

The Trunk Lady's Restoration Guide

Over 125 full color photos
Written by Michele De Vito

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DEDICATION

This book is dedicated to all those who used to travel with these beautiful pieces considered luggage at the time. If it were not for them, we would not be able to enjoy their beauty and usefulness today. It is also dedicated to my family, who helped me buy, refinish, and sell these trunks, as well as endure the noxious fumes during the refinishing process, then proceed to decorate our homes with them to begin to fill them with new memories. I would be remiss if I did not make a special point to thank my mom who works so closely with me on all of these projects. There is no way I could have ever accomplished all of these trunk restorations without you. We make a pretty awesome team.

Keep in mind this interesting fact, that while traveling up to the early 1900's, the steamer trunks (flat top) were usually the ones put on ground level while the dome top trunks were stacked on top of these. This was an indication that individuals who owned the dome tops were of a more wealthy status and so their luggage was placed up off the ground. If you don't already know the history of the trunk you own, just imagine the life of the person who did own it back in the early 1800-1900's. There is probably such a story to tell.



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INTRODUCTION

I would first like to welcome all of you reading this book. If you are like me, collecting trunks is somewhat of an addiction; or maybe you have one up in the attic just waiting to be restored back to it's beauty. Hunting for that perfect trunk can be exciting, educational and adventurous. I started collecting trunks around 1990. After refinishing my first one, I was hooked. My mother has played a big part too. She lines the inside of the trunk, while I restore the outside. My collection grew to such a proportion that I started bringing them to local antique shows in New Jersey. Several family members now own trunks also. An old trunk finished tastefully will even compliment modern furniture.

The information you are about to read has been obtained solely from my own personal experiences in restoring trunks, and other furniture for that matter. I have developed my own techniques by studying the trunks before removing anything. After making mistakes and doing things the hard way, I have learned more efficient methods. Of course, the more you do, the faster you get, and the easier it becomes. I am going to do my best to tell you how to restore your cherished family trunk, or the one you got for a bargain at a garage sale, in the simplest way possible. As for the insides, well Mom used to sew, so she makes patterns before doing anything hasty. That will be explained later too.

I am not one for getting hung up on dates because I know that most of these trunks range from the mid 1800's to the early 1900's. I refinish them mainly so they are in useable condition. My purpose is not necessarily to date them. I am no expert in this area, although I have ideas about what time period they fall into. My interest is more a creative, artistic one. It is one that brings an old piece of furniture to stand next to a new one and hold its own, or to place it in a room with modern day furniture and have it blend. It

becomes part of the furniture, not a piece of luggage used for traveling like years ago. I am changing its functionality. It may become somewhat of a conversation piece. So, I hope this does not offend anyone who believes antiques should not be touched unless absolutely necessary. My intentions are only to take an old piece which more than likely is not being used, and is probably not worth much in monetary terms, and give it a purpose - a usefulness. For some, this task means reliving memories of past ancestors, where they came from and the hardships they may have endured along the way. For others, it may bring back sweet thoughts of a simpler time.



My first trunk



One of our gems.



Street Fair, Hillsdale, NJ 9/19/1992

HOW TO BUY A TRUNK

Before I get into cleaning, let me give you some tips on what to look for when buying a trunk. If you are looking to own a trunk that is in original condition, and want to keep it that way, then make sure the trunk has a minimal amount of rust on the hardware, the wood is not rotted through, and the bottom is intact. If the canvas is torn, you may decide to remove it.

There are various types of trunk styles and coverings. To name a few, there are dome tops or camel backs, and oval tops. These are often covered in either smooth metal, embossed metal, which is a raised design, an alligator design, paper or leather covered. Then there is the steamer trunk, which is usually covered in a heavy canvas. Over time, the canvas becomes very worn and tears easily. On occasion, you may come across a wardrobe trunk. It stands about five feet tall and opens like a book. Inside there are hangers, shoe bags, and drawers. Some of these trunks may even have a box or tray inside. It lifts out easily for storage below.

As far as price, the better the condition, the more you are going to pay. Trunk prices can range from just ten dollars, up to one hundred and fifty dollars and more for an unfinished trunk, and this will vary with style. If you are feeling adventurous, go for a trunk that needs some work. It will be cheaper. To have a trunk refinished by someone could cost you in excess of five hundred dollars easily and that does not include the purchase of the trunk or any special supplies. When all is said and done, it may cost in the ballpark of seven hundred dollars and more if it has to be shipped out to the restoration company. So let's get started on your trunk from the comforts of your own home.

