

Time for bed...

Lending an air of romance to the bedroom, it's easy to see why antique beds are becoming ever-more popular, says Jenny Oldaker

While classic British antique beds – from cast-iron or brass bedsteads to ornate mahogany four-posters – have their share of admirers, it's the exuberance of continental antique beds that seems to have captured our hearts in recent years.

Dr Scott Jones, owner of French Farmhouse Furniture (frenchfarmhousefurniture.co.uk) is a firm fan. 'British beds were typically fairly small, sober, dark-wood pieces, whereas their French and Italian counterparts were often large, joyful works,' he explains. 'Varying from restrained Louis XVI or Directoire forms to unashamedly theatrical Baroque (Louis XV) or Venetian pieces. After nearly 40 years I'm still amazed that I routinely discover uniquely wonderful beds in chateaux and attics all over France. Many French, Italian and Catalan beds have an éclat, romance and joie de vivre that our native beds don't.'

Louise Bacou, owner of La Maison London (lamaisonlondon.com) agrees. Her business, which she runs with her

husband Guillaume, started out as an antiques shop and soon began offering restorations too. Today, the company not only sells beautiful antiques – and is known especially for the impressive stock of 18th and 19th-century beds – but also undertakes recreations of the most popular antique beds to have passed through their hands. One such design is the 'Cherub' bed, which has attracted celebrity customers and been used in projects such as Soho House New York and Serangoon House Hotel in Singapore.

It's not hard to see why people are gravitating towards antique pieces in the bedroom. 'Having been through 18 months of lockdowns and so on, I think there's a desire for permanence and longevity,' says Louise. 'Antiques offer a connection to something greater than our troubles in the present. Our bedrooms are sanctuaries and we want them to be calm and elegant spaces, and that's reflected in the beautiful lines and craftsmanship of antique and antique-style beds.'

Scott suggests that it's the sense of permanence that comes with antique beds that resonates today: 'They are

beds for more than one life... it's hard to imagine any bed we deliver not putting a daily smile on the face of its owner – and their descendants!'

The modern beds created by La Maison London, inspired by the furniture of the past, also aim to impart this sense of continuity. 'I want the pieces we make to become antiques of tomorrow,' says Louise. 'I'm not interested in making something that someone will have for a few years and then move on. A lot of our customers are seeking a piece they want to have around for the rest of their lives.'

Although many antique beds are lavish affairs, it's worth noting that most of these frames (and mattresses) were smaller than the ones we demand today – the concept of king and super-king size are relatively modern – so most antique beds will require some work before they can be used. Specialist dealers usually employ experienced restoration experts to carry out sympathetic and careful work, which can be anything from cleaning and retouching paintwork to extending frames or side rails to accommodate modern mattresses. ❏



FROM TOP This late 19th-century or early 20th-century hand-painted Venetian bed is currently for sale at French Farmhouse Furniture for £5,495; a detail of a 19th-century Venetian giltwood headboard at La Maison London. **LEFT** The original 'Cherub' bed (now sold) in all its glory, decorated with the exquisitely painted putti after which it was named. **FAR LEFT** The hand carved reworking of the Cherub bed is La Maison London's most popular antique-style bed frame, POA.

Buying an antique bed

Louise Bacou, founder of La Maison London, offers advice...

PROPORTIONS: Antique beds come in many sizes and proportions, so choose one that works with the dimensions of your bedroom. As a general rule, rooms with ceilings higher than their depth and width can take beds that mirror those proportions: high headboards, four-posters, lit à la polonaise or beds with canopies can all work in these spaces. If the room's proportions are more contemporary, choose a bed with a headboard that is wider

than its height, such as Italian designs from the last century, which will work well.

BASE & MATTRESSES: Most antique beds are frames that consist of a headboard, footboard and two sidebars with various different support systems/designs to make up the base.

The frame's support system is usually either east/west slats, which sit across the frame, or sometimes there is an L-shaped metal bar attached to the sidebars that does the same

work. Before an antique bed frame can be used, a base will need to be placed on top of the slats – putting a mattress directly onto the slats won't give the mattress enough support and also, proportionally, the mattress will sit too low in relation to the headboard's design. A base can be hard top or sprung and is about 6in deep, although some Italian designs, with more contemporary, mid-century proportions, require a 'biscuit base' which is only about 3in deep. Your bed frame supplier will tell you what your bed requires and should either offer the service of making bases and mattresses to size or will have a list of suppliers you can order from directly.

CUT-OUT CORNERS: Beds with curves at the headboard or footboard can look very elegant and feel cossetting to sleep in. If the curves are particularly deep, then the base and mattress may need to have 'cut-out corners'. A template is made of the curve and the base/mattress manufacturer will then cut them to fit the curves. Most antique bed suppliers are used to this as an option and, again, your frame supplier should guide you through the process to completion.

SIZE: Antique beds come in many sizes, always in multiples of 3in: the springs, traditionally, were 3in so it is possible to find a 4ft 3in, 4ft 6in, 4ft 9in etc. Remember that

in deviating from modern 'standard sizes', buying a base and mattress off the shelf won't be an option. A good base and mattress supplier can make any size to order.

CANE OR UPHOLSTERY: If choosing a cane bed, make sure the cane is in good condition. It can last a long time if looked after properly and always ages gracefully in colour. If the bed is upholstered and the fabric looks tired, it can be freshened up with new fabric. As the bed will already have a natural ageing in the patina, choose a fabric to complement this.

TRUE SUSTAINABILITY: Although there are more things to consider when buying an antique bed than a modern, standard-sized

bed, there are real positives to owning an antique piece. Not only can you be part of the creative decision-making on whether it needs restoration and reupholstery etc, you will also become part of the bed's history and it will become part of yours. You can see this journey as true sustainability: we are looking after well-crafted pieces, caring for them in order to extend their life and usefulness, just as our ancestors did in a pre-industrial age. And that care and attention is returned to us as we live with pieces that age gracefully and beautifully and that are a joy to be around.

La Maison London lamaisonlondon.com