

Decade of preparation precedes woman's launch of European-antiques business



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European Finds is a passion project for local marketing executive Sheila Howell, who spent a decade drafting her business plan and researching a range of antique furnishings and accessories and making sourcing trips to Europe before launching her online business in August. She converted a pole barn into a warehouse for her inventory. [Kyle Robertson/Dispatch]



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The Columbus Dispatch

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Most people nurture dreams for years, but it took decades for marketing executive Sheila Howell to start her dream business: European Finds antiques.

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Years of working in finance and marketing at various central Ohio companies consumed her professional time. Then, about 10 years ago, she hit a bump in the road.

"It can be tough being in the corporate world, and one day was really challenging," she said. "Driving home, I thought I had to set a goal that's just for me.

"I started by asking the question: What am I passionate about?"

She worked through the night on a marketing plan, and then "started doing more research. It didn't make sense to just jump into it."

That's putting it mildly. Howell went on to spend 10 years learning about antiques in general, particularly "French, 18th and 19th century furniture mostly, learning everything I could."

During that time, she made several trips to Europe, first to Italy and then — fulfilling her childhood dream — to France, and Versailles.

"It was everything I dreamt it would be," Howell said. "It was really, really crowded, though. I'm planning to go back to Versailles this coming spring, take my time and maybe get a personal guide and go through it slowly."

That would be quite a bit different from the whirlwind trip earlier this year when Howell finally felt ready to pull the trigger and buy an initial round of antiques to get the business running.

In March, "my thought was to go on my first sourcing trip, not necessarily to buy, but to find out prices, sources, fully vet it. I met with a handful of dealers and absolutely fell in love with some pieces. But it was a nerve-wracking moment when I said, 'OK, I'm actually going to buy these pieces.'"

Part of the reason Howell was so apprehensive was because she focuses on pieces that have a story.

"It's very difficult to find those pieces that have a story that can be authenticated," she said. "But it connects with me so much more, because it's no longer just something sitting in a warehouse. It's, 'Here's the family, here's how it was used.'"

"For example, there is a pair of Louis Philippe mirrors just removed from a mansion in northern France. It was one of the 'palaces of the Americas,' from families who would come over to the U.S. during the (19th century) industrial boom and come back and build big homes."

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Howell's emphasis on unique pieces is part of a trend in retail, said Lee Peterson, an executive vice president at WD Partners, a Dublin retail-consulting company.

"That's been a trend ... for a long time now, especially with millennials — original, authentic style," Peterson said. "I don't see that going away anytime soon.

"The uniqueness trend has been best brought to life as of late by Restoration Hardware in their RH Galleries. They're not antiques, but a very curated selection of fantastic individual furniture pieces (with a restaurant for you to think it all over in)."

Howell is also "very smart" to start her business online, Peterson said. "You can reach the world without signing a 10-year lease, and find out if your idea holds salt."

During her trip to Europe in March, Howell eventually bought three big pieces, but because she was going to have them shipped over in a container, she decided to buy more pieces to fill it up.

The container finally arrived in June and went into her "warehouse" — a pole barn owned by her son that Howell has equipped with insulation, temperature and humidity control and a security system.

Howell officially launched the business in August and sells the antiques online, on both her website and some online marketplaces.

"Smaller tables are certainly of interest, too," she said. "That gets to people downsizing — you can have a small piece and make a statement. But there's also a fair amount of interest in larger mirrors. They are statement pieces."

Eventually she'll have a showroom where customers can see the merchandise in person. But now she has her hands full, not only with the European Finds business but also as she continues to work full time as vice president of marketing for both Cheryl's Cookies and Fannie May, which are brands owned by 1800Flowers.com.

"I love staying busy," she said, chuckling, "and this is a perfect mix. I'm excited. So far it's been a lot of fun, although at times my hands were shaking because of the decisions I was making. But I'm glad I did it."

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