

Restoring Treasures, Hearts and Minds

As taught by Gerlinde Kornmesser...

This summer, at the campus of Lawrence University in Appleton, WI, antiques dealers and collectors come together for a one-week workshop to learn how to repair and restore antiques pottery and porcelain figurines and dolls. Instructor Gerlinde Kornmesser also helps her students learn that restoration needs not only precious treasures, but hearts and minds as well. "The skills you learn at this workshop offer renewed financial freedom," says Gerlinde. "Having fun making a living is the key to success, not only in business but in the business of being happy and productive."

By the time the week is over, her students will have been taken through the skills Gerlinde uses daily in her own work as a renowned ceramics restorer. They will learn 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.

"Being a restorer for many years in Chicago, IL, has given me a lot of experience with people and their treasures," says Gerlinde. "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 greatest feeling. What better way to spend a life than being paid to do what you love most?"

Learning to Unlearn

There's a lot in one week, but for Gerlinde what students unlearn is even more important. NOT to grind, for example. Grinding cup handles is like reducing trees to stumps. Grinding creates irreversible damage to a piece. Gerlinde explains that in Austria and Germany, the tendency to "grind first and ask questions later" is nothing less than vandalism, what she calls the "American fast way to restore".

Some other ill-advised ways to cut corners include: 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 which can destroy a good joint. "These are prime examples of what not to do", explains Gerlinde, who teaches that staying with a Museum principle of restoration is very important.

"Please understand that I am not criticizing all American Restorers. While there are some downright unscrupulous practitioners as there are anywhere in the world, other well-meaning restorers are simply uninformed, self-taught artisans who 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. It is to these ranks that I seek to train the next generation of restorers."

Options for Repair

Gerlinde describes how her customers are often not aware, for example, that a flower in a porcelain figure can be modeled back, rather than grinding all the broken flowers off and painting grass over. "I recall a good museum quality piece a customer brought in, 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. I strongly advised the customer to have it restored to its original condition. It would have its full value and beauty back, despite the cost. Furthermore, fully restored pieces have proven, in Auction Houses, to fetch the very highest price, even when the bidders are aware it has been restored. Fortunately, the customer agreed, and was overwhelmed with the beauty of the finished work."

Gerlinde explains there are three options in restoration: "Fully restore – the most expensive; gluing and Filling – half-price; gluing only – the least expensive. Some people don't care how much a restoration costs; its sentimental value is worth far more than the actual cost of materials and time. Either way, for auction, display or sentimental value, to get the full value back, you have to go for the best, full restoration by a qualified craftsman."

While Gerlinde's restoration skills cover a range of objects, she admits to having a favorite in her own work. "I love to restore porcelain. Porcelain comes first...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 lots of leaves made. We can put them under an Infra-Red 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 looks excellent, it follows the Museum Principle and its value is not simply retained, in many cases it is greatly enhanced.

The Road to Restoration

It is not easy to become a good restorer, Gerlinde admits; it takes the care of a craftsperson, and a willingness to practice with commitment. Gerlinde is quick to point out however; neither does one have to be a great artist to become a good restorer. A steady hand and patience is the key. Kornmesser herself had no formal Art training. While in school in Austria, she tried all sources to learn the craft of restoring. The European restorers kept the subject shrouded in secrecy, along with the materials they used. At Vienna University, Gerlinde found a professor who taught her the craft on weekends, for two years.

At the age of 21, Gerlinde came to Chicago and continued her studies, notably with Morla Tjossem. She was happy to learn that Morla used the same materials as Gerlinde had used in Europe. European restorers were aware of how effective American-made automotive and dental materials can be in restoration. Gerlinde teaches her students the generic names for all of the products they use, and are given tips for tracking down sources of supplies close to home. Gerlinde quotes an old restorer saying, which translates as "The material doesn't matter as much as what you do with it".

For more than a decade, students have studied at Gerlinde's studio in Glenview, IL. The first lesson is the reassurance they can be good restorers by learning the correct methods from the beginning. Gerlinde has succeeded Morla Tjossem in teaching the Summer Classes at Lawrence University in Appleton, WI.

A Summer Place

Gerlinde's summer classes have attracted people from the USA, Canada, Germany, Australia and Japan. "My students are a mixture of antiques dealers, collectors, serious hobbyists and others, ranging from 17 to 80. They all share the common urge to repair something. It is a great feeling when you find the right missing hands, the perfect knob for a lid, and so on. The restorer's art is nothing short of bringing a piece back to life!"

"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. The skills I teach can be learned by all. It is practice, patience, love and commitment that make a restorer one of kind. When you see the pleasure on the face of your customer when their treasure is not only back the way it used to be, but like it was when it was originally created, well...it's like having your cake and eating it too."