

# How to deal with a lifetime's worth of stuff

When adult children inherit their parents' furniture and knickknacks, odds are they don't have the space or desire to keep it all. Experts can help with the hard decisions.

Carolyn Patten For The Oregonian/OregonLive

When boomers, Gen Xers and millennials inherit their parents' furniture and knick-knacks, odds are good they don't have the space or desire to keep it all. But they also don't want to let something good slip away in the haste to be done with the stuff. Add to that the coronavirus pandemic and its impact on the economy, and it's hard to know how to begin to deal with a lifetime of things.

Kathleen Tumpane, owner of Happy2BHome Interiors in Lake Oswego, often helps clients with downsizing and recently took care of her mother's large home when she passed away. "It takes time and energy to investigate the value of possible treasures," she said. "I had a professional appraiser come out for an appraisal of what was valuable and what was not. It was worth every penny and took only a couple of hours. Then I could move on and be comfortable with selling or giving away a great deal of stuff."

Portland appraiser Jerry Dobesh says, "It's too soon to know the extent of the impact COVID-19 is having on the marketplace. Sales this past month are reported to be down immensely as many important auctions were either canceled or rescheduled for later this year. But the sales that did occur saw strong prices, especially in the low- and mid-levels of the market. Online auctions saw record numbers of bidders. It's quite possible that stay-at-home orders redirected collectors to these online marketplaces."

With the uncertainty of the current market and slow reopening of many selling venues, we went to some of the experts in the Portland area and put together some simple steps and tips to make the process easier.

## FIRST, LEARN WHAT THINGS ARE WORTH

Start with a price guide that covers your type of object. One of the most well-known is Kovel's Antiques & Collectibles Price Guide. It reports on specific sales, usually at retail, and is a good place to start when you want to know in general terms what things are worth.

Another free research avenue is eBay, the world's most popular e-commerce site for used items of every description, and a great place to find current market prices.

For high-ticket items, look into getting a professional appraisal to verify the item's age, provenance and full retail (or replacement value), which is important to private buyers. Appraisals are also needed for IRS purposes and for items you wish to insure.

O'Gallerie, a Portland auction house that specializes in fine art, antiques and estates, will do presale evaluations (not appraisals) for items worth at least \$250. Their website also has a search function so you can look for final sales, just as you would on eBay.

The top international auction houses — including Sotheby's, Christie's and Heritage — also offer free auction estimates for valuable jewelry, art, furniture and collectibles.

## WHAT SELLS?

"We're in a declining market for everything except very high-end pieces," said Tom O'Grady, president and CEO of O'Gallerie. "It's the IKEA generation" that wants cheap and functional. Also, "I'm meeting more and more people who are embracing minimalism and getting rid of things."

Appraiser Dobesh grew up in the antiques business and has been a full-time independent appraiser since 2001, after working for O'Gallerie for seven years as an evaluator and appraiser.

The forces of the 2008 recession and a dramatic change in lifestyles have changed the market for antiques and collectibles, he said. "Prices during 2001-2008 were relatively static or in a slow decline in many categories across the spectrum of antiques and collectibles," he said. "Today's prices for common antiques and collectibles are down 50% or more from 2008," though what he calls "the best of the best" can still command strong prices.

Dobesh said the values of table china, cut glass, carnival glass, dolls, porcelains and figurines have all decreased, along with many Japanese and Korean antiques. But there are growth areas among antiques. "The best firearms and Chinese antiques are still setting records," he said, "and surprisingly, vinyl records and typewriters have become sellable. Duck decoys and silver have seen a resurgence the past year or two. Common silver items have always had, as



O'Gallerie, an auction house in Northeast Portland that specializes in fine art, antiques and estates, is offering online auction bidding, even while the showroom has been closed for coronavirus. Sean Meagher, staff



Owner Beverly Hecht-Levy, left, and Erin Marshall sell preowned, original paintings, sculptures, pottery and bronzes from Northwest artists at ReSaleArt in Southeast Portland. Sean Meagher, staff



a floor, the spot price of the bullion market."

