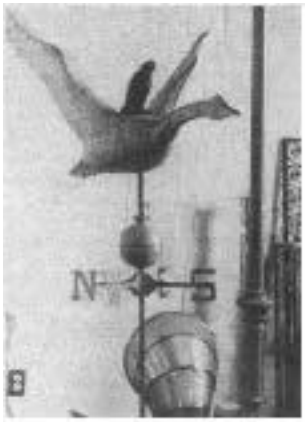
Traditional Looks for Sale

Artisans, salvage yards, and entrepreneur are meeting the demand for classic styles

by Steve Carlson



An antique weather vane may not be returned to its original use, but whether it is or not, it is now appreciated as a work of art.

Old and new items are often combined. This bathtub, for example, is an antique, but the shower ring is a reproduction.

Victorian gingerbread, colonial door hinges, and Georgian columns are returning to the mainstream of American residential construction.

Renovation is a large part of the market, but items with a traditional look are also finding their way into new houses throughout the country.

"Traditional" is a broad term, covering everything from Moorish balustrades to art deco ceilings. If it's old-fashioned and interesting, it's likely to find its way to the materials list for a new house or remodeling project.

While many of these items aren't yet available at the average building supply store, it's possible today to obtain almost any traditional architectural piece you or your customer may desire.

The salvage industry (see "Salvaging Our Architectural Heritage", next page) is booming. Restoration specialists are kept busy repairing and polishing artifacts that have been corroded and damaged by time. Old established businesses are expanding to meet an escalating demand for their traditional product lines. Individual craftspersons are relearning old crafts. Many new businesses have sprung up in recent years to reproduce traditional items.

Antiques and Reproductions

The distinction between architectural antiques and reproductions is often blurred. Quality and workmanship, rather than age, are the criteria for the present wave of consumer demand.

At Conant Custom Brass in Burlington, Vt., the main line of business is restoration of old hardware, lighting fixtures, and other items made partially or wholly from brass. Customers bring in family heirlooms for restoration, and "pickers" are paid to find old items that can be renewed for resale.

But the company also carries a full line of reproduction hardware and other brass components. "If you need a particular item for a particular project, the chances of finding a genuine antique can be pretty slim," owner Steve Conant explains. An antique claw-foot bathtub in his showroom sports a newly crafted shower ring. Reproduction door hardware is popular, he says, because it's almost impossible to find enough similar antique pieces for an entire house.

Conant and his five employees also market their own reproductions of one particularly hard-to-find item: dust corners. Dust corners are little brass triangles affixed to the corners of stairs, developed in the 1890s to make sweeping easier. Conant says he's sold over 30,000 dust corners so far, and orders continue to come in at a steady pace.

Many restored items, Conant says, are put to uses "other than what was originally intended." His plant is a virtual museum that includes weather vanes that may end up in living rooms, and old musical instruments converted into light fixtures.

Ancient Art Forms Still in Vogue

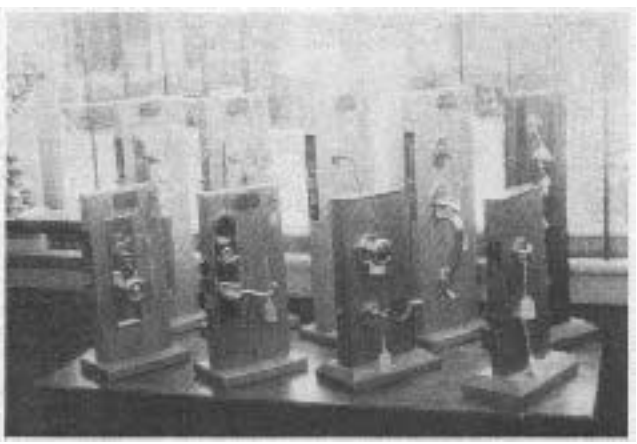
Ancient methods are still used to craft many of today's reproductions.

The waves and bumps characteristic of old mouth-blown glass, for example, cannot be replicated in modern plate glass. In Europe, fifth-and-sixth generation artisans still blow long glass cylinders. The cylinders are then slit, laid on a flat surface, and reheated to flatten from their own weight.

The S.A. Bendheim Co. in New York City imports mouth-blown glass and markets it under the trade name "Restoration Glass."

