



Modern Indifference

Why won't a local antiques dealer sell to St. Louis?

Somewhere west of the city—only a select few know exactly where—sits a warehouse full of impeccably refurbished mid-century antique furniture. Mid 20th-century antique furniture. Coveted by trend-conscious interior designers across the country, these amoeba-shaped cocktail tables and sleek slipper chairs have become the haute home decor du jour and consequently fetch thousands of dollars apiece online. It's our own little Fort Knox of 1950s Modernism ... and the dealer who amassed the collection has no interest in selling any of it here.

Why wouldn't someone with high-demand home furnishings look for local buyers? Economics, for one. When local refurbishers get wind of the prices these

pieces fetch, their rates skyrocket, and the chances of buying from local auctions at below market value decrease. But the bigger issue, this dealer says, is one of taste: St. Louisans "don't get it."

These swank pieces of retro chic sell like ultrasuede-covered crack in Manhattan, but they barely register on St. Louis' style radar. Local stores bold enough to specialize in the stuff either wither and close or end up selling it for far less than it's worth--oftentimes to dealers who turn around and sell it elsewhere for a profit.

"There isn't much of a market here, and that's too bad," says local interior designer Scott Tjaden. "Mid-century furniture lines are perfect; the design is classic, the craftsmanship unmatched."

The design itself doesn't seem to be the problem. Stores like Centro, Niche and Baseline Workshop sell enough contemporary modern furniture to remain in business.

So if not the look, then what? Tjaden says St. Louisans are passing up these pieces because they don't see the value. "I have clients who don't want to buy antiques of any kind—even of good quality—and instead buy newly made furniture that could cost the same or double."

It doesn't help that furniture from the '50s has only recently officially become antique. New Yorkers with money may be willing to drop the dough now to buy tomorrow's collectors items, but St. Louisans are more wary, says local writer and design buff Toby Weiss. "This is a sentimental town," she says. "We cling to a past that doesn't even belong to us."

The market for mid-century design, limited though it may be, has its devotees. Kyrle Boldt, founder and owner of bathing suit boutique Splash!, has filled his Modernist Bernoulli-designed home with vintage pieces. Weiss also has friends who appreciate 1950s modernism, and she takes exception to the idea that it's just St. Louis that "doesn't get it." "The same way it's true for St. Louis, it's true for all of the places that are not New York," she says. "St. Louis may not be in that market right now, but that market's only going to pick up steam."

—Matthew Halverson