



Tuft talk

An antique sofa now speaks volumes with tufting

by Kelly Frush

If this antique sofa could talk, it would have a lot to say. In addition to spilling its history—it reportedly came around Cape Horn many years ago—it would also thank upholsterer Kelly Mielke for restoring its characteristic Victorian-style tufting.

The previous upholstery job lacked the Victorian charm so many collectors covet. Mielke, of Kelly's Upholstery in Bellingham, Wash., and his customers decided button tufts would be in character with its Victorian style and enhance the antique settee's beauty.


"They didn't ask how much it would cost," Mielke says. "They just brought it in, set it in front of me and said, 'What do you think?'"

Mielke suggested tufting and drew up a pattern, excited to have his customers confident in his expert opinion.

"They trusted my judgment," he says.

Mielke thought the frame was exquisitely made and the woodwork superb. Only two vertical supports in the back and two on the sides had held weight for 150 years. But after removing the old upholstery, Mielke realized that due to repeated reupholstering, there was very little wood left to work with.

He filled the spaces with 3½-inch jute webbing, added cotton and included the original horsehair. He then covered the sofa in Irvin Allen chenille and had the last word with the tufting.

Mielke's customers were thrilled with the outcome, and so were the 2008 Design & Craftsmanship Awards judges—the project earned a Platinum award in the antique couch category. Now that's saying something. 



Above (before): The turn-of-the-century heirloom's upholstery included double welt and joints in odd places. Mielke told his customers he thought tufting and gimp would work better for the piece. "They just said, 'Do what you will with it!' And so I did," Mielke says. **Top (after):** "When doing tufts on a concave surface, they foreshorten," Mielke says. "They have a tendency to crowd towards the center if the pattern is the same, so that had to be taken into consideration. Those curves made it a bit of a challenge."

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Project: Turn-of-the-century antique sofa

Upholsterer: Kelly Mielke, Kelly's Upholstery, Bellingham, Wash.