Beware 'New' Antiques, Cautions Orleanian

By LYNN WOGAN

Unique Customs Expert Eyes Widening Sphere

Beware of bargains when you buy antiques — they're practically non-existent, says Charles J. Colomes Jr., and he has reason to know.

In his 23 years as antique examiner for U.S. Customs in New Orleans, Colomes has used everything from the frugality of the English to the analysis of upholstery dye to recognize attempts at passing fakes through customs.

Colomes noted a famous English authority who said more "antiques" are shipped to America in one year than could have been made in the whole of the 18th century. He said in determining a fake, a customs examiner may notice a fresh saw mark, wear marks pressed on bottoms of glass articles by the use of emery paper, a made-up pieces like a "Queen Anne Sideboard" that never existed in that period, or dumbwaiters made into coffee tables.

From 1940 to 1963, when he was appointed assistant customs appraiser, Colomes was the only person in the entire South and Southwest authorized to pass on the authenticity of the valued furnishings.

And until last month New Orleans was the only port in the Gulf designated as a port of entry for the antiques.

COLOMÉS SAID a special do-it-yourself training program for other port examiners should go into effect during the next few months under Voelker's direction.

"But antique evaluation is not something you acquire overnight or out of books. It takes analyzing article after article, and it will probably be some time before we have skilled examiners in all the ports of entry in the Gulf.

"Of course," Colomes said, "a lot of it doesn't really require the experience of an expert."

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"That was no problem — it was simply a case where an English dealer wasn't aware of the pre-Civil War History of his character.

"But on the other hand, Colomes said, "it's the fake made of old materials, constructed in the pre-1830 manner, and correct in style and material usage that really challenges the knowledge and skill of an expert."

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YOU COULD BUY yourself an air-conditioned automobile and have plenty left over for what this piece is worth, says CHARLES J. COLOMÉS JR., U.S. assistant customs appraiser, as he examines an antique walnut settle. The settle dates back to 1695 or 1700 and is a traditional piece from the William and Mary to Queen Anne period. 

Colomes cautioned antique enthusiasts to deal with reliable sellers and get some substantial guarantee for their purchases.

"Faking of antiques is a very lucrative business," he said. "There's a lot of incentive because the prices people are willing to pay for what they think are antiques permits tremendous profits."

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COLOMÉS EXPLAINED why Congress chose 1830 as a dividing line, even though popular opinion recognizes any article over 100 years old as an antique.

"Before 1830 most of the furniture was handmade," he said, "but with the advent of the Industrial Revolution in Europe it became more and more difficult to distinguish the authentic from the fake."

He recalled one of the most outstanding shipments to come through the New Orleans port as two pieces of silver by Paul de LaMarre, a renowned English silversmith.

"Together they were valued at $18,000 when we received them in 1956, but they are probably worth double today. Silver is one of the areas of greatest mark-up."

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