

Cover Story

See antique fixtures in a new light

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TORONTO STAR

When John and Monique Taylor decided they wanted a special lighting fixture to make the dining room of their 1910-era home really sparkle, they weren't thinking of the usual update. It was more of backdate.

A fabulous fixture from the past — specifically, the 1850s — now hangs in splendour over their dining room table.

The beautifully crafted piece is made from brass and “Britannia metal” (also referred to as pot metal) and once hosted burners fuelled by whale oil. The fixture incorporates a boy and a sparrow — figures from Aesop's fables, popular at the time.

When John Taylor first saw the fixture at Turn of the Century Lighting on Sherbourne St., it was “in pretty rough condition,” he says. But he could see the potential. So could the staff at Turn of the Century Lighting, a unique business in Toronto that has been operating for more than 30 years. The store offers refurbished antique lighting, reproduction lighting and custom pieces, and includes an on-site workshop for manufacturing, finishing and assembly in its lower levels.

Fittingly, the location was once the home of three quite proper Victorian townhomes, now turned into a showroom with many of the separating walls eliminated.

The store with the widest selection of restored antique and custom reproduction lighting in Canada even has a small foundry in the lower level for specialty lost wax and sand casting.

Staff do extensive research in the sourcing of products. They were able to tell the Taylors that their lighting fixture was made by a company called Starr Fel-



MICHAEL STUPARYK/TORONTO STAR

lows and Company, based in New York. The shades on the fixture had to be replaced, says Turn of the Century manager Michael Rosar. Period replacements were found, featuring “a Greek key motif, which was another aesthetic hallmark of the time,” says Rosar. “When we restored the fixture we did a period restoration on the finish, which is a combination of antique brass and a restored bronze-painted finish.”

Although the now-electrified “prized” piece is actually older than the home, Taylor says it fits in very well and offers “the best light in the house. It has a very warm, very cozy kind of light,” says Taylor, who has bought other antique fixtures from the

Sherbourne St. store.

So, how much did he pay?

Taylor laughs and says he'd rather not divulge. “Let's say it comes in under the range of zero to \$50,000,” he says, referring to the higher end cost of the fixtures carried by Turn of the Century.

Actually, the most expensive piece the store has on hand now is a \$42,000, 1880s brass and crystal ceiling light, says Suzanne Walsh, who started the business more than 30 years ago with her husband David Ivens, who does design and some of the hands-on work on-site.

Restoring antique lighting “in an aesthetic and appropriate way is really important to us . . . and we've been fortunate in be-



At night the 1850s-era antique light fixture, left, casts a warm cozy light in John and Monique Taylor's dining room. Above, a circa 1920 restored two-light fixture with blue antique acid etched glass shades from Turn of the Century Lighting.

ing able to make a living doing something we really enjoy.”

People looking for something less expensive can use the store's website (www.tocl.ca), which has stock catalogued and searchable by fixture type, year, style, finish, number of lights, diameter and price range — all with photos and dimensions. At any given time, the store has on hand between 300 and 400 antique fixtures, from the years 1850 to 1940.

You can also check out custom work. A 1920s reproduction art deco wall sconce with a polished aluminum finish and opal-cased glass, featured on the website, costs \$325. A reproduction Wellington wall sconce, single light, brown patina and waxed finish,

costs \$198.

An antique or reproduction piece may cost more than one from a big-box store, but “people who are looking for period lighting fixtures are looking for more than illumination,” says Walsh. “Our clients go to great lengths choosing lighting. Purchasing quality lighting involves a monetary investment but also an investment in time. Like a piece of art, there is an emotional connection,” says Walsh, who feels that nothing quite compares to the impact of “light quality and the personality of antique and traditional-style lighting.”

Clients generally focus on two key areas — the entrance or foyer and the dining room.

With the foyer, people want to “make that first impression and express their sense of style in a very personal way,” says Walsh. As an example, a Georgian lantern with bevelled glass could set the tone for an understated, restrained “old money” sedate feeling, she says, while a frivolous, ornate Victorian light implies a more flamboyant style.

In dining rooms a “traditional light can truly impact the dining experience,” says Walsh. “For me, dining and sharing with family and friends with the glow from a chandelier above and the lights dimmed down low . . . candles on the table and background music — those are truly treasured moments.”

Another trend these days is to turn the powder room into a “little jewel” with a special fixture that “creates a little vignette” and adds drama.

All of the Turn of the Century Lighting antique fixtures in the 1,500-square-foot showroom are dated with the approximate year of origin and are fully re-

stored with new wiring and sockets and, if necessary, elements altered, so that they are CSA (Canadian Standards Association) approved. Fixtures are bought from all over North America and Europe, from private sellers, antique dealers and estate sales.

But the company will also custom-make fixtures.

The wide selection has attracted set designers for movies. “We provided some vintage lights for *Cinderella Man*,” says Walsh, referring to the filmed-in-Toronto story about Depression-era boxer James Braddock (Russell Crowe).

Bright ideas

Check antique stores and flea markets for vintage light fixtures.

Remember, there could be a real jewel under the tangle of old wires and tarnish, so examine it closely and be prepared to have it re-wired. Keep in mind, though, that while some of the old chandeliers are very beautiful, all that glass will need to be cleaned.

If you like the look of antiques but can't afford the price of refurbishing, consider some of the more traditional styles available at major lighting fixture stores. Many, like Living Lighting at 2132 Queen St. E. (www.livinglighting.com) and Universal Lamp at 121 Cartwright Ave. (www.greatlighting.com) have websites that show an assortment of fixtures, invariably including traditional looks.

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