

# Every Piece Tells a Story

MORTON SQUARE



PHOTOGRAPHS: KARIM SHAWIS/BASHIA

Herb Rader takes old furniture that's bound for the trash and makes it his own treasure.

**H**erb Rader is a storyteller, but he's not of the front-porch, rocking chair, yarn-spinning kind. In fact, he's rather unassuming—a soft-spoken and humble man. But each day, he takes the remains of aging and worn furniture and breathes life into it. In painting the pieces and restoring them to their historical periods, Herb summons the stories the furniture has absorbed over the years and gives each piece a new identity and future.

Herb is the son of a billboard-sign painter. The summer he was 12, he



*Herb surrounds himself with the furniture he has brought back to life. He incorporates a burnished detail on top of a petite side table. Each piece he restores receives at least 5 to 10 coats of finish before he adds the hand-rubbed wax.*



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Painting has always been part of Herb's life. An old photograph shows him as a toddler perched on his father's knee by the paint truck. Perhaps Herb's grandson Jacob (below) will one day take up the craft.



He began following his father, Bill, up and down ladders—hauling paintbrushes and cans, learning all about the depths and dynamics of color. Bill painted the ads for Goo Goo Clusters candies and Hav-A-Tampa cigars as well as other local businesses all over Nashville. “Without even knowing it, I learned everything about painting by watching my father,” says Herb. “When I got out on my own, I realized that the techniques were ingrained.”

He took over the sign-painting business after graduating high

“What I do is similar to the restoration of an old car. I buy a piece of furniture, disassemble it, learn how it is put together, and then restore it to its period.”

Herb Rader



**left:** The original finish on this French console had deteriorated badly. Herb introduced a new color scheme with six shades of cream, burnished over the gold leaf, and gilded areas of the carved detail.

school, but by then paper billboards had begun to phase out painted ones. Drawing on his experience, Herb began painting rooms in houses. During one of the jobs, a decorator asked him if he could apply gold leaf, which motivated Herb to read about decorative painting. He soon began specializing in the technique, painting faux finishes and murals on walls and cloud scenes on ceilings. After seeing his work,



Herb's clients inquired about having furniture painted, so he hit the books again and taught himself that art. Fortunately, furniture was not a totally foreign subject to him. "Some people golf and fish as a hobby. For years, I have spent my free time looking for old pieces of furniture—learning to read their lines," Herb explains.

More than three decades after Herb first balanced on those billboard signs, he now boasts his own



Herb paints with the help of his budding apprentice, Jacob.

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**TIPS FROM  
 A FELLOW ANTIQUER**

Herb spends all of his free time scouring for antiques across the South. Here are a few things he's learned about antiques shopping.

- Practice makes perfect. The more you educate your eye by looking for antiques, the more familiar with them you will become.
- Look for the potential. Don't ever let the exterior finish determine your opinion on the quality or the age of the piece.
- Furniture provides clues. Spend time deciphering what these are. For example, on an original piece, wear on the legs, feet, and wood surfaces points to age.
- Always look at the bottom of the piece and the bottom of its drawers, if it has them. Uneven surfaces and discolored patinas will show up on older pieces of wood. These clues will tell you the piece has aged with the passage of time.

“When I look at a piece of furniture, I envision what it might be.”

Herb Rader

furniture painting and restoration business, Morton Square Antiques. His wife and partner, Tanya, does the upholstery work and makes vintage pillows.

He likens his craft to the restoration of an old car. Depending on its condition, Herb restores each piece using items and details taken from other furniture of the same period. After careful research, he paints on a finish that mimics that of the original piece.

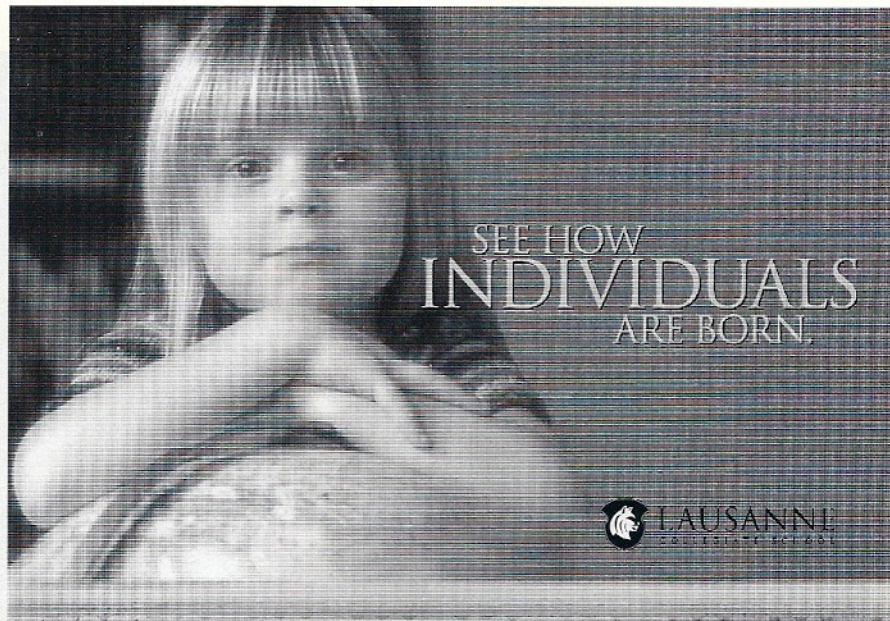
What makes his work different from everything else out there? “Painted furniture companies today mass produce new pieces made to look antique,” says Herb. “But each of mine is one of a kind and has a history—each has a story to tell.”

As for his own favorite pieces, Herb says that they are the furnishings that he and Tanya found together and placed in their home. “We look at them and remember the places where we got them—such as San Francisco and New York. And the most extraordinary thing about them is that when we first saw them, they were in horrible shape. We gave them new life.”

TANNER C. LATHAM

#### ANTIQUE WITH HERB

Morton Square Antiques: 3008 Simmons Avenue, Nashville, TN 37211; (615) 834-3573. Also, look for Herb and his collection monthly at the Scott Antique Market located in Atlanta. Visit [www.scottantiquemarket.com](http://www.scottantiquemarket.com) for more information.



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