



Above and right The 1714 'Leonora Jackson' Stradivari violin (on the right in both pictures) alongside a copy (left), varnished and antiqued by Jeff Phillips and Antoine Nédélec at the 2017 Oberlin Violin Makers Workshop

The art...

of deception?

Making a new instrument look old is a painstaking craft that requires skill, patience and imagination. But why do luthiers spend their time creating an unreal effect?

Peter Somerford speaks to both advocates and critics of the process

As with making copies, the practice of antiquing, or simulating the wear and tear of old instruments, divides opinion among violin makers. Is it a symptom of a craft that's too glued to its rear-view mirror, still so in thrall to past idols that makers today not only seek to copy 300-year-old models, but want their instruments to look old too? On the other hand, antiquing has a long history of its own, and if the classic old look is still admired, and in commercial demand, why shouldn't makers continue with it? For some, antiquing is a way to challenge oneself, and to showcase flair, imagination and technical prowess. Skillfully deployed artifice might elevate violins into works of art, but these are musical instruments, not paintings, goes the counter-argument – so why bother with all the fakery when an attractive straight-varnished instrument

works just as well? Perhaps, if what really counts for musicians is how an instrument sounds, then whether it's antiqued or not becomes simply a matter of personal taste – just as for makers, the way they varnish and finish their instruments is a personal choice.

For some makers, the experience of seeing and handling the finest violins by the likes of Stradivari and Guarneri 'del Gesù' creates a strong desire to emulate the look of those instruments. "The main reason I do antiquing is because I just find old instruments incredibly beautiful," says Antoine Nédélec, who regularly teaches varnishing and antiquing techniques as a faculty member of the Violin Society of America's Oberlin Summer Workshops. American maker Joseph Curtin explains why the finish of old instruments can fascinate and beguile: "Old violin finishes can have so many things

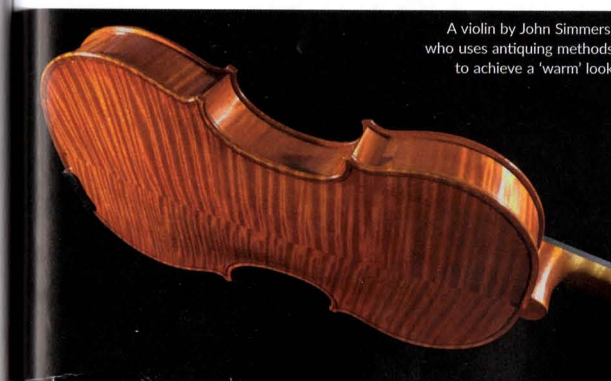
going on. There is the texture from scraping and finishing the wood. There is the surface texture of oil varnish, and then how that changes over time with scratching, corrosion, and craquelure. There's the way that dirt gets worked into the finish, highlighting the texture. All this tells a story."

To emulate such effects convincingly demands excellent skill, but also flair and artistry, say makers. "Violin making is more of a craft than an art," says Nédélec, "but there is certainly some artistry about it." Antiquing can be an avenue of creative experimentation and technical virtuosity, going beyond what makers were ever taught in school or permitted

to do for violin making competitions (Cremona's Triennale and the Mittenwald competition, among others, both prohibit artificially aged instruments). Australian luthier John Simmers says: "For some makers, antiquing can become a personal challenge to push themselves and prove their skill and artistic flair. It is great fun and I've enjoyed doing it in the past, and so I completely understand why people do it."

There are different degrees of antiquing. A luthier tasked with making a bench copy of an old violin, for example, might go to amazing lengths to capture every last mark or variation in patina on the original instrument. Simmers thinks this amount of effort makes sense in certain circumstances: "There is a very legitimate reason for making exact copies: if someone has a beautiful old instrument that they don't want to travel around the world with, then they might have an accurate replica made. In that case, the intention of most makers is to make the instrument look as close to the original as possible." For Tokyo-based maker Andreas Preuss, antiquing is less about scrupulous attention to detail and more about leaving space for a maker's personality and artistic expression to come through. ▶

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A violin by John Simmers, who uses antiquing methods to achieve a 'warm' look