

1. *The Lure of the Old*

ONE DAY I BOUGHT A LITTLE BOX. What use the box had ever had was unclear to me, and really I had no use in mind for it. Because it was wooden and primitive and meant to hang on a wall, you would not have thought to put anything valuable in its four miniature drawers. They might have been suitable for matches or paper clips, or loose change, or whatever was cluttering up a tabletop nearby. I was attracted to the box only because of its proportions and its paint, a crusty salmon color that bespoke age.

I bought the box at the Brimfield antiques fair. Anyone interested in objects—in the nature of objects, if that’s a concept that makes any sense—should go to this event, held in Brimfield, Massachusetts, three times each year. It is the largest such bazaar of its kind in America and quite possibly in the world. At Brimfield, people walk around with signs on their back saying “I buy ephemera” and “\$\$ for Old Toys,” and dealers specialize in cast-iron stoves or ornamental lawn

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sculpture or oak furniture or advertising signs or manual typewriters or cookie jars. Once I saw a fellow who had driven all the way from Canada to sell items from two of his collections: wooden snowshoes and Coca-Cola coolers. You had to wonder how these interests had come together. You had to wonder about his marketing skills too, since he had so many snowshoes (hundreds of pairs, it seemed) that all by himself he had almost certainly driven down the market price, to the extent that there was, in the late spring heat, any market at all. At moments Brimfield looks like an amalgamation of every tag sale that has ever been held, or a cosmic version of one of those dreadful accidents you sometimes see in which a truck turns over and spills its contents along the highway. At such moments you reflect: There are so very many errant things in the world, and thank God for the prisons in which we keep them, for closets and attics and chests of drawers. For boxes.

But my box wasn't a container of anything, but an object in itself. A benign couple in late middle age, from New Hampshire, sold me the box, from their assortment of eighteenth- and early-nineteenth-century New England furniture. I paid a tidy sum for it: \$200. Then I drove it home.

Sometimes things really seem alive. During the drive, only about an hour and a half, I felt emanations from the box, and they were not good. Something was making me uneasy, something made me glance over at the box and back to the road. I was eager to look at it more closely, and yet I

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wasn't so eager. Something was telling me the box wasn't what it claimed to be.

I detoured on the way home to stop by to see a friend of mine who is an antiques dealer. I showed him the box and asked him what he thought. He shared my skepticism and said he'd keep it overnight to have a closer look. In retrospect, I think he was being kind, that he knew at a glance what I was coming to realize: the box was a fake.

The next day he tactfully confirmed it in detail. The crusty paint? There's a chemical you daub on that will produce that effect. The nail holes in the back, stained with what appears to be rust—it's actually paint. The wood's been chemically "aged" too, as you can see if you look inside at the new wood behind the drawers. In fact my friend thought he could identify the maker of the box, a woman very much alive and specializing in such items. Months or even weeks ago my old box had been a little pile of wood in her workshop.

This was all kind of interesting, even funny, and we had a laugh at my expense. Of course there was also the \$200, but I could discount that as a tuition payment for a lesson on antiques fraud. True, none of the lightheartedness dispelled that slight sense of a diminished self that occurs when we are deceived, for no matter how clever the con man, we always ultimately blame ourselves. And all the more reason to do so in this case, because, as I thought about it, no one had really lied to me. The sellers had said nothing about the age of the

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box, though you could argue that by placing it amidst their actual antiques they made an implicit claim. No, it was the box itself that lied.

If pressed, perhaps the gentle dealers would have called it a “reproduction.” There is, after all, a distinction to be made between a fake and a reproduction: it is all a matter of intent. With the care that had been lavished on its nonaesthetic side, the “rusted” nail holes and so on, the box had clearly been made not to reproduce something but to pretend actually to be something. It was meant to deceive. As a 200-year-old object it would have been actually worth the \$200 I paid; as a product of the twenty-first century it was worth—what? Twelve dollars and fifty cents?

