

Consumer Reports MoneyAdviser

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deal with it

How to get attic treasures appraised

"Antiques Roadshow" makes it look so easy. You appear at the taping of the PBS TV show with Grandma's old dresser, and *voilà!*—some expert tells you it's worth a fortune. In real life, putting a price on items like antiques and paintings isn't always so easy, or rewarding.

If you're simply looking to find out if that painting you found in the attic is worth anything, you can take your find to a major auction house, such as Sotheby's in New York or Bonhams & Butterfields in San Francisco. Auction houses may have experts on staff who can give you estimated values. You can also surf the Internet. Helpful sites for researching prices on art and antiques include www.artfact.com, www.artnet.com, www.artquest.com, www.askart.com, www.bada.org, and www.trocadero.com.

But if you need an official appraisal for an insurance policy, an estate sale, or a tax return, you'll need to find a professional appraiser with the appropriate experience. Here's how to find an appraiser with the chops you need:

► **Round up the names of local accredited appraisers** with expertise in the type of item you want evaluated. You can get referrals from the American Society of Appraisers (www.appraisers.org), the Appraisers Association of America (www.appraisersassoc.org), or the International Society of Appraisers (www.isa-appraisers.org). ASA-accredited appraisers must have at least two years of full-time experience. Appraisers with credentials from the ISA must have at least three years of experience; both groups require members to take courses.

The appraisers you choose should be accredited in a designated area for which they must take a special exam. If, for example, you need a painting appraised, make sure an appraiser is certified in fine art. Some specialty areas have subspecialty concentrations. You can, for example, find fine-art appraisers who specialize in contemporary art, prints, or old masters. The ASA and the ISA have directories at their sites searchable by specialties and subspecialties.

► **Request estimates from appraisers** on how much their services will cost. You can expect to pay between \$75 and \$350 per hour or more, depending on the level of expertise. Ask if the appraiser will be charging extra for expenses like photography. Also, make sure all fees are included in an appraisal agreement, which should specify the date by which you will receive the appraisal report as well as its purpose, whether it's for donation, estate tax, or insurance purposes, or to get it ready for a sale.

► **Avoid appraisers who offer to buy your items**, charge a percentage fee, or who work for free, says Frances Zeman, an accredited senior appraiser of the ASA with more than 20 years of experience. These red flags may indicate a conflict of interest. "An appraiser analyzes the data and applies that to the property being appraised," she says. "That's the only function an appraiser should make." \$