



Designer and antiques dealer Cliff Fong approaches the décor of his own Los Angeles apartment with a true collector's sensibility, filling it with iconic twentieth-century pieces, including a rare Bruno Mathsson chaise covered in sheepskin.

cursory glance, a knockoff Barcelona chair may look very similar, but if you examine it, you'll see the way that it's actually screwed together. It's not one solid piece. The frame is lighter because it's hollow or it's chrome-plated, and the underlying straps might be vinyl or secondary leather."

The goal when buying secondhand is to get well acquainted with the piece—inspect it, learn its details, how its designer intended it to be made, and handle it, see it, and touch it for yourself. "Generally, once you become a collector, your eye becomes sensitized," says Wright. "There is a visual difference between the vintage pieces and the contemporary pieces, even if they've stayed in continuous production. There's just a different sense. There's kind of a brand-new garishness about a lot of the reissue pieces. If you like things with a patina, you're drawn to the vintage world." What he means is that the estate-sanctioned modern manufactured design by some iconic designer might use a different kind of wood than the designer originally intended, and even if every ingredient is the same, the final piece has a showroom newness that you might not care for. And when you're buying vintage, you're buying something used, thus sometimes a decades-old piece is actually cheaper than its modern sibling, in addition to possessing that patina of wear that collectors value.

These days we hear words like *handcraft* and *artisanal* a great deal, but these labels aren't always indicative of quality—and these are concerns specific to our time that don't necessarily relate to midcentury furniture. "The distinction that something is machine-made versus handmade is not always a direct parallel to quality," says Wright. Much of the iconic midcentury design we still covet was developed precisely to be manufactured on a mass scale, and that manufacture in no way diminishes their quality—mass-produced is not, in short, always a bad thing. "Herman Miller makes very high-quality furniture, and they did at the time, so the consistency of their manufacturing process and their quality control is quite good," says Wright. "Many of the better pieces of the fifties were made at manufacturers that had a lot of integrity—Knoll, Herman Miller, Dunmore furniture have incredible quality. There's great handmade furniture. There's also some really crappy handmade furniture. Just because somebody made it doesn't necessarily mean that it's a high-quality item."

Sterling examples of important design such as those in which Wright



If you're a novice collector, or simply buying what you love, it can be hard to say whether something is truly original, or know if the design will be worth more when you're ready to part with it. So be it. Gilbert says if it's money you're after, you're better off playing the stock market: "I never recommend someone collect something that they don't appreciate aesthetically and they don't want to live with in their home." It's wiser to buy what you love—if it ends up having monetary value, so much the better.

Of course, when collecting antiques, you're dealing with goods that may have wear and tear that predates life in your home. That doesn't necessarily negatively impact their value. "Condition is more complicated to evaluate," says Gilbert. "An appropriate indication of age and use on the piece of furniture adds to its quality. It's a delicate balance, where you never want the structure or stability of the chair or sofa to have been compromised, but you want to see that it's been used and loved. Sometimes wood looks more beautiful when the oil from someone's hands has smoothed it and mellowed the patina over time." So there's no reason to keep your collection packed away. Use it, live with it, admire it, love it—this may well enhance its value in the end.

Gilbert considers design to be a great field for auction novices, as buying at auction can be on par with buying retail, in terms of price and ease. "People are already spending a fair amount of money on their furnishings," she says. "Just putting a little bit of extra thought into where it comes from, who designed it, why it's special, or why this material is beautiful can be done without that much more work."

While buying at auction might seem vastly different from shopping at a store, in the end, it's not all that dissimilar. You needn't be armed with any specific knowledge, but approach it with common sense. "Don't be afraid to ask to flip an item over and look at a label," Gilbert says. "There's typically a signature, a manufacturing label on older pieces. You can learn a lot about construction by flipping over a new piece."

These questions and details are salient whenever you're considering bringing something into your home. While it's fun to watch people hit the jackpot on *Antiques Roadshow*, the truth is, Grandma's sugar bowl means something to you because it's connected to a fond memory—there is a difference between something that has monetary value and something that is valuable to you.