

Bright Spot

19th century French chandeliers add an aura of grandeur and ornamentation to today's homes

By Donna Boyle Schwartz

What homeowner doesn't love to hear guests "ooh" and "aah" over their décor and furnishings? And there is no better way to elicit those enthusiastic exclamations than a magnificent, dramatic chandelier.

Opulence and French styling are virtually synonymous, so it is no surprise that today's homeowners are turning to antique 19th century chandeliers for their decorating needs. "French 19th century chandeliers are grander in scale than today's fixtures," explains Lewis Baer, managing principal of Newel, a large Manhattan antiques dealer for more than 70 years. "That makes them desirable for today's larger, mansion-style homes. A beautiful chandelier sets the tone for the entire home, and new homes really cry out for this kind of definition."

The styling that appeals today, however, is actually older. "The interesting thing about 19th century French chandeliers is that the best ones are copies of 18th century styles," explains Nancy Nesle, owner of renowned New York antiques house Nesle Inc., which last year relocated to its expansive warehouse in Long Island City. "The Louis XV, rococo designs were all the rage in 19th century France."

Xavier Jover, assistant vice president, 19th century furniture, decorative works of art and sculpture, for Sotheby's New York, points out, "Surviving 18th century chandeliers come up for sale rarely and the demand is so high that people are looking to 19th century productions to satisfy their demand. It is interesting to note that 19th century manufacturing often surpasses 18th century quality due to advances in technique and greater understanding of the combination of materials."

Baer points out that 19th century French chandeliers cover a wide range of styles, from faithful reproductions of rococo Louis XV and Louis XVI designs as well as curvilinear Art Nouveau and Belle Époque forms.

Constructions, too, vary greatly, including bronze, glass and wood pieces originally used with candles, oil and gas; towards the end of the century, some makers experimented with electric chandeliers. Today, most 19th century chandeliers have been retrofitted with electricity, although some original constructions are available. Many of the 19th century bronze chandeliers were gilded and often feature some sort of glass ornamentation, including crystals, hurricanes, globes and etched shades. Indeed, according to Baer, some etched globes and shades are worth as much as the actual fixtures because of their rarity.

Jason Preston, Christie's specialist head of sales for 19th century furniture, notes that finely-chased ormolu bronze chandeliers carry the highest value. "People who buy these

chandeliers are seeking something that is more ornate and beautiful.” A 14-light ormolu chandelier signed by François Linke recently sold at Christie’s London office for £42,000, or about U.S. \$84,000.

Chandeliers constructed by established 19th century furniture or cabinetry firms command the highest prices, particularly signed pieces. Jover cites a number of high-end lines, including Linke, Henry Dasson, Alfred-Emmanuel Beurdeley, Gagneau Frères, Délisle Frères and Theodore Millet; other names to look for include Meissen and Dresden, for porcelain chandeliers; Austrian glass; Murano glass; and Baccarat. Pierre-Philippe Thomire is another well-known maker, although many of his pieces are unsigned.

A basic chandelier in good condition can start as low at \$5,000; prices of \$30,000 to \$50,000 are not uncommon. Truly exceptional pieces command six figures at auctions: for example, Sotheby’s recently sold a pair of gilt bronze and Napoléonite marble chandeliers by Henry Dasson for \$168,000, and a pair of Louis XV gilt and patinated bronze chandeliers for \$144,000.

Nesle says shoppers can still find bargains. “You can find medium sized chandeliers for as little as \$1,500 to \$2,000 at auction, although some sell for as much as \$80,000. The gilded bronze styles are the most valuable.”

Glass chandeliers generally do not command the highest prices in this category, although Baccarat pieces can sell in the \$10,000 to \$50,000 range. The one exception to this is highly prized French opaline glass. Hand-blown opaline glass is opaque or slightly translucent and appears in white as well as brilliant shades of green, blue, pink, black, lavender and yellow; many pieces are decorated with gilding or hand-painted floral or bird motifs.

Aside from the visual appeal, antique chandeliers are an investment. “A person can spend \$20,000 on a very good quality, 19th century chandelier and be reasonably sure that it will hold its value or even be worth more as time goes by,” Preston remarks. “But a brand new \$20,000 chandelier is probably never going to be worth \$20,000 again.”

WHERE TO FIND IT:

Christie's
20 Rockefeller Plaza
New York, NY 10020
Tel: 212-636-2680
Fax 212-636-4951
www.christies.com

Nesle, Inc.
38-15 30th St.
Long Island City, NY 11101
Tel: 212-755-0515

Fax: 718-786-2170
www.nesleinc.com

Newel, LLC
425 East 53rd Street
New York, NY 10022
Tel: 212-758-1970
Fax: 212-371-0166
www.newel.com

Sotheby's
1334 York Avenue
New York, NY 10021
Tel: 541-312-5682
Fax: 541-312-5684
www.sothebys.com

ALSO RECOMMENDED:

Manhattan Art & Antiques Center
1050 2nd Ave at 56th St.
New York, NY 10022
Tel: 212-355-4400
Fax: 212-355-4403
<http://216.154.219.17>

Marvin Alexander Antiques
315 East 62nd Street
New York, NY 10021, USA
Tel: 212-838-2320
<http://marvinalexanderinc.1stdibs.com>

Quai Voltaire Antiques
378 Greenwich Ave
Greenwich, CT 06830
Tel: 203-618-9777
www.qvantiques.com