

Antiques Roadshow: The Object of Learning

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Even as school administrators were cutting the unique feature of museum Educators from the school district budget, museum directors in Philadelphia were calling teaching through objects, 'lightning in a bottle.' Educating through objects that have been crafted by talented artisans, owned by famous people, cherished by their association with loved ones, or inanimate witnesses to important historical moments is a recognized and immediate path to learning in the arts. In the search for the authentic, while simultaneously embracing the virtual, Americans participate in shaping a broad understanding of popular culture and accumulated history. Americans are having a love affair with bric-a-brac, yard sales, estate sales, and flea markets. A parallel development can be seen in the advent of genealogy as a hobby in diagramming family trees. Learning from actual objects fuses the critical processes of observation, analysis and evaluation with an appreciation of technical and design skills. Object learning is a type of cultural mirror.

The appeal of the objects found in attics, basements, and garages is best seen in public television's program, Antiques Roadshow. An educator can not help but be absorbed by the interest level and attention to detail the amateur antique scavengers have for the stories the appraisers wholeheartedly share with them and the public television

audience. Art education, as a discrete discipline as well as a springboard to interdisciplinary instruction, shares similar goals and investigative approaches to learning from objects with that of Antiques Roadshow. Mutually reinforcing pedagogical comparisons between popular television shows and educational initiatives create cultural connections and build community. After watching Antiques Roadshow only a few times, a viewer could become an amateur art historian grouping objects being appraised into germane themes such as Frontier Life after the Civil War along America's major rivers- the Missouri, the Mississippi, the Columbia, and the Colorado, or The Untutored Eye-portraits and landscapes in clothing, wall hangings, flags, and upholstery or The Inventive Mind-fanciful toys and useful tools or New York City 1920s through the 1950s from Table Settings to Street Walkers. Style, materials and chronology become the tools for all learners in a quest to categorize history.

The call to merge 'road' and 'rubric' has direct backing in the National Education Goals: lifelong learning, language literacy linked with visual literacy, an enhanced set of national standards in all disciplines, and recognition of professional development as a part of the national agenda. In addition, the Advanced Placement examination in art history has begun to move from object identification to an understanding of cultural values inherent in a work of art. These examinations have a wider range of artifacts from world cultures being examined than ever before underscoring the importance of ritual, myth, ceremony, religion, geography, and materials inherent in each society. The sanctity of what is considered an art historical resource is therefore greatly expanded to include objects of daily life as well as those in archives and on view in museums. For over ten years, *Art Education* magazine has used its instructional resource section to provide color reproductions of non-western artifacts to promote further integration of global art making into the classroom. The pictured resources of

diverse objects act as two-dimensional substitutes for actual objects not readily accessible.

The Smithsonian Institution with its numerous museums in Washington, D.C. and two in New York City is embarking on a reinvigoration of its National Program. The Smithsonian Institution owns circa 140 million objects including rocks, sundials, candlesticks, weathervanes, and irons, teapots, quilts, clocks, paintings, documents and a great variety of other artifacts together seen as the accumulated wealth of the nation. If just over half of the 275 million people who live in the United States became the caretaker of one of these objects there would be a ground swell of national pride in the contents of the storeroom of our natural and constructed environment. A more closely aligned sense of ownership could develop with these objects through actual and/or virtual adoption. Ideas of personal and national ownership would, therefore, be both expanded and refined. A breathtaking piece of jewelry at the Cooper Hewitt Museum in New York, for instance, was labeled American, not because of its style or manufacture, but because the stones employed in the brooch were indigenous to the United States. Art education in the United States has its foundation in aiding industry and refining tools and instruments for industrial and domestic improvement so important to a growing country. Concomitantly, copying Old Master paintings and sculptures has been a hallmark of traditional American art education in the academics. Object learning, however, has functioned both in progressive learning environments and in bastions of traditionalism fostering an in-depth exploration and understanding of one's surroundings.

Discovery is both a method and an inspiration for learning. The 'you are there' instant, the 'aha' moment, and the unfolding of a story with a totally surprise ending often requires great planning, orchestration, and erudition. The appraisers at the Antiques Roadshow know competing jewelers of the 19th century in New York or

silversmiths in Boston, they know the manufacturers' hallmark stamped into glass and metal pieces, and they readily recognize hardware that has been replaced on bureaus, dressers and desks. Interesting asides reflects the expertise of the appraisers and includes information such as the use of the word Catlinite. Catlinite is a stone carved by Native Americans named after the East Coast painter George Catalan, who was known for his portraits of Native Americans in the mid 19th century. The appraisers know the distinction between 5, 4 or 3 clawed small sculptural dragons used as holders for Chinese calligraphy brushes which feed a wide collectors' market. The owner's appreciation of the symmetry and design of the horns on the back and sides of a Texas Longhorn Rocking Chair was rewarded by knowing others valued this piece with high auction prices. Astute to the fact that a flint enamel glaze for ceramics is typically from Scotland enabled the appraiser to quickly match up the piece on hand with one sold at auction earlier in the year. Antiques Roadshow's producers are the first to say that it is not the price tag but the legacy, the origin or manufacture, rareness or commonness of the household treasures that makes the object dear to its owner. The disappointment of hearing of repaintings, destroyed patinas, and/or of elaborate additions to already complete objects gives a nuanced meaning to originality and replicas. The 'best of show' is not necessarily and not often the aberrant piece done by an artisan but the most typical of a style according to most appraisers. The 'wrinkles' of age are, in fact, the beauty of a scooped chair leg.

