

***The Nearly-Extinct Formal Dining Room:
Why Your Dining Room Is Worth Less Than You Thought***

by

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As an Appraiser and Home Downsizing Consultant I have the opportunity to visit many homes. Most homes I visit have a Formal Dining Room which typically consists of:

- Table: Usually mahogany, cherry, walnut, maple, oak, or pine, and of varying maker, age, and style.
- Chairs: Usually 4-6-8-12 chairs, and the chairs are often, but not always, matching.
- Hutch: The hutch will normally have a glass-door or open top, and closed bottom.
- Sideboard and/or Buffet: With display space on top, and closed bottom.
- Better China, Glassware & Figurines: On display is usually some better glassware & crystal (Waterford, Lalique, Baccarat, etc.), some better porcelain (Limoges, Wedgwood, Lenox, etc.), some better figurines (Hummel, Lladro, Royal Doulton, etc.), some sterling silver and/or silver plate accessories, and other select fine items.
- All the Rest: Usually hidden beneath the hutch, sideboard, or buffet is a set of china, some additional sterling silver or silver plate flatware and accessories, assorted serving trays & bowls, table cloths and napkins, placemats, and other various items. Often these items have a holiday theme. And often these items were received as wedding gifts 20, 30, or 40+ years ago.

Traditionally the formal dining room has been reserved for family get-togethers such as Thanksgiving, Christmas, Hanukkah, Easter, Birthdays, Anniversaries, etc. Yet in all-too-many households the dining room is used significantly less today than it was in years past.

Most families have the best of intentions. They honestly intend on using this room for their next important family get-together. But as that special date approaches, reality usually sinks in and few are willing to do all of the work associated with a formal dining room. As a result an increasing number of households take the easy way out: *They bring out the paper and the plastic and dine in a more informal setting.*

I'm not suggesting that no one uses the formal dining room today. Some do. But what I am suggesting is that it is used less frequently by the 60+ generation today than it was in previous decades. I am suggesting that the 30-50+ generation uses it far less frequently than their parent's generation. And I am suggesting that the formal dining room, as we know it, is on the decline... *and nearing extinction.*

The formal dining room is not disappearing because people don't like fine things. Rather, it is disappearing because of all the work associated with using it. Far fewer families today are willing to:

- Wash the china before the meal (because it hasn't been used for so long).
- Wash the china after the meal.
- Wash and iron the cloth tablecloth and napkins.
- Polish the silver.
- Put in the table's extension leaves.
- Dust-off the tchotchkes.
- Actually eat in the dining room... away from the football game on TV.

And sadly, with the decline of the formal dining experience, the demand for traditional furniture and accessories has also declined. With the exception of sterling silver flatware and accessories, whose value fluctuates with the daily spot price of silver, the value of most other dining room furniture and accessories has significantly declined in recent years.

As an example I recently had a client who was downsizing from a 4-bedroom home to a retirement community. As part of her home downsizing we sold 104 pieces of her *Rosenthal China* (a high-end German porcelain), all in excellent condition, and including some better serving pieces. It brought only \$40 at a highly reputable regional Auction House. In the same Auction the same client sold a single child's sterling silver handled cup sold for \$75!

How in the world can a single sterling silver cup be worth more than 104 pieces of *Rosenthal China*? I attribute this to four things:

- *The Soft Economy*: No one really needs these items today. With the value of people's real estate and retirement savings falling, with the financial insecurities associated with a tight job market, and with all of the fears surrounding the world, no one really needs dining room furniture and accessories today.
- *The Changing Demographics*: The younger generation simply doesn't care as much for the formal dining experience as their parent's and grandparent's generation. And as these generations age, downsize, and pass on, there are fewer in the younger generation interested in buying these items... especially at yesterday's inflated prices.
- *Market Reality*: Few Antiques dealers today are interesting in repeatedly packing and unpacking a slow-moving commodity.
- *The Disappearing Formal Dining Room*: The formal dining room has traditionally been one of the "least-used" rooms in the house, and as the size of new-construction houses has been shrinking, and the number of condos and smaller 55+ communities has been increasing, it has simply been eliminated from many homes. And fewer dining rooms means less demand for dining room furniture and accessories.

As a result, with the exception of sterling silver, the value of most formal dining room furniture and accessories has plunged in value in recent years. No one needs it, and relatively few want it today. So when the time comes to sell the contents of your dining room, don't be too surprised to find that the value is not what you may have hoped for.

The best advice I can give clients is this:

- Determine what you paid for it years ago.
- Determine what you can sell it for today.
- Divide the difference by the number of years you have owned it.

That will represent the average annual expense it has cost you to own it. And once you run the numbers, you will probably find that despite today's soft prices the cost of your formal dining room, and the many years of memories and enjoyment it has provided, was one of the best investments you have ever made.

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Keywords: home downsizing, michael ivankovich, bucks county appraiser, dining room, declining furniture values, antiques