For millennials and younger buyers, lifestyles and tastes have pivoted away from collecting to experiencing, especially in urban areas where home is more likely to be a shared space or small condo than a multi-bedroom house. "Young folks prefer to use Airbnb instead of owning a vacation home; most urban dwellers don't feel a need to own a car; many don't have the need, or the ability, to own a home or condominium," Dobesh said. "Lifestyles are not as formal, and not as materially focused, as the preceding couple of generations."

Gary Newton of Peerless Estate Sales, a professional estate sale company that holds 60-70 sales each year in the Pacific Northwest and Greater Palm Springs areas, echoed that view. "A new generation of minimalists is pushing out an older one of accumulators, or collectors."

With furniture, experts agree midcentury modern is the top seller, especially pieces by recognized designers and in good condition.

"If we are fortunate enough to book a truly midcentury modern estate collection — even just one classic piece — it will get tons of attention and draw people to a sale no matter the address," Newton said.

Both Newton and Dobesh said that most 18th, 19th and early 20th century furniture — often called just "brown furniture" — has a very low market value today. "French Provincial and colonial styles in furniture are nearly un-sellable," Newton said.

## WHERE CAN YOU SELL?

Once you have a good idea of what your pieces are worth and are ready to sell, you have a few choices of where to sell, based on the dollar value and how much time and effort you want to put into the transaction. With the new reality of pandemic precautions, both buyers and sellers are going to be understandably reluctant to open their homes to strangers, so strike casual yard sales off your list of possible venues.

**Estate sales:** In Portland, estate sales run by professional companies have been a popular option when an entire home needs to be cleared out.

Interior designer Tumpane recommends using an estate sale company to quickly sell items such as furniture, appliances and miscellaneous household items that don't have great value.

"After you've dealt with all the valuable stuff, an estate sale company can help you get rid of the rest," she said. "They do all the photographs, cleaning, pricing and moving. It's a very efficient process. I enjoy going to estate sales by reputable companies — the prices are minimal from a seller's point of view, fabulous bargains from a buyer's."

Newton of Peerless says his estate sale company was hit especially hard by the pandemic. Monticello Antique Marketplace, where Peerless maintained an office, closed and, within days, all scheduled estate sales hit a "hard pause."

Newton said the decision was "an easy one to make no matter how financially painful." Last weekend, Peerless held its first estate sale since March, with greatly revised rules and procedures. "The size of the house, the layout of the selling space, the size of the actual front door is different in every sale," he said. "A small house may only allow 6-8 customers to comfortably socially distance, and the next week, we may be able to allow 10-15 people in at once. In the past, it was common to have 30-50 people in a house at one time, and people signed up ahead of time to make sure they got in early." Newton said they are now operating on a "simple, first-come, first-served basis, with people spaced on the sidewalk." Inside, touchable equipment like display cases and

## Resources

**Christie's:** [www.christies.com](http://www.christies.com)

**Sotheby's:** [www.sothebys.com](http://www.sothebys.com)

**Heritage Auctions:** [www.ha.com](http://www.ha.com)

**O'Gallerie:** [www.ogallerie.com](http://www.ogallerie.com)

**ReSaleArt:** [www.resaleart.com](http://www.resaleart.com)

**Kovels Price Guides:** [www.kovels.com](http://www.kovels.com)

## Choosing an appraiser

There is no regulatory body requiring appraiser certification or accreditation. Ask your appraiser about specific training and certification in law and appraisal theory, principles and ethics, product knowledge and proper appraisal procedures. You might begin the search by asking for references from antique dealers, or checking the rosters at these voluntary organizations:

**American Society of Appraisers:** [www.appraisers.org](http://www.appraisers.org)

**Certified Appraisers Guild of America:** <http://caga.synthasite.com/>

**International Society of Appraisers:** [www.isa-appraisers.org](http://isa-appraisers.org)

video kiosks, along with plastic shopping baskets, have been eliminated. Cashiers can't touch the merchandise so they will not be offering bags or boxes, and restrooms will not be open to the public. Finally, Newton said, everyone will be required to wear a mask.