Objects are survivors of another age. Earthquakes, wars and divorces displace objects from their original homes. Zuni pottery uses stacked geometric designs to symbolize thunderhead clouds, a formation certainly crucial to the arid locale. The symbolism of the geometric shapes often gets lost when far from its mythic beginning and geographic source. Dedications on the inside pages of books or edits of a manuscript are treasured survivors of the actual thinking of a person. The original version of Lewis Carroll's Alice in Wonderland

is annotated in purple ink. Lewis Carroll taught mathematics at Oxford University and must have kept the purple inked pen, the color ink Oxford professors used, in his hand moving from grading math exams to editing his manuscript. In the purpled marked manuscript, one is then a witness to the meanderings of creativity.

The real life 'Wonderland' of auction pricing and personal attic cleaning is not without intrigue. What museums buy, what auction houses sell and what individuals want would be storyline for any soap opera not only an edutainment public television show. Traveling auctioneers set up in Victorian mansions or other large prestigious buildings subtly attempting to substantiate their legitimacy. However, poor bronze casts of facsimile Frederic Remington charging horses may not be disguised to an educated eye even on a porch with a lovely striped awning. One must investigate carefully who appraisers say are their clients. Antique owners have a soft spot to giving artifacts to museums to preserve for the general public's edification. Without asking for contracts and/or proof of collaboration between museum and appraiser, it is hard to know where an artifact will go after it is sold to an appraiser. An appraiser can be working for an insurance company, or for an antique dealer or as a business partner with a dealer. An appraiser's unscrupulous predilection would be to offer low estimates for artifacts and sell to a dealer at a considerable profit or to have the client sell to the dealer and get a kick back from dealer. The provenance, the ownership history of an object, adds greatly to its value. Many sellers do not know the word or the significance of provenance as a type of lineage of the object that is a major asset in selling an artifact. A way to side-step collusion between appraiser and dealer or appraiser and museum is to make sure the client has done comparative pricing for similar historical objects. The time-consuming activity of researching provenance, style, materials, and condition of the objects can be of little interest to many individuals holding onto objects solely for sentimental reasons. The treachery of salesmanship, the need for

seemingly new found cash and a reinforcing of questionable taste coalesce to undermine an honest transaction between client and appraiser or antiques dealer or museum official.

Certain historical periods continue to provide the public with treasure troves of artifacts. The on-going fascination with Civil War history, an American war that requires no reading ability in a foreign language to understand its documentation and the likelihood to have had a great-great-great relative who fought in that war, makes artifacts from that war often quite sought after and valuable. The disappearance of Dutch Renaissance drawings and paintings after World War II that then resurface and are returned to German museums adds to the mystic of art as currency, as barter and as talisman. Hidden in a German castle by conquering Soviet troops, a group of Dutch Renaissance drawings and paintings, now valued at \$15 million, were handed over to the KGB during the Cold War. After display at an art museum in Baku, Azerbaijan, the work was stolen again and offered for sale by a Japanese ex-wrestler trying to raise \$12 million for a kidney transplant. Underlining the importance of the uniqueness of a work of art, museum objects also clarify an historical and stylistic moment regardless of a tainted provenance. A museum visitor, perhaps, unknowingly is then the recipient of the variegated political, scholarly and entrepreneurial route of the object into the museum's collection.

Telltale characteristics for diamonds are the four 'c's - color, clarity, carat, and cut. The code for valuing rubies is for them to be pigeon blood in color. Noting tricolor in cameo glass is highly desirable. Bronze, an alloy of copper and tin, in the 18th century was so treasured that large bronze European kettles were alternately traded by settlers, broken into smaller pieces to make weapons and buried with their dead. Samovars that appear so exotic, with their bulbous shape, to 21st century Americans were ubiquitous in 18th and 19th century Russia. They were all marked with medals of merit and every family had one. Samovars may have sentimental or decorative value, but they have

little or no value as collectibles in today's market. For collectors of toys, condition and rarity is everything. The excitement of folk art for both scholars and collectors is the endemic uniqueness of the art form. For various paintings and sculptures, it is the collective wisdom and consensus of curators, appraisers, scholars, and dealers that determine which periods in an individual artist's development is most important and ultimately most valuable in the market. Punctuated by acknowledged and valued qualities, there are nevertheless arbitrary biases in all categories of collected objects accentuating the spirit of individualism.

The market and the classroom often corroborate democratic orientations. Public opinion and public taste form a shifting matrix of consensus. Object learning advances the national art education standards with its emphases on critique, cultural history, aesthetics as well as technique and design. As states throughout the country are issuing and revising arts standards, the reappearing concern for creating community connections is supported by the heightened examination of the artifacts of our personal and collective histories.

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Miss, Miss, Look at What My Mother Sent Me from Jail

Future Akins

When I tell people that I teach in a public school, especially when I go on to say that I teach at the Junior High level, there is almost always snickering sounds and rolling eyes followed by horror stories from the



past. They relate memories of crowded, noisy hallways filled with bullies; classrooms that felt like jail, teachers that were bored and lots of hormone driven mis-adventures. I just smile because I know it is all too true. I do not attempt to explain why, as an artist, I choose to return to the classroom after so many years or how I am inspired everyday by the energy and truth of the students I encounter. I have come to learn that this immediate reaction by

others is only a small part of the whole experience.

Junior High, for all its craziness and rambunctiousness is also a place of incredibly direct honesty. I do not know if this honesty is a remnant of innocence from elementary school or if it is the beginning bravado of young adulthood. It is probably a mixture of both. I only