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Nothing appeals like the genuine thing

Real Deal



BY JANICE PAPOLOS

I LIVE IN A STREAMLINED, contemporary home. I own exactly one antique: an 18th-century Colonial American candlestick given to my husband and me as a wedding present. It sits so high up on my bookshelves that it's not really visible, and, frankly, I haven't thought of it in years. But several recent events have opened my eyes to the true value of objects from the past, and this value has nothing to do with Christie's or Sotheby's or eBay.

A few weeks ago, my dear friend, writer Victoria Secunda, downsized and shed a lifetime of saved-but-stuffed-in-the-basement memorabilia. Culled from her collection are a few touchstones to ground her in this time of stress and new beginnings: the 19th-century camphor-wood chest once owned by her seafaring great-great-grandfather, sepia photographs of her great-grandmother and great-aunt, their letters written in the 1800s, penned in an old-fashioned spidery hand. These antique treasures serve as a kind of taproot into her past that give her a sense of perspective about her own place in her family's history.

I gained another insight into the unique property of antiques when I visited artist Susanne Williams in her family's summer cottage on Cape Cod. We spent a lot of time talking about the launch of her Art From Antiques notecard company that draws upon her family's love of antiques. She photographs decorative details she finds not only adorning her own family's collection, but also among those she finds in her travels.

These details include images painted on furniture, designs painted or etched on glass, and those glazed onto 19th-century English teacups and saucers. From these photographs, she creates highly original and evocative notecard collections.

As Susanne pointed out the patterns on the furniture and accessories, she mentioned phrases that were new to me, such as *verre eglomise* (painting on the underside of glass) and *rosemaling* (the 18th-century Scandinavian art of flower painting on wooden furniture). She told me that her grandmother had commissioned the Swedish artist Axel Farham to paint much of the rustic wooden pieces placed around the house. Suddenly a blue chair sitting in the living room became more than an old blue chair with pinkish swirls on its back. I began to picture Axel Farham learning the craft of rosemaling in some remote and frozen place and envisioned the low, leaden sky over the vast waves of the Atlantic as he traveled to a new homeland.

I thought of Susanne's grandmother in her house across an ocean of years, filled with her people and the comings and goings of a summer day. I imagined her conferring with the artist as seagulls wheeled in the middle distance and the sun poured through the six-over-six windows.

And therein lies one of the great values of antiques. They allow the mind to travel back through time, to a distant geography, and to people and their daily long-ago lives. The Hepplewhite side table you touch today could have been touched by a woman in Yorkshire in a sprigged-muslin, empire-waisted day dress, serving tea to newly arrived guests. Such objects are mute bearers of history whose secrets are closely held. They can be guessed at but never fully known. Who made the captain's sea chest that survived to the present day in Victoria's new home? What did her great-great-grandfather keep inside it: scrimshaw carvings, detailed logbooks, letters from his sweetheart? How I wish I could ask him: What were the trade routes you traveled? Did you sail around Cape Horn, the "sailor's graveyard"? Were you frightened when flogged by ferocious winds? Did you see the fabled cities of

Sir Real

ALTHORP, the 500-year-old residence in Northamptonshire, England, has been home to successive generations of the Spencer family—the most notable member being the late Princess Diana. Some may recall her brother Charles, Earl of Spencer, who catapulted himself to international fame when he delivered stinging comments about his sister's in-laws at her 1997 funeral. Like other peers of the realm, he has to keep up appearances, in this case, upkeep of a mammoth stone mansion replete with exquisite furnishings. As heir to Althorp, the Earl has his work cut out for him, but now, with the aid of expert furniture maker Theodore Alexander, Earl Spencer is leveraging the assets of the family manse to generate a stunning home-furnishings brand. Reproductions are popping up in places such as Lillian August, where some 200 pieces of Althorp's dazzling furniture are available to count and commoner alike. Spencer explains his knock-off project by saying that a reproduction preserves the aura of the real thing while also raising the money needed to maintain it. "Ask any of the occupants of the great country houses of Britain what their greatest challenge is, and they will touch on the responsibility they feel for preserving their heritage," he says. "I view my role primarily as custodian rather than owner, and therefore hope to pass Althorp to my heir in a better state than when I inherited it." How original. —Caroline Davis



China? Such an item triggers countless questions about its history and brings to life bits of knowledge and images gleaned from a lifetime of reading or visiting museums.

And this leads us ultimately to the question: Is a reproduction as good as the real thing? After all, a copy may be extremely well-made, cost a third as much as an original, and no doubt give joy to an owner who relates to its historical period. But can it elicit the same musings as a piece that shared space and time with its creator would? The real thing arose from the mind and hands and talent of one person who actually lived and worked in that particular period. Once realized, the object set off on its journey where it began to gather

the molecules of memory and time. Reproductions lack that layer of history, that richness. They are beautiful, yet twice removed.

But no matter what we place in our homes—real antiques, reproductions, or items of a more contemporary aesthetic, I've realized that we ourselves are fashioning objects that may, in the fullness of time, come to have meaning and value to a fellow human being. A needlepoint stitched, a table crafted, a letter artfully written—these things are real. Perhaps they, too, will be treasured and preserved. In generations to come, an unknown someone may speculate about us and our lives. We will become the progenitors, the originators, the ancestors. ■