Now that on-site estate sales are again possible, Newton said he's confident his business will prove to be "economy proof." "When times are good, people have more money to spend on things they don't need," he said, "and when times are bad, more people have less money to spend so they need to shop thrifty."

Newton said the items continually in demand are "what people need: tools, cookware, small appliances, needlework and craft supplies, food, bedding of all levels of quality, and newer electronics."

Other categories that sell well at estate sales, said Newton, include hand-thrown art pottery, Atomic Age home decor, high-contrast abstract art with brilliant colors, beautiful leather-bound books bought primarily for their decorative value, vinyl records for their decorative value, vintage toys, model trains, post cards, decorative primitive items, vintage electronics, vintage advertising and miniatures such as doll house furnishings. Costume jewelry is always worth the effort of pricing out piece-by-piece.

**Auctions:** Peter O'Grady, vice president of O'Gallerie, advised sellers to "look for the cheapest venue with the largest audience." That is often an auction house or an eBay auction. Auction houses will handle everything for you, from photographing to marketing, selling, shipping and final payment. Commissions range from 10% to 30%. On eBay, listings are free for private sellers for items up to \$750. When an eBay sale goes through, sellers pay a 10% fee plus shipping, and there are lots of paid options for such things as upgraded visuals and prime positioning.

O'Grady postponed major auctions that were scheduled for late March and has since held three auctions without a live audience, handling all sales with online, absentee and telephone bidding.

O'Grady said many of the company's long-time customers weren't familiar with the tech needed to navigate online or absentee bidding, and were happy to learn a new skill set. For online auctions May 4-5, "sales went up beyond anything I could have imagined. People are in a buying mood and prices were good. Firearms and anything gold were very popular, and prices for furniture were definitely up."

Ahead of a June 8-9 auction, "I had dozens of calls from all over the world, from clients who didn't want to wait for the auction — they wanted to buy right then. We don't do pre-auction sales, and the bidding was intense. I'm hearing from antique dealers all over that sales are extremely strong right now." For the large decorative arts and furniture auction set for July 13-14, O'Grady said the auction house may return to live bidding on the floor, as long as social distancing is possible.

In that case, he said, "We are considering charging a small admission price, which would go to charity, to make sure the crowd is primarily buyers rather than spectators."

**Consignment art:** ReSaleArt owner Bev Hecht-Levy operates Portland's only gallery dedicated to selling preowned, original paintings, sculpture, pottery and bronzes from professional artists of the Pacific Northwest.

"We have made more sales last month than I thought we would," she said. "While other art organizations are scrambling to get their artwork and shows online, ReSaleArt has an advantage in that all our artwork has always been online, including our prices."

While stay-at-home orders closed the gallery, Hecht-Levy said she saw customers by appointment, asking them to wear masks and maintain social distancing. Now, the gallery has reopened to customers Tuesdays-Saturdays.

"People are still downsizing and businesses are still moving," she said, "and we are trying to work with them in order to accommodate their needs. We have also found that after spending over four weeks at home staring at blank walls, some people can't wait to get in here to find some things that they can enjoy instead of looking at their white walls."

She cautioned people not to expect to recoup their original investment, except in rare instances. "A traditional gallery will have a very large markup — the full retail value — and I price pieces at one-half to two-thirds of their current retail value," she said. Hecht-Levy will hold artwork for as long as six months, reserving the option to mark it down after two months and again after four months.

**Look for creative options:** Kathia Emery, owner of Emery & Associates Interior Design in Portland, recently worked with a young couple who wanted a way to incorporate an antique dresser in their new master bedroom. It was a cherished family piece, but the dark brown finish didn't fit with the new decor. After having the dresser painted and glazed a light cream color, Emery said, "now you can see all the wonderful details on it, and it fits in beautifully. That's a lovely way to hold onto a family heirloom and give it new life."

In the end, "if you can't decide whether to keep something or pass it on," Newton advised, "evaluate why it's special, consider the memories, take a picture of it to keep forever and then let it go so another family can make a memory."