



5 Tried-and-True Tips for Sourcing Authentic Vintage Pieces

Here are the fundamentals of scoring one-of-a-kind design pieces

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A variety of sought-after items—including sculptures by artist Yongjin Han— on display at Maison Gerard, a respected New York gallery that has been in business since the 1970s. Photo: courtesy Maison Gerard

When looking to enhance an interior design project with a bit of *je ne sais quoi*, consider introducing some vintage items into the space. “It adds a level of depth to a project that is hard to duplicate,” explains [Sag Harbor](#), New York–based designer [Glenn Ban](#), who has been incorporating carefully sourced finds into his design projects for 15 years: “There is something about the patina of furniture, the weight of an object, that just makes sense.”

Similarly, New York–based [Charlie Ferrer](#), says, “Vintage warms up and elevates interiors—like art, it is an excellent medium for humanizing a home and for layering in a personal perspective and a point of view on the greater history of design.”

But what are the top considerations when electing to include vintage items in a design project? We consulted four experts on their sourcing strategies.

Research and Invest in Rare Pieces

Be sure to do research and know what you’re buying. Select unique pieces that will truly amplify the design decor and either complement or juxtapose specific design elements of the project. If clients are biased against older things, Ban suggests sourcing lighting or decorative items such as art or pottery. Likewise, Ferrer feels that “vintage lighting injects character and uniqueness to projects in a functional way.”

New York–based designer Sasha Bikoff—who sources Art Deco, [midcentury-modern](#), and [Memphis](#) pieces to “bring a sense of history and worldliness, a certain intellect” to her projects—advises strategically allocating funds for rare antique items. “Invest in pieces that are no longer manufactured,” she offers, cautioning, “A lot of designer pieces are replicated or are licensed through other companies.”

Auction results are so accessible, it’s not difficult to conduct a proper analysis before making a purchase. “Philips, Wright, Christie’s, and Rago have strong decorative arts programs and historical sales data is accessible online,” Ferrer points out.

Experts suggest perusing online marketplaces, too. “With sites like [Chairish](#) and [1stdibs](#), people are comparison shopping and researching before they buy. Be aware of market pricing and realistic about too-good-to-be-true deals. And as a seller, you need to know what other people are charging when you set your price,” offers Keith Pollock, AD’s executive digital editor, who has a shop on [Chairish](#) and experience selling directly to dealers and galleries.

Beware of Knockoffs

Pollock also cautions to take care to avoid knockoffs. “You need to be aware of what is original, and what is ‘in the style of’ or ‘attributed to,’ or simply a reproduction,” he says. “The price difference between original and reproduction is quite different, so you need to be aware.”

Adept at buying [antiques](#) since high school, Pollock adds another valuable tip to ensure the authenticity of your purchases: Go to the source. “When looking for French pieces, it’s best to look at dealers in France. When looking for great Italian lighting, look in Italy,” he advises. “Search in the country of origin—better prices and authenticity.”

Ban acknowledges, “There are fewer and fewer vintage stores, so finding those trusted sources is harder.” However, there are a host of online sources available. Ban names online retailers [1stdibs](#) and [Decaso](#) as his go-to reputable sources, in addition to [Chairish](#), [One Kings Lane](#), and [Jayson Home](#). Even [Etsy](#) sells coveted original pieces.

But regardless of where you are shopping, the onus is still on you to be informed. A few tips on spotting fraudulent furniture: Check the dovetailing and joinery; older pieces will be irregular, while newer machine-made pieces will be symmetrical. Be wary of furniture that's made to look old; seek out realistic signs of wear-and-tear. And look inside drawers and on the backs and bottom of pieces for manufacturers' stamps, tags detailing where the piece was made, or even spots where labels were removed.

In order to source authentic pieces, Pollock urges: "Understand where makers marks, tags, labels, or signatures would exist. Ask dealers about where the pieces originated from. I always try and gather as much information about the origin of the piece I am looking to buy."

Examine the Condition

Ideally, you want to purchase preowned items in original or like-new condition. Ferrer, who recently [collaborated](#) with CB2 on a special collection of midcentury items, recommends: "Take time to examine the condition of the piece in a systematic way. Foremost, check for structural integrity. Then look for areas of loss or meaningful damage. If it is a piece of seating, sit-test it for comfort; examine the guts of the upholstery." In tables or chests of drawers, check the legs and feet for damage or replacement.

And while purchasing vintage can be an emotional, have-to-have-it experience, it's crucial to be practical. "It can be a great designer piece," Pollock says, "but if it has an irreparable crack or a chip, or you need to start altering it in a significant way, it won't have the same value."

Evaluate the Cost of Refurbishing

It's natural for gently used items to show some wear and surface scratches and minor flaws can be fixed. But consider the expense of a complete restoration in terms of dollar amount and integrity of the piece. "Before committing to a piece that needs a lot of refurbishing, realize the costs that are involved," Bikoff notes. "Offset that with the price of the item to see if it's worth the investment before taking the plunge."

Pollock admits, "I have made the mistake many times—buying antiques that required a lot of restoration work. In the end, you can tell the difference, and it is not nearly worth the amount you put into it."

Trust Your Gut

In every sense, trust your gut when dealing with older treasures. "Let your heart guide you in the process," Ferrer stresses. "When a piece speaks to you, you'll feel it."

Similarly, Ban offers, "Buy what you love. Trends come and go, and because of social media we can get overwhelmed with fads. I buy what speaks to me—sometimes that is a \$5 piece of pottery, or it can be a painting at auction. Often for me, the provenance of an object isn't always as important as whether it has a soul."

Bikoff advises, "When you spot a vintage or antique piece you love, act fast and on instinct, because most likely it will be hard to find ever again if you pass up."