One might ask why this should be so. The box I now knew to be fake was the same box whose look had appealed to me, and its color was still that attractive salmon, and in fact it looked quite handsome on my mantelpiece. That there is worth inherent in age is something I don’t often question, but it’s a proposition worth examining.

I was an easy mark, but suppose I had not been. Suppose the fakery was so brilliant that it would fool an expert. Oddly enough, I am not sure I would feel much better. In her skeptic’s guide to American antique furniture, *Fake, Fraud, or Genuine?* Myrna Kaye describes one of the classic pieces of fakery in the antiques business, the “seventeenth-century” “great chair” actually crafted in the 1970s by a man named

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Armand LaMontagne. LaMontagne, for obscure reasons, held a grudge against museum curators and he set out to embarrass them. He succeeded. He spent two months reproducing a chair modeled, with clever variations, on a genuine “pilgrim century” object in the museum at Plymouth, Massachusetts. This was not easy, involving, as it did, not only creating the chair but subjecting it to treatments that included burning, multiple coats of paint and paint removal, smoking, a brief attack with a knife, immersion in sea brine, and other time-consuming tasks. When he was satisfied, he sent the chair like a cork upon the waters downstream into the antiques market, starting with a dealer who was in cahoots with him. The chair changed hands a few times at prices under \$1,000 until it was bought for \$9,000 by the Henry Ford Museum, in Dearborn, Michigan. Then the craftsman disclosed his fraud. He was at first not believed, and was able to prove his story only when X-rays revealed marks that had been deliberately made with modern tools.

At this point one has to wonder: What’s the difference? If the chair had the beauty of the original and the illusion of centuries of wear, is it not in itself a glorious object? Wasn’t it just as good as the real thing? Well, no. We want something that is not “fake or fraud” but genuine. But why?

And why is one of my favorite books a volume called *Ford N Series Tractors*? This is an illustrated guide to the farm tractors made by the Ford Motor Company in the mid-twentieth

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century. I have such a tractor, an “8N” made in 1948. I wasn’t actually sure it was made in 1948 until the book gave me the exact tools—serial numbers, subtle design improvements—to understand that all the details appropriate to the year were present on my machine. Thrilling. Not long ago I went for a walk and happened on a neighbor who was laboring over his ancient Dodge pickup truck. He was eager to share what he’d recently learned about the paint history of his truck. It had once been two-toned green, you see, and an expert had told him this identified it as a “spring special,” manufactured only in the spring of 1953. He was thrilled too. Now Dodge trucks don’t happen to interest me, so I could take only an abstract interest in his pleasure. It is disconcerting to realize that at any one moment all across the land similar obsessions bloom—about Barbie dolls and Walking Liberty half-dollars, about Bierstadts and old lunch boxes. Why? What does it matter if some more or less superannuated object is “all there,” or in “mint condition”? Someone else would paint my tractor yellow and call it cute; I would take her vintage doll in its valuable original box to the tag sale and sell it for a dollar.

I know, or think I do, what the age of a thing means to me, but this quickly gets a little mystical. For one thing, if it’s handmade it carries with it the presence of the maker, and the irregular marks of a 200-year-old plane, felt beneath one’s own mortal fingertips, have the power to connect you with another time. Even old industrial objects, by virtue of having

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been held and used by other hands, have this effect on me. And then there are times and places that simply seem superior in the art of making stuff. For me, one of these is New England of the eighteenth and very early nineteenth centuries. A sense of proportion seems there and then to have been universal, so that everyday objects had a quality that today seems to require genius to achieve. "Around 1830, carpenters began to lose their eye," Lewis Mumford once wrote. Reading this sentence years ago I thought it remarkably audacious, but then I began to look around at the houses he was talking about, and I saw his point—pretentious colonnades attached to humble farm dwellings, windows a couple of inches too big for their façades—and what was true of houses was true of virtually everything else. What once was commonplace became rare and soon virtually extinct. (For a fascinating account of how this happened, see *The Old Way of Seeing*, by Jonathan Hale.)

