

To Restore or Not Restore

In the world of collecting, there are many different philosophies as to whether or not an item should be restored or left in its original “as found” condition. The rules for some are more clear cut than others. Coins, for example, should never be cleaned. They should be left totally untouched. Antique furniture may be carefully cleaned of dust and loose dirt but never thoroughly cleaned or refinished. Paintings can be cleaned and repaired where necessary.

In other collectibles, the rules are not as clearly defined. Car collecting has changed over the years. Many years ago there were two perspectives on car collecting. One was that the car should be in original condition and remain relatively untouched. The second was that a car should be totally restored to look as it did when new. In most cases the restoration made it look better than when it was new. Today the trend seems to be more toward customization and modification of original cars.

Blowtorch collection does not seem to have clear guidelines. It is all a matter of personal choice and personal taste. I’m sure many collectors got into collecting torches because they liked the look of polished brass, copper, and bronze. I know I did. However, I still like the look of a torch in very good original condition.

I have restored many torches in my life. In some cases there was a decision to be made as to whether or not I should do a restoration on a particular torch. In most cases, the decision was clear. I only collect auto torches and the tanks tend to get beat up and many times are bulged out like a balloon. The photo to the right is of a Clayton & Lambert Model 48 auto torch. This torch was in excellent slightly used condition and retained most of the original label on the front of the tank as well as almost all the original finish. This torch would look very pretty if it was polished but it’s rare that you find a torch manufactured prior to 1925 in this condition. I lightly cleaned this torch and did not polish it.



In many cases, such as the Russell torch below left, the decision is clear. There would be no way to remove all the excess solder and still retain a consistent patina. A restoration was clearly in order. In some cases the decision is a bit more complicated. The picture below right is a torch manufactured by Klein and owned by Graham Stubbs. It is actually in decent “as found” condition. At first glance, there would seem to be nothing unusual about this torch.

Closer examination would reveal that the tank is made of copper and there are engravings on the pump knob and the button on the top of the tank. Had these features not existed, there probably would have been no motivation to restore this seemingly typical looking torch.



The restoration of the Klein torch demonstrates a dramatic difference and in my opinion, makes it a much more desirable torch. Details that were once buried under a significant amount of corrosion are now clearly visible (below).



Ultimately the decision is yours. I don't believe it is black and white. I don't think every torch should be polished and I also don't believe every torch should be left untouched. The decision is that of the owner and determined by their preferences. I believe the true value of a torch is placed on it by its owner. I don't think too many of us consider the resale value of our collections.

I don't believe that restoration does any damage to the value of a torch. It may actually add value. I would caution you, however, that a torch is in its original condition only once. Any alteration or polishing changes that status. A torch cannot be unrestored. There is value to unrestored torches. I find both restored and unrestored torches aesthetically pleasing and therein resides their value to me.