

Restoration

Good as old

Under that shabby, outdated material might lurk a fine chair in need of a visit to the upholsterer, says **Sue Peacock**.

AN INHERITED Victorian chair that doesn't fit with your house's contemporary style. Or Aunt Vera's couch, which you slept on as a child and always thought was ugly, but which retains a deep-seated, unexplainable hold on you. There is something about their quality and craftsmanship that makes the idea of them leaving them out on the nature strip on hard-rubbish collection night inconceivable.

Reupholstery may be the solution.

Peter Cronin, manager of Richmond upholsterer Martel, says many of his customers are "inheritors". They've been left furniture that had been fashionable, and they come to Martel looking to update it with contemporary fabric. "They might replace a velvet with a linen, for instance," he says.

Paul McGlade, of McGlade Fine Furniture in Mt Waverley, says he is working with the children of customers who want to put their own stamp on a piece. "We may have done the original work 20 or 30 years ago but they want it redone in a different fabric," he says.

The cost of redoing an antique chair has become a more reasonable proposition, says Mr McGlade, because of a bigger choice of affordable fabrics retailing between \$60 and \$90 a metre.

Choosing good-quality fabric will help achieve an attractive, long-lasting result, but it is just one component of the upholstery process. The value of a skilled upholsterer is often found in what you can't see. There is the cutting, sewing and fitting to consider, plus materials such as foam, feathers or wadding. And expect to pay significantly more for labour if the springs need realigning or your piece needs to be stripped right back before being

restored, a process that might take a day or more and result in nothing being left apart from a frame.

You could pay as little as \$65 for a drop-in dining seat chair, up to \$5000 for a rare designer piece to be reupholstered. Fabric prices can range from \$45 to \$295 a metre.

Martel upholsterers Mark Castaldi and Ivan Mattucci specialise in 20th-century modernist furniture, such as 1950s and '60s Scandinavian and post-war Australian pieces — they upholster for Melbourne retailers Great Dane, Angelucci and Geoffrey Hatty Applied Arts, and they often come across pieces of unknown origin. "Every item is unique," Mr Castaldi says.

"In some cases we might build a template beforehand to work out our approach."

Mornington Peninsula homeowner Melissa McKay recently spent \$3500 reupholstering two 1953 Grant Featherston television chairs that she'd inherited from her grandmother. A small footstool was

made by Martel to match one chair. The fabric accounted for about a third of the cost.

"I have had the chairs for about 10 years," she says. "They were covered in a bone-coloured vinyl in the 1970s and I can remember they stood in the spare room at my grandmother's house for many, many years. Originally they were covered in a lime and pomegranate-coloured wool boucle fabric, which was popular during the 1950s, but I have chosen more gentler, neutral tones in a Scandinavian wool."

Chairs are the new religion, apparently. In the Martel front room, an assortment of chairs are lined up facing the door awaiting their owners. Among them are some icons, including a rare Elda by Italian designer Joe Colombo and a couple of Featherstons, plus some whose pedigree is unknown but which look smart in their new clothes.

"The world is full of people searching for the perfect chair to feel comfortable and secure and relaxed and safe in, to watch television from,

CURRENT TRENDS

- High-quality, hand-crafted custom-built upholstered furniture.
- Wing-backed chairs are in demand.
- Panelled bed heads with quilting or diamond buttoning.
- Built-in bench seats.
- Upholstered walls.
- Upholstered furniture in outdoor spaces.

read the paper in and get away from the kids," says Martel's Mr Cronin. "When they find the chair that suits them, they will often hang on to it for ages, upholstering it when necessary."

"People have an emotional attachment to chairs."

- 1 & 2.** Reupholstered in a fire-engine red, a 1950s divan and matching chair.
- 3.** Peter Cronin (left) and Mark Castaldi with Grant Featherston chairs and a footstool being reupholstered in Kvadrat Hallingdal fabric.

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