I say all these things, spiritual and aesthetic, and I believe them. But they are not the whole truth. Others have felt just the way I do, and made the same points. And it is somewhat odd that in the history of feelings these sentiments have a rather recent provenance. A love of antiques only became a recognizable phenomenon in the late nineteenth century. It seems to have been a direct response to the appearance of manufactured household furnishings and the concomitant debate over standards of taste. Before that time one was more conscious of the condition of something than its age,

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and to go in search of an old piece of furniture would have been felt by most people to be quite bizarre. The story of how this happened in England is wonderfully told by Deborah Cohen in her book *Household Gods: The British and Their Possessions*. Despite the abrupt appearance of the collecting passion, it quickly took on an elaborate set of meanings that amounted to a moral fervor. Antiques required patience, discipline; they rebuked instant gratification; they stood as a barrier to social as well as manufactured fraud. "For the true cognoscenti," Cohen writes, "worshipping at the altar of fine antiques was no sin. There were false idols and then there were real ones." A collector named Robert Drane, a pharmacist by profession, did the world the favor of keeping a diary in which he revealed the depth of his commitment to the right thing and contempt for the wrong: Drane could denounce the spurious with the air of a fire-breathing preacher (his father had been such a man), calling a silver castor "ignorant, illshapen, cheap, mechanical and false in every respect." Antiques were, for Drane and his newly minted ilk, a way of repelling the falseness in all aspects of life. At the extremes of the obsession the objects took on literally a spiritual dimension; it was believed that if you listened hard enough they would speak to you of their earlier lives.

This is a lot to ask of a Chippendale table, but I am not unsympathetic. Old things sustain me in a way that I know to be not wholly rational. Around the room: a Windsor

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chair, a tall red case clock with wooden works, a brass bed-warmer. The chair's delicate splines are so fragile that I discourage visitors from sitting in it; the clock does not work, though I intend, as I have for years, to get it fixed; the bed-warmer has a tiny hole in it and couldn't safely hold coals, even if one were inclined to warm a bed. So, functionally, these things are marginal to useless. And yet I love them.

My deepest excursion into the things of the past happened with something that can't be called nonfunctional, though it started out that way: my house. A kind psychologist might have called the enterprise a "rescue fantasy," but there was more to it than that. When the place, a late-eighteenth-century Cape, came on the market, it had reached (almost literally) a tipping point: the sills collapsing onto the foundation stones, joists rotting in a damp cellar. The next owner was going to do something major (tear it down, tart it up): that seemed clear. I lived nearby at the time, and I feared the worst. Our cunning real estate agent may have pushed me over the edge with casual references to one prospective buyer who had grand plans for modernizing the old keeping room, with a Formica-topped island in front of the fireplace. I made an offer.

The upside of a neglected house is that often a lot of regrettable changes have not happened, and the real attraction of this place was indeed that so much remained original. The old symmetrical floor plan survived intact, along with much of the original plaster and moldings and, crucially, the

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massive stone chimney with three fireplaces, themselves made out of stone.

We (my wife and I) had only one rule as we entered this project. We would do all the necessary structural work but change nothing that was solid and had been there from the start. As to the necessities of modern life—stuff like a refrigerator and a shower—we would deal with those later, and we would relegate them to an ell. We didn't quite acknowledge it at the time, but we were attempting what they call a "period restoration."

And so we got under way. Of sills and joists (and the roof and the heating system, etc.) let us say as little as possible. Anyone who has done this sort of work knows that everything, once uncovered, was half again as bad as expected, and twice as expensive to fix. The more interesting problems lay ahead. As I say, the house was rich in original detail, but it nonetheless had undergone one facelift, decades ago, and then had endured some halfhearted efforts to reverse the changes. In a modest, countrified way the house had been Victorian-ized, probably sometime around 1880. The main change had been to the windows. They had been lowered from their proper place, tight up against the eaves, and the old twelve-over-twelve sash had given way to then newly fashionable large lights. They in turn had been removed (though one remained in a little-used pantry) and replaced with some cheap imitations of the older multi-paned windows.

