



18th-century Venetian "in the manner of Viani". They were withdrawn from the sale, but not before one leading dealer had submitted a written offer to the vendor, through the auctioneers, of £650. Then several top-flight English and French experts were invited to appraise them, not with the intention of purchase, but to establish a definitive attribution. All agreed that they were undoubtedly antique, but there were intriguing differences in their assessments.

"The patination is superb, but the modelling of the torso is slightly 19th century in its handling." "The carving – particularly the facial expression – is undoubtedly 18th century, but I feel that the decoration is of a slightly later date – probably redecorated about 1860." "They are genuine, but made at different dates by the same hand." "Of course the shells are recent. Believe me, this type always held torches in their hands – look, you can see where the arms have been altered." "The pedestals don't

belong to them – someone's replaced the original marble ones at a later date." Eventually, the blackamoors were exported to Paris as modern reproduction ornaments, and as we go to press are a popular attraction at the Paris Antique Dealers Fair.

The moral of this cautionary tale is that highly decorated furniture is nearly always restored, and the purchaser should insist on a written statement from the vendor which specifies just how much of the decoration, and the undermatter, is original. The demand for this type of furniture has made dealers less careful what they buy, because they know only too well that it is all too easily saleable. At least one London dealer has his own workshop converting plain brown Victorian furniture into brass inlaid 'Regency' pieces by the car load. The label 'Regency table in antique mahogany' means that the table is made of antique mahogany – possibly an old wardrobe. In an increasingly material



age, the knowledge and perhaps the wish to spot the multitudinous impostors in these fields is shrinking. There are now too few men capable of telling a fake, or even of safely giving an accurate opinion, though in almost every case the opinions they give are honestly based. There is a frightening fall in the number of experts, which is in almost direct proportion to the increase in the number of dealers specialising in 'decorative furniture'.

The British Antique Dealers Association are the right people to take steps to ensure that the great mass of 'expertise' is not allowed to drift away from the trade, and should realise that their members' reputation cannot be jealously guarded except by some very positive action. The goldsmiths' and silversmiths' associations pass their 'lore' on to their members; so do diamond and precious stone merchants, antiquarian booksellers and numismatists. Perhaps the B.A.D.A. will in the future live up to their motto: 'Knowledge dispels ignorance.'