

Close to home

"Due to the rarity of Cape country furniture, every original piece is an investment," says dealer Hannes Zaaiman. He shares expert tips for budding collectors of Cape antiques

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“Recently a friend mentioned a rare 1600s Tulbach bench that I had in my shop some 30 years ago, but I was hard-pressed to remember it,” says dealer Hannes Zaaiman, owner of Cape and Country Antiques, who specialises in 18th- to early 20th-century Cape antiques. “What I do remember and what really excites me are the small things that could so easily have been lost, which I’ve been fortunate to rescue.”

This includes gems of ordinary living, like the protea wood *botterbak* (butter bowl) he found being used as a ducks’ water bowl, or the laundry iron, made by Cape coppersmith Joseph Lawton, which turned up in a coffin in the loft of an old Franschhoek cottage.

Hannes has also discovered what he calls ‘wild’ pieces. He explains: “After 1945 people became more prosperous,

they wanted new things and began to throw their ‘old stuff’ out, giving dressers, cupboards and chairs to their employees who carted the lot off to the townships. What in fact saved most of this furniture from the ruin of being left outside in all weathers and general neglect was the fact that it was usually given a coat of green enamel paint.”

It’s this talent for recognising hidden treasures, together with his vast knowledge of our heritage, which has allowed Hannes to build up a collection of fine Cape furniture and other smaller antiques, ranging from kitchenalia to picture frames made by prisoners of the Anglo Boer War. He houses them in a lovely stone building on the road to Stilbaai in the Western Cape; this shop is something of a secret amongst serious collectors who converge there from all over South Africa.

When Hannes talks about ‘Cape country furniture’, he refers to

furniture made in the country districts of Riversdale, Calitzdorp, Oudtshoorn and others, as opposed to pieces made in Cape Town. Many competent carpenters worked in the country, but he adds that “good pieces are becoming more and more difficult to obtain and prices are rising steadily”.

While a certain maker’s name can often increase the desirability and price of an antique, Hannes maintains that this isn’t necessarily the case with Cape country furniture. “Very few makers signed their pieces,” he says. “When the name of a maker is known, often by information handed down, other pieces of furniture, which show the same style or craftsmanship, can be attributed to the same maker.”

But, he believes that a clean-lined country piece with immaculate proportions, lovingly made by a talented unknown carpenter, is a gem to be treasured. ▷

MAIN PICTURE: An old scale with brass weights stands on top of this 18th-century cedarwood table with chamfered legs and a two-plank top. Beyond is a 19th-century *jonkmanskas* with decoration on the feet and closing strip that is typical of the style used in the Riversdale area. It was probably used for storing china and, because of its fine proportions, would have been displayed in a prominent part of the home. From a private collection.

ABOVE FROM LEFT TO RIGHT: ● A stinkwood and yellowwood cupboard with inlay decoration on the feet and closing strip that is typical of the style used in the Riversdale area. It was probably used for storing china and, because of its fine proportions, would have been displayed in a prominent part of the home. From a private collection. ● A pretty peg-top 18th-century yellowwood table with tapered legs and a single drawer complete with its original brass handles. From a private collection.

● A waboom and yellowwood *potterak* with Cape copper drinking mugs.

CHANGING TIMES, CHANGING STYLES

Knowing how the style of Cape furniture evolved over time can help you to identify and date various pieces. Hannes gives a brief history:

- From the time of Jan van Riebeeck, 1652 until the end of the 17th century, furniture was made in Cape Town workshops using woods imported from the East. This furniture was influenced by the styles in Holland, hence the term 'Cape Dutch'.
- As the country districts flourished, notably Stellenbosch and Paarl, farmers built impressive Cape Dutch-style homes which they furnished with pieces made in farm workshops from indigenous woods. Once again furniture designs were influenced by Dutch styles; such pieces are termed 'town furniture' because of their elegance and the lifestyle of their owners.
- Furniture styles changed dramatically after the first British occupation of the Cape in 1795. For example, gate legs on tables and chairs were replaced by tapered legs, and depending on the affluence of the person commissioning the furniture, inlays may have been added. Some of the most elegant pieces of Cape furniture were produced in this Neo-Classical style. Although such furniture was initially imported, competent craftsmen in the remote districts of Riversdale, Calitzdorp and Oudtshoorn also produced pieces in this style; these qualify to be named Cape country furniture.
- From 1820 onwards, the arrival of the British settlers and the so-called Regency Style influenced the look of Cape furniture. Turned legs on chairs and tables were evident.



Sometimes replacements and repairs are necessary to save a collector's item from further decay, but this must be done sympathetically and the dealer should always point this restoration out to the buyer. "I don't mind general neglect, but an unsympathetic repair, where for instance a yellowwood piece has had oak added, is always upsetting to find," says Hannes.

If you're a budding collector of Cape furniture, he recommends buying a wakis chest with original forged hinges and

handles; it could be used for storage, as a coffee table or even as an extra seat. Alternatively, he suggests smaller items that make interesting conversation pieces, like wooden *voetstofties* (foot warmers) and *skepelmate* (grain measures).

But, Hannes's golden rule is to buy what appeals to you, and although price could be a factor because of budget restraint, he cautions, "The bitterness of poor quality will remain long after the joy of a low price". **GMH**

CLOCKWISE FROM TOP: ● Hannes in his Klipfontein studio workshop with a fine collection of tables waiting for the next owner to love and cherish them. ● Detail of the star inlay on the kist. ● A transitional-style cedarwood kist, circa 1850, with original feet and a star inlay on the lid. This piece has a documented provenance and originates from the Nieuwoudtville area.

SOURCE

Cape and Country Antiques 028 754 2715, 082 372 6708 or www.capecountry.co.za