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By this time I had fallen under the spell of a true genius of restoration, a woman who was replacing some missing moldings, working with her collection of ancient hand tools. Like most geniuses, she was a person of definite views, and she let me know that the windows really should occupy their original space. She could make perfectly accurate new ones, and even fit them with old glass.

I resisted. In part because it was going to be expensive. And also because we seemed to be crossing a line from restoration to reproduction. But something had to be done about the current windows.

Then came a fateful encounter. One day I drove past a little house I'd long liked, and there was its new owner undertaking renovations. My God, he was tearing out the windows! Twelve-over-twelve, eighteenth-century sash. I stopped.

"You want to sell those things? 'Cause I'll buy 'em!" The negotiation that followed was, as can easily be imagined, comic, and for me hopeless. The deconstructionist who thought he was disposing of junk now thought he had treasure of inestimable worth: I quickly realized I'd been a fool, and tried to bargain my way out, with only limited success.

But I had my windows. And my friend and adviser, the craftswoman, was more than willing to strip and repair the old sash, removing and then refitting the wonderful old rippled glass. Surely this was closer to recycling than reproduction.

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What better use for these sash than to keep them in town and in a contemporaneous building?

I'm glad I did it—the house looks as it looked to its builder and I have to think that is the way it should look. Still . . . there's an element of fraud in these windows, as there is, I came to understand, in the whole enterprise of period restoration. The problem of insistence on a pure vision is that so much life exists in the impurities.

There came a moment in what ought to have been the very nadir of the restoration when I felt a strange contentment. Nothing was done. We were months (years, as it turned out) from moving in. Some of the windows were replaced, but the old two-over-two could be seen in the pantry. We had taken down a false ceiling in the parlor to discover, as one always does, why it had been installed. It covered two layers of wallpaper—so intent had the Victorian-era owners been on creating a dark gentility that they had papered not only the walls but the ceiling with a lugubrious brown floral print.

My daughter was newly home from the Peace Corps and performing a mission of domestic mercy. She and I worked together. Steaming off wallpaper is always fun, and all the more so when it's overhead, with no place for the scraps to go but into your hair and eyes. We alternately laughed and cursed at the lunacy of it all. It was late winter outside, mist rising from the snow. How many forgotten souls over the course of 200 years had seen just this weather from this

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room? The seasons eternal but each moment unique. For our part we had made the room uniquely a mess. But there was something about it I liked, with its plaster ragged around the windows and its wallpaper, emblem of someone else's keenly felt aesthetic, hanging from the ceiling. I felt that in a sense the house would never be better than it was at that moment, with so much of its history visible, and soon to be lost—lost, ironically, to restoration. I wanted to wrap the place in plastic and walk away.

Jean Baudrillard, the French philosopher, whose prose is one of those glorious Gallic unweeded gardens that ensnare you with their lushness, thinks he understands the problem posed by *les objets anciens*. He writes that people's affection for antiques derives from

the mythical evocation of birth which the antique object constitutes in its temporal closure—being born implying, after all, that one has had a father and a mother. Obviously, beating a path back to the origins means regression to the mother; the older the object, the closer it brings us to an earlier age. . . . Now, the search for the traces of creation, from the actual impression of the hand to the signature, is also a search for a line of descent and for paternal transcendence. Authenticity always stems from the Father: the Father is the source of value here. And it is this sublime link that antiques evoke in the imagination, along with the return journey to the mother's breast.

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If I ran an antiques business, which at my present clip I may be forced to do, I would keep this quotation prominently displayed as a kind of surgeon general's warning. The object you are about to buy may only exacerbate your identity problems.