According to Bendheim Vice President Donald Jayson, two levels of distortion are available, to represent different historical periods. The "full" version is thicker and more distorted, similar to glass produced in the 1600s and 1700s. The "light" version, thinner and less distorted, is characteristic of the two succeeding centuries.

Surrounded by other artifacts, Steve Conant replaces the bars on an antique bank-teller's window he is restoring.



Reproduction door hardware has gained popularity because it is often difficult to find enough matching salvaged pieces to finish an entire house.

Light fixtures, and other artifacts that can be converted to light fixtures, are popular restoration items. This is a small part of the collection that adorns the ceiling at Conant Custom Brass.

Older technology doesn't have to be inefficient: This pull-chain commode uses only 2½ gallons per flush.

Jayson says the product is in demand because the only competition is salvaged glass, which is not always available in the sizes and quantities needed.

Not surprisingly, Bendheim's product has been used in an impressive list of historic renovation projects. But according to Jayson, "a lot of it is used in new construction as well."

And despite its commitment to tradition, Bendheim has made at least one concession to modern needs and expectations: It offers mouth-blown glass in insulated units.

Sticking With Tradition

There are a few long-established companies whose products have returned to fashion after years of declining sales.

W.F. Norman Corp. of Nevada, Mo., opened for business in 1892, producing metal ceilings and sheet-metal architectural ornaments. Other products added over the years include metal store fronts, metal roofs, and metal siding.

According to Mark Quitno, vice president of the company, the product line and manufacturing techniques have remained constant throughout Norman's history. "Many of our stamping dies are over 80 years old," he says. But occasionally, he acknowledges, the stamping takes its toll and a die breaks. "When that happens we just make a new one."

The catalog for Norman's "Hi-Art" ceiling line is a reproduction of a catalog first printed in 1909. A few items are now stamped "not available." Price changes haven't affected the usefulness of the catalog: Prices weren't published in 1909 because of the wild fluctuation in metal costs at the time.

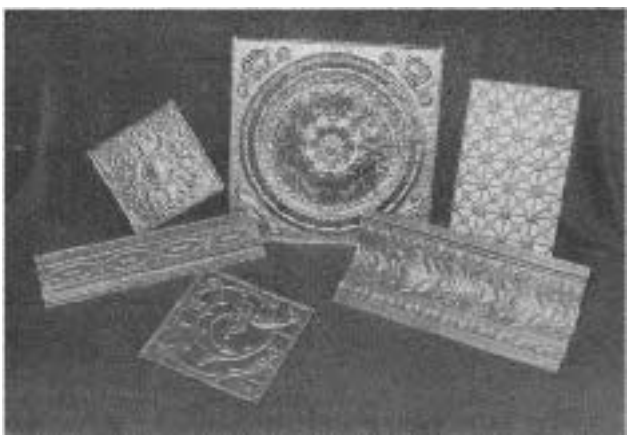
A newer flyer says that "while the demand for Norman products is fueled by the nostalgia craze, today's architects and homeowners appreciate these stamped metal ceilings and walls for their own sake." According to Quitno, the company's volume "has grown steadily during the last eight or nine years. "

A younger, but still venerable competitor of Norman, is A.A. Abbingdon Affiliates in Brooklyn, N.Y. Abbingdon has been making metal ceilings and cornices for just over 60 years, and still uses many of its original dies.

Newer Companies Catch the Wave

A more recent, and meteoric success story is that of Renovator's Supply. In 1978, Claude and Donna Jeanloz were renovating their farmhouse in Millers Falls, Mass., and had a hard time finding authentic replacement fixtures. Recognizing that others may have similar needs, they accumulated fixtures in their home and offered them for sale through a typewritten mail-order catalog.

The rest is history. In its tenth year, Renovator's Supply is a model success story for aspiring entrepreneurs everywhere. The mail-order division receives orders from 750,000 customers per year. The company also has 16 retail outlets, and manufactures most of its own products in factories in Asia and the U.S.



The ceiling tiles, plates, fillers, and borders produced by W.F. Norman Co. are identical to those made at the turn of the century. The reason: The company uses the same machines and most of the same dies.

Salvaging Our Architectural Heritage

By Daniel A. Kasle

The growing interest in architectural artifacts has bred a new generation of antique dealers.

