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AN EXTENDED GUIDE · NO. 1836

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Tracking auctions and realized prices online

An Extended Guide · No. 1836 · COLLECTORS' TECH

Tech Made Simple. Service Made Personal.

Bill Davis — Bill's Home Tech

(330) 200-8042 · bill@billshometech.com · Atwater, Ohio

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1 What is it really worth?

Anyone who collects — coins, stamps, trading cards, watches, art, antiques, old toys — or who has inherited a collection and is trying to make sense of it, eventually faces the same question: what is this actually worth? It is a surprisingly hard question to answer well, because the number that matters is not what a price guide prints, not what a hopeful seller is asking, and not what a dealer offers — it is what items like yours have actually sold for, recently, to real buyers.

That figure is called the realized price, and learning to find it online is the single most valuable skill a collector can have.

The internet has made this research genuinely possible for ordinary people in a way it never was before. The records of what things sell for — on auction sites, at auction houses, in specialist databases — are now largely searchable from your own computer, for free or at modest cost. Learning to use them means you can value your own collection honestly, avoid overpaying when you buy, avoid being lowballed when you sell, and understand what you actually have. It turns guessing into knowing.

This guide shows you how to research realized prices online: the crucial difference between asking prices and selling prices, how to use the free tools everyone has access to, where the specialist databases are for serious collectibles, and how to read the results wisely so you draw the right conclusions. None of it requires special expertise — just a little method and the understanding of a few key ideas. By the end you will be able to find out, for most things, what they are genuinely worth.

2 Asking price is not selling price

The most important idea in this entire guide, and the one that trips up nearly everyone at first, is the difference between what someone is asking for an item and what items actually sell for. These are two very different numbers, and confusing them is the single biggest mistake people make when trying to value a collection. An asking price is a hope; a selling price is a fact.

Picture a search that shows ten of your item listed for sale at prices from fifty to three hundred dollars. It is tempting to conclude yours is worth somewhere in that range, maybe splitting the difference. But those are asking prices — what hopeful sellers want, which may be wildly optimistic, and many of those listings may sit unsold for months or years at those prices.

The three-hundred-dollar listing tells you only that someone wishes their item were worth three hundred dollars. It tells you nothing about what a buyer would actually pay.

What you need instead are the records of completed sales — the items that actually changed hands, and for how much. If those same items have been selling for forty to sixty dollars despite some sellers asking three hundred, then forty to sixty is the truth of the matter, and the high asking prices are just noise.

Training yourself to always seek the selling price, never the asking price, and to mentally discard the hopeful listings, is the foundation of honest valuation. Everything else in this guide is really about finding those real selling prices reliably.

3 The free tool everyone has: completed sales

The most accessible realized-price resource, and the one most collectors use daily, is the completed and sold listings on the big general auction site, eBay — a vast record of what ordinary items of every kind have actually sold for, searchable for free. Because so much buying and selling of collectibles happens there, its record of completed sales is often the best single gauge of real-world value for everyday collectibles, from common coins to old toys to mid-range watches.

The trick is to search not the active listings (which show asking prices) but the completed or sold ones (which show what actually sold). Within the site's search, there is a filter to show sold items — turning it on transforms your results from a list of hopeful asking prices into a record of real transactions, with the price each one actually fetched, usually shown in green for the ones that sold.

Suddenly you are looking at facts instead of hopes, and a pattern of real value emerges from the numbers.

Learning to do this well — searching specifically, filtering to sold items, and reading the results — is a skill the next chapters develop, but the core idea is simple and powerful: for a huge range of collectibles, the free record of what things have actually sold for is sitting right there, a few clicks away, if you know to look at sold listings rather than active ones.

For many collectors, this one free resource answers most of their valuation questions, and it costs nothing but the knowledge of how to use it.

4 Searching sold listings well

Getting trustworthy answers from sold listings is partly about searching precisely, because a sloppy search gives a misleading mix of unrelated items and a precise one gives a clean picture of your exact item's value. The goal is to compare apples to apples — to find sold items that genuinely match yours in the details that affect value, not just the general type.

Search with the specific details that matter for your kind of collectible: not just 'silver coin' but the exact country, denomination, year, and mint mark; not just 'baseball card' but the player, year, set, and card number; not just 'watch' but the brand, model, and reference number. The more precisely you describe your exact item, the more the sold results will reflect its true value rather than a muddy average of loosely similar things.

If too few results appear, loosen the search a little; if too many unrelated ones appear, tighten it.

Then read the matching sold results as a group rather than fixating on any single one. Look for the cluster — the range where most of the genuine matches sold — and treat that as your answer, while setting aside the odd outlier high or low (which may reflect a mistake, a special variant, or a listing with poor photos that sold cheap).

A dozen sold examples clustering around a figure tell you far more than one lucky high sale. This habit of searching precisely and reading the cluster is what turns the raw data into a reliable valuation, and it improves quickly with a little practice on your own collection.

