

The stories and the years piled up, as both tend to do, and today he has over 35 years of experience in the buying, selling and restoration of antiques.

While he is conversant across the board when it comes to periods and styles, American Empire and Federal hold a special place in his heart.

"I love the boldness, the richness of the woods," he says. "It was the peak of American craftsmanship. It was a time when craftsmen were breaking away from the traditions of Europe and creating their own style, a style that was truly American."

He's right at home walking through the selection of high-end 18th- and 19th-century American and European furniture in his showroom. Every piece is a part of history and there are stories upon stories that can be told while examining their inlays, joinery and finishes. Watch him work, slowly, step by step, in his shop and you'll understand how happy he feels to be a part of those stories. ➤

finest antiques in the world. These included a period Queen Anne Chinoiserie secretary, valued at over half a million dollars, that served as the centerpiece for Hyde Park's booth at the Winter Antiques Show.

Even so, he credits the big break that helped him launch his own business with being at the right place at the right time. One day, a driver needed a helping hand making a delivery to a penthouse in The

#### FOR MORE INFORMATION

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