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Friday, 05/05/06

Know Your Stuff: Marble-top curio needs care of a conservator

Cabinet probably was made in the 1820s

By CONNIE SUE DAVENPORT
For Williamson A.M.

Dear Connie,

This curio cabinet has been in my family four generations. It belonged to my great-grandmother's parents; she was born in 1895.

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The curio is 16x16x41 inches tall. It has a marble top and gilt paint on the wood, which features a different scene on each side. We have been told the panels were done in a Vernis Martin style. We have found other cabinets similar to this one, but none this size, and with this much gilt, finished on all four sides.

The photo of the gentleman is my great-great-grandfather, Edward Keeling, whom I believe was the original owner.

I would love to know more about it, and also how to care for it, as some of the painted scenes are starting to crackle.



enlarge

Even with cracks and chipping in the paint, which indicate shrinkage in the wood and natural aging, this curio is worth between \$4,500 and \$5,800. (SUBMITTED PHOTOS)



— **Holly Pike, Franklin**

Dear Holly,

Your curio cabinet, also known as a vitrine, quickened my pulse a bit; what a great piece!

Like you, I often see reproduction French curio cabinets in antique shops, but the hand painting and marble top on your family piece is exceptional. Vernis Martin, of the Martin Brothers, perfected a special varnishing technique in the 1730s; this may have been used on your vitrine, but at a later date. I believe yours dates to circa 1820.

The lovely cracks indicate shrinkage in the wood, and this natural aging has caused the

chipping in the paint. Unfortunately, the dry air found in modern homes is often detrimental to such pieces. So you should place it in the shower with you twice a week. Just kidding! Discuss the care of this fine piece with a conservator. As you interview candidates, ask where they were trained, what their plan of action is and can their work be undone in the future, as better techniques are developed. Love and protect this beauty, as it is currently worth between \$4,500 and \$5,800!

While waiting for my next appointment in Franklin this week, I visited the Harpeth Antique Mall at Alexander Plaza on Murfreesboro Road. I had a nice visit with the owner, Carl Zehner. Unlike many malls where the owner is an absent business owner, Carl is usually present to assist customers and to encourage his very fine dealers. He said his customers' desires are quite diverse. Musical instruments, working or not, are always good sellers, and American pottery made by Roseville, Hull and Rookwood are still hot! Mr. Zehner said that kitchen gadgets and cameras are regular sellers as well. He maintains a wants list to connect his customers with dealers. I also learned that vintage and antique cups and saucers are being purchased for children to take to tea parties! That's good news, because sales on these pieces have been quite flat.

Throughout the mall, dealers have on display antique Fenton glass, majolica, European porcelains, American china and vintage collectibles like hammered aluminum and exquisite snow globes. I especially liked the booths filled with obvious reproductions; this helps buyers learn the difference between new and old pieces. By handling the repos, you will feel and see the difference between the two. Don't miss the right rear corner of the store, where there is a selection of reproduction jadite, Aunt Jemima items, crocks, Fiesta ware, rolling pins and lots of decorative iron pieces.



Edward Keeling is likely the original owner of Holly Pike's curio cabinet.

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Contact Connie Sue Davenport with any questions about your antiques and collectibles, and we'll discuss them here. Send to conniesue@conniesueinc.com or by mail in care of Williamson A.M.

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