Don't forget to take pictures of your trunk before you start working on it - don't forget

the inside either! After the trunk is completely finished, take pictures again of the inside and outside. You will be amazed at how you have transformed the piece from dirty and somewhat undesirable to a beautiful showpiece that will probably outlast all of us!



A sampling of different styles of trunks.

CLEANING AND REPAIRING

To clean the inside of a trunk, take a paint scraper and remove all of the loose paper. Vacuuming is the most efficient way to remove all the debris. If you have a lid with pictures you want to preserve, just wipe with a damp cloth. I would use a lacquer spray over it to preserve the picture from further damage and decay. The bottom half of the trunk (and lid if there are no pictures to preserve), I like to seal with a coat of shellac, which can be brushed on or sprayed. In addition, this provides an adhesive coating when lining the inside. If there is no box, I usually remove the two side pieces of wood that the box would have sat on. This is done by wedging a screwdriver between the side of the trunk and the strip of wood. Loosen it carefully by moving the screwdriver back and forth gently until the strip of wood loosens away from the edge. This may tear a chunk of wood out of the side if done roughly. Should you tear out a chunk of wood, fill the hole with liquid nails or a good epoxy wood filler to add strength back to the sides. Removing these side pieces makes it a lot easier to line, but it is all a matter of preference.

Boxes should be handled carefully when trying to preserve them. First, I like to hammer all the loose nails to make the box sturdy again, and add nails if necessary. If your box has a lid, follow the same steps as for the lid of a trunk.

Cleaning the outside can be very messy, so wear old clothes when doing this. I use a bucket of wood soap and water, with a soft bristle scrub brush. This is best done outside or in a garage with a lot of room, since the scrub brush splatters quite far. If you have a leather trunk where much of the leather is torn, you may want to remove it completely by taking a razor or utility knife and cutting as close as possible to the edges. Then continue to follow the instructions for cleaning wood. To clean leather, I would recommend a

leather cleaner and protector that you rub in. I would not brush or spray over this with any type of finish after, since it will not adhere with the leather protector.

Canvas and wood trunks can be scrubbed if you want to remove the dirt build up. After scrubbing gently, wipe down with a cloth to remove the excess water. The canvas, when dry, may actually return to its original brown or green color, which is most commonly seen. A wood trunk that had canvas removed may also have a lot of glue stuck to the wood still. This can be removed by using a coarse sandpaper on the wet wood. Be prepared to have a few sheets handy. You can also use a belt sander to cover large areas on the trunk, only after it has completely dried. However, there is a lot of potential for damaging the wood if you don't have good control over the sander. Let the wood dry for at least a day so you are not sanding wet wood, except as mentioned above to remove glue. Otherwise, splintering will occur. When scrubbing canvas, do so gently so you do not tear a hole in it.

A metal trunk can be scrubbed down also, to get the dirt off and return the slats to a light colored wood. Sandpaper or steel wool can be used to remove excess rust. I prefer to use a cordless drill with a medium coarse wire wheel brush inserted. This will remove rust or anything else that has built up on the metal. It is a good idea to wear a dust mask when sanding. Occasionally, a trunk will have been painted. If it has enough sentimental value and you do not mind a little hard work, the paint can be removed - even from canvas. Use a semi-paste, paint and varnish remover. (ALWAYS WORK IN A WELL VENTILATED AREA.) Do not try to remove canvas that has been painted over. The paint seeps through to the wood making it very difficult to remove. Either repaint a color of your choice or strip the paint off, then remove canvas. A trunk with a heavy cardboard

fiber can be wiped down with a damp cloth. Saturating it will cause the covering to warp. This is the time to remove any hardware that needs to be removed. To remove the hardware for the handles, I use a screwdriver, hammer, tack puller, and a nail (wire) cutter. I loosen existing nails by wedging the screwdriver between the nail and the hardware, hammering the end of the screwdriver like a chisel. Once the nail is loose, I use either a tack puller or nail cutter to pull it out. If the nails are salvageable, I will straighten them out and reuse them again, which is most often the case. The only reason I do this is to keep the piece as original as possible. Besides, these nails could not be purchased in a store today. This is also a good time to hammer any loose nails throughout the trunk, or add them where they are missing.

It is possible that the wood in the bottom of the trunk may be cracked or rotted. There are a couple different ways to approach this. If the floor is cracked but still in tact, a piece of plywood can be cut to size and placed inside the trunk. Glue it to the existing floor to hold it in place. If the whole bottom is rotted and needs replacing, then have a piece of plywood cut to the exact size of the floor. It will have to be nailed to the existing sides to hold it in place. Metal hardware and sheet metal may need to also be replaced once the new floor is attached.