5 Condition changes everything

One factor overwhelms almost all others in determining what a collectible is worth, and failing to account for it is how people most often misjudge value: condition. The same coin, card, stamp, or watch can be worth a few dollars in worn condition and a fortune in pristine condition, and two items that look similar to an untrained eye can differ enormously in value because of subtle differences in their state of preservation.

This means that when you find sold prices for 'your item,' you must compare condition honestly, not just the item's identity. A sold example that fetched a high price may have been in far better condition than yours — or yours may be the better one. Look carefully at the photos and the condition descriptions of the sold items, and match them to a clear-eyed assessment of your own, resisting the universal temptation to grade your own treasures generously.

The realized price that applies to you is the one for items in genuinely the same condition as yours.

For many serious collectibles, condition is formalized into grades — professional grading services assign coins, cards, and other items a standardized condition grade, and a graded item's value is closely tied to that grade. When researching such items, the realized prices you want are for the same grade as yours, since a jump of even one grade can multiply or halve the value.

Understanding that condition, and formal grade where it applies, is the master variable keeps you from the common error of seeing a high sold price and assuming yours is worth the same, when the difference in condition makes them worlds apart in value.

6 Specialist databases for serious collectibles

For more valuable or specialized collectibles, the general auction site's sold listings are only the start; there is a deeper world of specialist price databases and auction records that serious collectors rely on, and knowing they exist opens up far better information for the things that warrant it. These focus on particular fields — coins, stamps, cards, art, watches, wine — and aggregate sales from many sources, including the major auction houses whose results the general sites miss.

In most collecting fields there are well-known databases and price-guide resources that track realized prices in detail — some free, some by subscription, many run by or alongside the grading services and specialist auction houses. For coins, stamps, trading cards, and the like, these resources often let you look up a specific item in a specific grade and see a documented history of what examples have actually sold for, which is more authoritative and complete than a general-site search for high-value pieces.

The major auction houses also publish their past results online, a goldmine for valuing finer items.

The practical approach is to use the free general-site sold listings for everyday items, and to seek out the specialist database for your particular field when you have something valuable enough to justify it — a rare coin, a graded card, a piece that might be worth real money. A little searching for 'realized prices' or 'auction results' in your collecting area, or asking a reputable dealer or a collector community which databases they trust, will point you to the right resources.

For serious pieces, that deeper research is well worth the effort, since the difference between a good and a poor valuation can be substantial — and these databases are how knowledgeable collectors avoid both overpaying and underselling.

Rather not do this yourself? I'll come to your home and set it up for you — a flat $99 first visit across Portage County, Ohio and nearby communities. Outside the area? I also help remotely by phone or screen-share. Book at billshometech.com/book or call (330) 200-8042.

7 Setting up saved searches and alerts

Research need not be a one-time effort every time you wonder about value; the auction sites let you save searches and receive alerts, which turns valuation into an ongoing, effortless stream of information. For an active collector — whether buying, selling, or simply tracking a collection's worth — this is a genuinely useful habit that keeps you continuously informed without repeated work.

On the general auction site, you can save a search for a specific item and have the site notify you when matching items are listed, and you can keep an eye on completed sales over time to watch how prices for your items move. If you are hunting to buy a particular piece, a saved search alerts you the moment one appears, so you do not miss it.

If you are tracking value, watching the stream of sold prices over weeks and months shows you whether your item's value is rising, falling, or steady — information no single snapshot can give.

This ongoing view matters because collectible values are not fixed; they drift with fashion, with the wider economy, and with what happens to be in demand at the moment. A price that was right two years ago may be well off today. By saving searches and periodically glancing at recent sold prices for the items you care about, you keep a living sense of your collection's worth rather than a stale one, and you are ready to act — to buy, sell, or simply know — whenever the moment is right.

It costs nothing and takes almost no effort once set up, and it keeps your knowledge current.

8 Avoiding the traps

The world of collectible values has some pitfalls that catch the unwary, and knowing them protects you from both bad valuations and outright scams. Beyond the fundamental asking-versus-selling confusion already covered, a few traps are worth naming so you can steer around them as you research and, eventually, buy or sell.

Beware the inflated 'book value' from an old or optimistic price guide, which often bears little relation to what items actually sell for — real realized prices trump any printed guide. Beware the lone spectacular sold price that you want to believe applies to your item; one anomaly is not the market, and may reflect a special variant, two bidders in a frenzy, or even a faked sale.

And when it comes time to sell, beware dealers or 'we buy collectibles' operations that count on your not having done this research — your realized-price homework is exactly what lets you tell a fair offer from a lowball one.

WATCH OUT

Be especially cautious of anyone who pressures you to sell quickly, or who offers to value your collection and then buy it themselves — an obvious conflict of interest. Do your own realized-price research first, get more than one offer for anything valuable, and never let urgency rush you. A collection that took years to build can wait a few weeks for you to understand what it is truly worth; anyone insisting otherwise is serving their interest, not yours.

9 From knowing the value to acting on it

Once you can find what your items are truly worth, that knowledge becomes a tool for whatever you want to do — buy wisely, sell well, insure accurately, or simply understand and enjoy your collection with clear eyes. The research is not an end in itself but a foundation for confident decisions, and it serves differently depending on your purpose.

