

Restoring GLORY

*Rosewalker Designs
redefines what it means
to restore furniture*



BY STEPHANIE STEWART • PHOTOS BY SHERRY CLAGG

Visitors to the recent Antiques and Garden Show drew themselves up short when they encountered a stunning sight: a 19th century Cuban mahogany table just partially restored. By “partially,” what I really mean is that half the table, as seen here, looked fabulous, thanks to the attentions of Richard Sullivan of Rosewalker Designs, and the other half was left as it had been discovered—damaged and lackluster. The display’s impact pushed the casual observer to really think about what’s meant when someone talks about genuinely restoring a piece of furniture. In an era of D.I.Y. crazes, with TV viewers convincing themselves they can cheaply remake anything, the power of the Rosewalker display is no small thing. Sometimes, you need the experts to return a worn piece to glory, and when you do, it’s worth the price you’ll pay to get it done right.

Richard and Carolyn Sullivan take a creative approach to their business, as well as a restorative one, combining their love for serious restoration with a commitment to their artistic passions—offering both original decorative arts and refurbishment of older pieces. Hence the company’s name: Rosewalker Design Project: A Decorative Arts Company, with the mission statement “To enhance our material culture by restoring antiques and designing unique, hip decor—respecting the past, celebrating the present and creating the future.”

Richard Sullivan’s background began with cabinet making, a skill he learned fresh from high school, which led to restoring antiques. “By the time I heard about universities with conservator programs, I was 27 or 28 and already out and doing it,” he says. He moved here from Boston some 13 years ago, because he’s also got a deep, genuine interest in songwriting. That interest introduced him to his future wife, Carolyn Walker, who works in development and marketing, but adores antique furniture and interiors. Together, they developed Rosewalker as a serious commodity, with Carolyn focused on promoting both



Original decorative arts
“Buttonflowers” by Rosewalker Designs.

the original work and the restoration aspects.

“When people bring something to us for restoration, they have one of three relationships with it,” Richard tells me. In a nutshell, it’s either personal or sentimental; aesthetic—meaning they love the way it looks; or it’s a true collector’s piece, which may come directly from a dealer. “It’s fairly evenly divided with customers. You wouldn’t believe what people will spend on something worth about \$25 if it’s important to them.”

Working with the customer, Richard explains that *true* restoration can be pricey. One of the things he can do is “repurpose” an item, making it into something else with elements of the original. While some may be horrified by the idea of doing so with Auntie Hilda’s childhood dresser, the Sullivans say it’s good to bring it up, and Carolyn says it gets the customers thinking creatively, especially about old, damaged, less high-value pieces.

“Some companies will deal with you on face value,” she says. “They’re not really listening to the opportunity to collaborate. But it’s a great way to make a new piece for a room and give yourself something ‘new’ with sentimental value.”

Richard takes pride in helping to save those dead-end pieces. “It’s best not to be closed about it,” he says. As a result, he actually does less true refinishing, instead focusing on reworking and refurbishing, cleaning and polishing.

“We don’t have a cheap finish,” he says. For those used to the TV shows that tell you how easy it is to refinish, forget what you’ve heard. Richard says that a cheap refinishing job often involves poor

repairs and a finish put on over loose veneers to hide flaws, along with bad commercial stain colors.

He makes all his own stains, creating a quality finish by using two layers of stain to add depth at different points in the process, then applying a top coat. A high finish requires a lot of hand rubbing and sanding. If there’s a veneer that needs repair, that too is a time-consuming effort. Likewise, a breakfast table refinished by Rosewalker might cost \$800-\$1,000 or more, perhaps more than you paid for it, but if it’s a good piece, you’re preserving it and adding to its long-term value. (Forget the popular TV show that says refinishing destroys value; good refinishing preserves.)

“I think our approach to the restoration business is different,” says Richard. “The collaborative, consultative approach isn’t normal, but maybe being really good at repair isn’t either. The first question to ask is ‘Why do you want to refinish this table?’ My job is to educate my customers. I want them to know something and make a good choice. I’ve got a lot of ways to rejuvenate an old or bad finish. We can find what works for every customer.”

Rosewalker also does some custom pieces for clients. Wood turning, for example is one of Richard’s specialties. If you’re looking for a decorative arts piece, you’ll find that too (see pictures of their web site at rosewalkerdesignproject.com.) Next in line for the company is getting their cool original pieces out to area galleries. And more. “We want to become the destination for restoration in Nashville,” says Carolyn with a smile. They’re well on their way. (*Find Rosewalker Designs at rosewalkerdesignproject.com*)