

The Invisible Artist

A Charleston conservator quietly cares for European treasures

BY ROBIN HOWARD | PHOTOGRAPHY BY HOLGER OBENAU

“Everything here is part of a love story,” Candice Murphy says. We’re sitting in the front room of Jacques’ Antiques on King Street where, in true French form, gracious Jacques Lemoine himself has just poured us a glass of ice-cold Sancerre. “When Jacques goes shopping in France, he has to fall in love with something in order to buy it. When it arrives here, I have to fall in love with it, too, but for totally different reasons,” she says.

You could say that Candice has more of an arranged-marriage approach to the love of antiques, because she has a very unusual

relationship with them: She doesn’t choose them, yet she has to get to know them intimately; she has to spend days or weeks interacting with them, yet she never changes them or leaves her own mark. Candice is a conservator, one among a dwindling group of artisans skilled in preserving cultural artifacts.

A conservator’s job isn’t to restore antiques or artifacts; it is to stabilize them so

they don’t deteriorate further. Then, if possible, conservators may make small repairs using the same materials and employing the same tools and techniques as the original artist or craftsman. There aren’t many conservators in the United States, and, due to changing cultures and the nature of how conservator knowledge is passed down, their numbers are declining in Europe as well.

Candice’s mother was a Master Crystal





Engraver, so Candice was immersed in a world of beautiful artifacts at a young age. She learned her skills through apprenticeships and then spent a decade providing services to clients in Palm Beach and dealers on the legendary Antique Row in West Palm Beach, Florida.

Even though Candice is a world-class artisan, you'll never see her work. In fact, if she's doing her job well, you'll never know she was there at all. She is so committed to the art of invisibility that she doesn't even like to talk about herself, preferring instead to talk about the way an artist applied paint

or how a craftsman held his tools.

"Conservators have to study how the artist held a brush, how the original creator carved, how he moved his hands. The most important aspect is to respect the integrity of the maker and the piece," she says.

Candice works for several private clients,

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designers and several of the antique dealers in Charleston, but spends a part of each week working with Jacques. The charming Monsieur Lemoine has an edge when he travels to France several times a year to shop for pieces for his store: First, he's French, so he has access to a network of family and friends who let him know when an estate is for sale or when someone has a special piece that he or she wants to sell. Second, he's French, so he is skilled in the art of tasteful negotiation. It also doesn't hurt that he knows European history dating back to the Middle Ages like it all just happened yesterday.

"French antiques are unique in that each region has its own identity which is reflected in the local culture," Jacques says. "You have to have the education and experience to be able to identify where they were made and what period they're from."

When Jacques' treasures arrive by freighter in Charleston, he and Candice evaluate each of the pieces to ascertain its history and determine what conservation needs to be done. They study the materials, the markings and the style to pinpoint an object's origin, time period and style. All cultural artifacts tell a story, and Candice and Jacques listen with their eyes.

For example, Jacques recently brought home an exquisite gilded Louis XV mirror, a perfect example of the elegant, curvy rococo style. Next to it is a massive armoire from the same period, except it has much straighter lines. The style of this piece is known as "transitional," a simple word for a phenomenon that is as old as love itself. Louis XV's last mistress, Madame Pompidou, didn't like rococo style, so she had the royal designers change it up. She had to make her lover happy, though, so this armoire still has a hint of those vivacious rococo curves, but overall is much more linear. Where most people would just see an armoire, Candice and Jacques see a story.

Back at her shop, Candice spends time with each piece, imagining the maker and what his intent was. She studies how the artist carved and how he put on paint. "Every artist has a different way of doing things even if it's in a common style," she says.

She doesn't use any modern power tools.



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Instead, her workshop is filled with restoration tools called *reparure* and historically accurate materials Jacques brings back from France. She carefully cleans away anything that is not original to the piece, repairs gilt, polishes wood and rebacks canvas. When she's done, her work is nearly undetectable, and everything that she has done can easily be reversed if necessary. By way of explaining how it's possible to be an artist whose work is temporal and invisible, she points me to a quote from *Dorure a' Versailles*, a famous compendium of Versailles legendary gilt work written by Daniel Sievert and Laurent Hissier:

“The profession of gilder restorer develops one’s artistic sensibility. Even though there is no creation allowed, it turns out it is difficult to restore Acanthus Leaves or Volutes and remain devoid of an Aesthetic sense.”

“I couldn’t do what I do without her,” Jacques says. “She is both an artist and an artisan. She not only has the vision to preserve the integrity of a piece, she has the talent. She can see what the artist wanted to do. That takes skill *and* spirit.” Jacques says she has “the fingers” of an artist, which translates as “she has the dexterity to do incredibly detailed and fragile work, and that’s something you’re either born with or you’re not.”

Candice and Jacques see themselves as mere caretakers of the pieces they adopt and conserve. Of course, the final character in this love story is the person who falls in love with a piece and agrees to assume guardianship...in exchange for a lifetime of enjoyment. ♡

FOR MORE INFORMATION

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