

Gerlinde's Article

The following article was published in a Chicago Newspaper...

"Being a restorer for the last 17 years in Chicago, IL, has given me a lot of experience with people and their treasures. Most of my customers don't know that you can actually restore an item back to its original beauty. For me, being my own boss, and being able to work at the trade I have learned and enjoy gives me the feeling of having hit the jackpot. What better way to spend a life than to be paid to do what I most love?!"

You can, once again, spend this summer with GK at the campus of Lawrence University in Appleton, WI. Antiques dealers and collectors come together for one week to learn how repair and restore antique pottery, and porcelain figurines & dolls. "The skills you learn, with practice, can give a renewed freedom to your business, having fun making a living this way, is something not many people I know can say. When was the last time you said 'I love what I am doing, everyday?'"

By the time the week is over, the student will have been taken through the skills GK uses daily in her work. They will know how to clean and remove stains; undo old repairs; mend breaks; fill chips; model and replace missing parts, and make their repairs nearly invisible by duplicating original paints and clays.

That's a lot to learn in a week, but for instructor Gerlinde Kornmesser what students don't learn is even more important. Learning NOT to grind, for example. Grinding cup handles or reducing trees to stumps. Grinding creates irreversible damage to the piece. Drilling holes into perfect pieces, making vases into lamps, destroying a piece that is 250 years old by using fast-setting glues, and the worst of all - using silicone - can destroy a good joint. It takes a lot of effort to correct these mistakes of bad restorers, or those who are self-taught. These are prime examples of what not to do. GK teaches that staying with a Museum principle of restoration is very important.

In Austria and Germany, they call these bad methods the "American fast way to restore". We call it vandalism. To criticize American restorers is an over generalization. While there are some downright unscrupulous practitioners, they are naive self-taught artisans who simply don't know what level of restoration is possible. The majority of American restorers are very knowledgeable in their craft, and very sensitive to the pieces on which they work. And it's to these ranks that GK trains the next generation of restorers.

Customers are often not aware that a flower in a porcelain figure (for example) can be modeled back, rather than grinding all the broken flowers off and painting grass over. As most old pieces can found in catalogs or books, for a collector it is important to have a piece restored to its original condition, not reduced in both value and quality.

In the case of a good museum quality piece a customer asking me to grind off a dog from a Meissen group because it was initially too expensive for the customer to have the dog fully restored. Three legs as well as the tail and the ears had been broken off, and half of the dog's face was gone. Not to cut the cost of restoring and reduce the value of this example, I advised the customer to have it restored to its original condition. It would have its full value and beauty back, despite the cost.

"Being a restorer, making the choice of what is more important - the price or caring for the objects - I love to restore the porcelain. Porcelain comes first, and then we figure out the cost. In fact, almost anything is possible. Say you have a figurine that has a lot of leaves missing. We make a latex mold from a good leaf and fill that mold with an epoxy composition. After 12 hours we can have a lot of leaves made. We put them under an infrared-heating lamp and bend the leaves to different shapes so they look different. After a little sanding we put the leaves on the tree. Later, they are painted and glazed. The piece will not only look good ... it will look excellent."

It's not easy, GK admits. It takes the care of a craftsperson, and the willingness to practice, but neither does one have to be a great artist to become a good restorer. A steady hand and patience are needed. Kornmesser herself had no art training. Still in school in Austria, she tried all sources to learn the craft of restoring. The European restorers keep the subject shrouded in secrecy, as they did the materials they used. Finally finding a professor in Vienna University, she learned the craft working at the weekends for two years. At the age of 21, she came to Chicago and a few years later she took Morla Tjossem's class (and others) to find out if she missed anything, and to update the materials she was using. She was happy to learn that Morla used the same materials as Gerlinde had used in Europe. The saying is that the material doesn't matter as much as what you do with it.

European restorers were aware of what Automotive and Dental materials can be used. There is knowledge that some of these materials can crossover and are used in restoration processes. GK says students are taught generic names for all of the products they use, and are given tips for tracking down sources of supplies close to home.

Kornmesser has her own restoration studio in Glenview, IL. For the last 11 years, many students have visited the studio and given the reassurance they can be good restorers by learning the correct methods from the beginning. GK taught the last 10 years at Lawrence University in Appleton, WI. She followed Morla Tjossem's footsteps. Being a good restorer takes time. It's not done overnight. As a customer asked GK if she can wait for a multi-broken piece. I told her it would take time - at least 4-6 weeks, if not several months. Every piece needs 100% attention. Drying and curing time is the same. Customers are sometimes shocked to find out the time and cost. They feel that paying \$35 for a simple break is a lot of money, but they don't complain if the repairman comes to the house charging \$50-\$75 just to get there. They have no idea of the time it takes to do good restoration work.

On the other hand, there are three options to do a repair: fully restore ... the most expensive; gluing and filling...half-price; gluing only ... the least expensive. Some people don't care how much it costs. The piece has more sentimental value than its material worth. To get the full value back, you have to go for the best full restoration. Fully restored pieces have proven, in auction houses, to fetch the very highest price, even when the bidders are aware it has been restored. It pays to go to the best restorer you can find. Gerlinde's summer classes have attracted people from the USA, Canada, Germany, Australia and Japan. Students are a mixture of dealers, collectors and others, ranging in age from 17 to 80. They all share the common urge to repair something. It is a great feeling getting missing hands, knobs for lids, etc., restored.

Restorers also mend people's hearts, making them feel good to have their treasure back the way it used to be. "I love what I do and I get paid for it. It's a real job and it's up to every restorer to become as good as they want to be. Practice makes you one of a kind. It's like eating the cake and having it to."