

CENTRAL HEATING DAMAGE TO ANTIQUE FURNITURE 'CAN BE AVOIDED'

The British Antique Furniture Restorers' Association (BAFRA) has issued a warning to householders to beware of the damage central heating can cause to furniture, particularly in winter.

Whilst central heating brought comfort to people wanting to be warm and dry during the depths of winter, restorers have emphasised that these are far from ideal conditions for antiques.

And their concerns about the effects of central heating on furniture are echoed by Valerie Taplin of the Air Improvement Centre.

She said central heating was probably responsible for more damage to antique furniture than any other single cause.

And standard household insurance policies did not allow for claims for this type of damage.

She said antique furniture needed protection from low levels of relative humidity caused by central heating. Without humidification, the relative humidity may well fall to dangerously low levels of 25-30% rH which is close to conditions in the Sahara Desert.

"Restorers agree that the culprit of most of the damage they are asked to repair is dry air". It's caused by central heating and results in more damage than fire, theft and flood put together.

"Dry air damage is extremely costly to rectify. Many pieces of furniture, surviving for centuries in unheated conditions, are irreparably damaged in just a single winter of central heating."

In the experience of BAFRA, the bulk of complaints connected with moisture movements in furniture occur between Christmas and Easter, especially when the winter is cold and crisp.

Central heating causes low relative humidity, and continual high temperatures in the region of 70 degrees F. are particularly villainous in drying wood to a low moisture content.

Wood is a hygroscopic substance which loses moisture to a dry atmosphere causing antique furniture, panelling and woodwork to suffer from prolonged low levels – and fluctuating levels – of humidity.

When the timber is subjected to a dry atmosphere, it gradually gives up moisture and starts to shrink and split along the grain. Pieces of veneer come away and may be lost.

Other dry air problems include cracking, splitting, loosening of joints, drawers that no longer glide smoothly and doors that warp and shrink.

Damage is particularly evident in veneered furniture where the main body of the piece, often in pine or oak, has a different rate of expansion from the thin veneer covering it.

Similarly, inlays of mother of pearl or metal, particularly in boule furniture, can be eased out of place by gradual contraction and warping of the wood veneers in which they were set.

Cracks will also appear in panelling and beams. Joints in chair backs and table legs will loosen through animal glues drying out.

"Extreme cases of damage due to dry air have occurred when something is exposed to central heating for the first time", said Ms Taplin, a director of the Air Improvement Centre, of 23 Denbigh Street, London SW1.

"For example, a piece of furniture may be transferred from a cool, damp, country house to a centrally heated home, shop or museum, involving a sudden drop in relative humidity from about 70% to 30-35%.

"The damage can be alarming, immediate, extensive and often prohibitively expensive to restore."

"Because most household insurance policies do not cover this damage, customers often complain to dealers that they should have been forewarned and would have appreciated advice on how to protect their purchases from potential damage."

"Regardless of temperature, it is wise to ensure that the level of relative humidity does not fall below 50%."

In addition to installing the right size and output-rated humidifier, there are a number of simple steps that householders can take to protect prized possessions. For example, avoid positioning antique furniture in front of a radiator. Ideally, furniture should be at least two feet away from any heat source.