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Tips on Caring for Antique Bookcases by Christian Davies

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Antique bookcases have a timeless appeal that is both functional and attractive. A library staple for centuries, today they are used to display everything from DVD collections to figurines â€“ not forgetting their usefulness for books collections, of course.

Like all fine furniture, antique bookcases need to be treated with care to keep them looking their best, and with todayâ€™s centrally heated homes this can be difficult. Not only is the wood liable to dry out and crack, but the dry air makes it easier for dust to settle. This is not in itself a problem â€“ people have been dusting their shelves for years â€“ the trouble is, modern cleaning methods often do more harm than good. An antistatic polish may be a convenient way to stop dust settling, but if the chemicals werenâ€™t around 200 years ago, thereâ€™s no place for them on a 200-year old bookcase or any other old furniture.

Tip one â€“ learn to love your patina

Antique bookcases have a deep, rich patina that even â€œdistressedâ€• reproductions donâ€™t have. Pa refers to the mellow sheen that develops through years of polishing, use and exposure. Like any piece of furniture that is used as well as admired, there will be changes in surface colour and texture; little marks will appear and the shelves may even bow slightly through the weight of many books. This is all part of the charm and value of the piece, and is best left alone unless there has been heavy damage, in which case you will need a specialist restorer.

One thing you must never do with your bookcase is attempt to â€œclean it upâ€• by removing the patina. This will strip your furniture of both its value and its protective coating.

Tip 2 â€“ Apply some elbow grease

It is possible to fill a modern home with antique furniture and still keep warm in the evenings, so long as you turn your back on synthetic chemicals which were, after all, designed for synthetic furniture. Instead, buy a good quality beeswax polish â€“ or its vegan equivalent â€“ and apply a small amount with a soft, lint-free cloth. You can do this at night to allow the wax to â€œfeedâ€• the wood and then polish the following day. Keep burnishing until the wax on the cloth goes shiny, showing the solvent has evaporated. Finish with a polish using a soft clean duster.

This method brings out the grain and colour of the wood while protecting the patina, and only needs to be done every few months. More than this can cause antique bookcases to become dull and absorb more dust. However, if the wood has become very dry or lost its patina, regular waxing will be needed to bring it back to full glory.

Tip 3 â€“ Keep up the good work

It isnâ€™t just beeswax which keeps antique bookcases looking beautiful, but all the dusting in between. Forget antistatic cloths and use a soft, dry duster on a regular basis. This will enhance the patina by forming a hard protective skin on the surface.

Tip four could be to fill the shelves with a selection of beautiful leather-bound tomes which is, after all, what antique bookcases were designed for.

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