Like other antique dealers, they examine the quality of materials, originality of design, and examples of fine workmanship. But instead of delicate china figures and other collectibles, their target is virtually any item from an older structure that is not furniture, whether decorative or integral to the building. Their inventories will include items ranging from carved newel posts and claw-foot tubs to stone gargoyles.

The architectural antique dealer depends on the community for material, with wreckers, builders, developers, architects, and homeowners serving as his supply lines.

At Great American Salvage Company, our inventory includes over 100 categories of items, including mantels, doorknobs, porch posts, windows, entryways, light fixtures, garden fountains, stained glass, wainscoting, bars, balustrades, and pedestal sinks. While the array of materials seems large, many are hard to come by. Often, the wrecking ball and bulldozer are too swift, and magnificent pieces are destroyed. Salvaging takes time, and can conflict with the deadlines of demolition contractors and construction managers.

Specialized Techniques

Removing architectural elements requires skill as well as patience. The methods of the last century's artisans and builders were not cut and dried; it is not always obvious how a massive carved marble mantel was crafted and installed. In this industry, the stories about "the one that got away" refer to broken treasures rather than broken fish lines.

Our firm's crews have developed many of their own tools to remove pieces without damaging materials or injuring themselves. Examples include a pry bar with a slightly smaller angle, and a special tool to remove stubborn hinge pins. Specialized tools and techniques can make the difference between a valuable artifact and a "neat piece of junk. "

What They're Used For

It's generally easy to identify what a particular item was once used for. The larger challenge is to decide what can be done with the item now. Is it for decoration only, standing alone on its own merit as a work of art? Should it be used once again as a functioning, structural element?

It's always a pleasure to return an architectural masterpiece to its original purpose. Recently, a couple in Westchester County, N.Y., hired one of our professional clients to design and build a house with the look, style, and charm of an older, classic residence. At the time, our firm was in the process of rescuing the elements of a Connecticut mansion designed by Stanford White.

We were able to salvage large parts of the mansion, including porches, columns, windows, and a spectacular sweeping staircase. These were transported directly to the new house site. The staircase, which covers an area 16x16 feet, was moved in three sections and now dominates the front hall of the new house.

Many smaller artifacts, however, are used as objects of art, or assigned to what we call "adaptive re-use."

A resident stone gargoyle might guard the fireplace. A graceful turn-of-the-century wrought-iron elevator door may be abloom with roses on the garden wall. A keystone face, carved balustrade, column capital, or stained-glass transom may be displayed in a context that is artistic rather than pragmatic.

And why not? Does anyone doubt the artistry of a wood carver who put his skill and interpretation into the scale, detail, and finishing of each molding of a magnificent paneled room? Or of the mason who designed, colored, and installed glazed terra-cotta tiles in the Art Deco theaters and office buildings of the 1920s?

Adaptive re-use is limited only by the owner's imagination. Our company recently turned a carved newel post into a floor lamp by adding a harp and socket. We've used Victorian roof-support brackets as the base for a wall-mounted glass table, and crafted an art deco dining table from an aluminum heating grate. Last year, a home designer in Washington, D.C. created a practical and stunning room divider with architectural columns and a clear half-round window.

The possibilities are endless. Period wooden fan lights from a barn can become a wall hanging. Matching columns can become bedposts. Carved keystones can support an end table.

Limited Supplies

The popularity of architectural artifacts has created two major challenges for dealers. First, to meet demand we must move quickly and aggressively to beat the competition: demolition crews, would-be collectors, and vandals.

Second, a wide range of materials is needed. Many clients are looking for items to complement a specific style or to make a specific statement. The most sought-after items include period doors, entryways, mantels, stained and beveled glass, bathroom fixtures, and lighting fixtures. Supplies are limited.

Most of the materials we salvage were produced in the late 18th and 19th centuries. They are remnants of an era when artisans were part of a design process, and a lavish, imaginative architectural heritage was developed.

Fortunately, that heritage is now appreciated, and to the extent possible, its artifacts are being rescued. That's important, because Grandpa was right: They aren't making them like they used to. ■

Daniel A. Kasle is chief operating and financial officer for Great American Salvage Company.

The success in marketing renovation materials has allowed the company to branch out into other fields, including publishing, computer services, and production of items for left-handed people. By 1986, Renovator's Supply was number 36 on Inc. Magazine's list of the nation's 500 fastest growing private companies.