If you are buying, realized prices tell you whether an asking price is fair, so you neither overpay nor miss a genuine bargain, and you can bid or negotiate from knowledge rather than hope. If you are selling, they tell you what to realistically expect and let you recognize a fair offer and reject a lowball, whether you sell privately, through the auction site yourself, or via a dealer or auction house.

If you are insuring or cataloging a collection — tasks that have their own guides — realized prices give you honest values to record rather than guesses or inflated book figures.

And if you are simply a collector who loves the things themselves, knowing their real value adds a quiet satisfaction and protects you from the disappointments of overvaluing — you hold your collection with accurate affection rather than inflated fantasy, and you are never caught out by a dealer or a hopeful seller. However you use it, the ability to find realized prices online transforms you from someone at the mercy of others' claims into someone who knows the truth of the market — which, in the world of collecting, is a genuine and empowering advantage.

10 Common worries, answered plainly

The questions collectors ask me most about researching value.

Why can't I just use the prices I see listed for sale?

Because those are asking prices — hopes, not facts — and many never sell at those numbers. You need completed, sold prices, which show what buyers actually paid. Confusing the two is the most common valuation mistake there is.

Is the free auction-site research good enough?

For everyday and mid-range collectibles, usually yes — its record of sold listings is excellent. For rare or high-value pieces, add the specialist database or auction-house results for your field, which are more complete and authoritative.

Why do similar items sell for such different prices?

Almost always condition, and for graded items the exact grade — the master variable in collectible value. Compare the condition of sold examples honestly against your own; a high price for a pristine example doesn't apply to a worn one.

A dealer offered to value my collection — should I trust it?

Be cautious if they also want to buy it — that's a conflict of interest. Do your own realized-price research first and get more than one offer for anything valuable. Your homework is what tells a fair offer from a lowball.

11 A simple plan to value your collection

Putting it into practice is a matter of method, not expertise, and you can start valuing your collection this afternoon.

Pick an item and identify it as precisely as you can — the exact type, maker, year, model, and any identifying marks. Search the general auction site for that specific item, filter to sold or completed listings rather than active ones, and read the cluster of real selling prices for examples in the same condition as yours, setting aside the outliers.

That cluster is your honest answer for everyday items. For anything that appears valuable, go deeper into the specialist price database or auction-house results for that field, matching your item's grade or condition exactly.

For a collection, work through it this way piece by piece — or at least the notable pieces — saving searches for items you want to track and glancing at recent sold prices over time to keep your values current. Keep condition front of mind as the master variable, remember always that selling prices, not asking prices, are the truth, and stay wary of inflated book values and conflicted dealers.

Done this way, you build an honest, current picture of what you actually have — the knowledge that lets you buy, sell, insure, or simply enjoy your collection from a position of genuine understanding rather than guesswork.

> *The real answer is never the asking price — it's what items like yours, in the condition yours is in, have actually sold for. Find that, and you know what you truly have.*

12 Your visit — and my promise

Getting set up to research your collection's value — learning to search sold listings precisely, filtering to completed sales, finding the specialist database for your particular field, setting up saved searches to track prices over time, and reading the results wisely — is exactly the kind of patient, practical help I enjoy giving at your kitchen table. I can get you comfortable with the tools so you can keep valuing your collection confidently on your own.

My promise is simple: I will teach you to find the real, honest values yourself rather than leaving you dependent on anyone's claims, help you steer clear of the traps and lowballers, and leave you able to understand what your collection is genuinely worth — for your own peace of mind and your own good decisions.

Bill Davis — Bill's Home Tech. Phone or text (330) 200-8042. Email bill@billshometech.com. Based in Atwater, Ohio, serving all of Portage County. Monday–Friday, 9 AM–5 PM (closed weekends); Sophie answers day or night.

BEFORE YOU GO

A Note From Bill

A quick note from Bill. I write these guides to make home tech a little less frustrating, and I do my best to keep every step accurate and up to date. Still, every home, device, and setup is a bit different, so I can't promise a guide will match yours exactly or fix your particular problem. These guides are for general information only — they're not professional, legal, or financial advice, and they don't replace your device's own manual or the manufacturer's instructions. Please go slow, use your own good judgment, and use everything here at your own risk. If a step involves electrical wiring, a gas appliance, a water heater, plumbing, or climbing a ladder — or if anything just doesn't feel safe — please stop and call a licensed professional (or give me a call at 330-200-8042). Bill's Home Tech and Bill Davis can't be responsible for any damage, data loss, or injury that results.

HOW I CAN HELP

Your Visit — and My Promise

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KEY SPECS

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Outside the area? Remotely — $49 for a screen-share session (free for Support Plan members, $39/mo), refundable if I can't fix it — and credited toward a visit if you'd rather have me in person. Book either at billshometech.com/book.

GOOD TO KNOW

My promise — If you're not 100% satisfied with your visit, I'll come back at no charge, or refund the full $99. No questions, no awkwardness. That's how I'd want to be treated.

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