Willa Shaw, a spokesperson for Renovator's Supply, says the biggest demand is for "hard-to-find items like brass railings, pediments, ceiling rosettes, pedestal sinks, and classic hardware." The consistent best-sellers, she says, are "the things that endure-real renovation items rather than novelty items."

Meanwhile, in Dallas, Texas, Classic Architectural Specialties (CAS) bills itself as "the one source for uncommon architectural features." Owner Tom McDowell says the firm has enjoyed great success by offering a huge variety of reproductions representing almost every architectural period. "People don't have to shop around for the items they want. If it's not in the lumber yard, we have it," he says.

CAS has been in business for nine years, and in the last three years, volume has increased by an average of 38 percent per year, McDowell says. As a result, he is planning to double the size of his showroom, and expand to additional locations.

Georgian and colonial items—including columns, entry and door systems, and pilasters—are going through a wave of popularity now, he says, while in past years, Victorian gingerbread items were the biggest sellers.

The Competition: Developers' Budgets

Like others in the business, McDowell takes pride when his products are used in the renovation of historic buildings, but acknowledges that "85 percent of our products go into new construction."

McDowell says he and other suppliers of reproductions are not in direct competition with salvage companies. "With salvage, you're limited to what's available in any given size," he says. "A 7'3" column can only fit into a 7'3" opening. If you have a different size opening, you have to buy a column from us."

The only real competition, he says, "is the developers' pocketbooks. Period architecture adds something to the cost, so we're in constant competition with the budgets, and perceived budgets, of the people who build houses."

"People working on buildings that are a century old tend to take a longer view. If we're going to do all that work, we want materials that are as good as or better than the originals..."

A Return to Quality

At a time of spiraling real estate and construction costs, budgets are a formidable adversary. Affordability is a key consideration for most home buyers. But CAS and other suppliers of traditional architectural features are clearly gaining ground.

Probably the best measure of the growth of this loosely knit industry is the growth of the *Old House Journal Catalog*. The catalog is the best-known source book of information about products and services related to period architecture. The first edition of the catalog, published in 1976, was 32 pages thick and listed 205 restoration-related companies.

By comparison, the 1988 edition is 250 pages and describes 1,533 companies.

Patricia Poore, editor of the *OHJ Catalog*, says the renewed interest in older designs, materials, and techniques is more than just a fad. In introducing the 1988 catalog, she writes:

"People working on buildings that are a century old . . . tend to take a longer view. If we're going to do all that work, we want materials that are as good as or better than the originals: things that look right in a solid old place. It is this concern for quality and durability that has carried over into new construction. Undeniably, a feeling has come back that we should build it with pride and build it to last."■

Steve Carlson is an associate editor of The Journal of Light Construction.

Artifact and Reproduction Sources

If you're in the market for salvaged artifacts, here are a few sources:

Architectural Antiques Exchange
709-15 N. 2nd St.
Philadelphia, PA 19123
215/922-3669

Governor's Antiques Ltd.
6240 Meadowbridge Road
Mechanicsville, VA 23111
804/746-1030

Great American Salvage Co.
34 Cooper Square
New York, NY 10003
212/505-0070

Olde Bostonian
135 Buttonwood Street
Dorchester, MA 02125
617/282-9300

United House Wrecking
535 Hope Street
Stamford, CT 06906
203/348-5371

U.S. Dismantlement Corp.
3801 N. Milwaukee Ave.
Chicago, IL 60641
312/685-4000

Vintage Building Materials
1124 DeKalb Ave., N.E.
Atlanta, GA 30307
404/658-9690

Other firms mentioned in the article:

Conant Custom Brass
P.O. Box 1523
Burlington, VT 05402
802/658-4482

S.A. Bendheim Co., Inc.
122 Hudson Street
New York, NY 10013
800/221-7379
(From New York, 212/226-6370)

W.F. Norman Corp.
P.O. Box 323
Nevada, MO 64772
800/641-4038
($3 charge for catalog)

A.A. Abbingdon Affiliates, Inc.
2149 Utica Ave.
Brooklyn, NY 11234
718/258-8333
($1 charge for catalog)

The Renovator's Supply, Inc.
Millers Falls, MA 01349
413/659-2211

Classic Architectural Specialties
5302 Junius
Dallas, TX 75214
214/827-5111

For more listings:

Old House Journal Catalog
69A Seventh Avenue
Brooklyn, NY 11217
718/636-4514
(Catalog price: $15.95)