

## MYTHS OF ANTIQUITY

As, halting step by painful squirm, our remotest ancestors emerged from the urchleim to face the unaccustomed and unpolluted air, did they bring with them any mementos of the twilight ooze which had been their ancestral home? Alas, the concept of possessions was still in the future and, with it, the concept of security or superiority attaching to them. Since then few have travelled as light. The refugee so desperate, the foot soldier so lame or cumbered, the savage so nomadic that he expends not a little tittle of his failing energy to carry a tangible reminder of hearth and home is as rare as the layer of corner-stones, the discoverer of continents or the walker on the moon who plants no artefact to confound future archaeologists.

Man's need for the sense of stability and continuity imparted by permanent and familiar household objects is stated as eloquently by the potsherds of Mesopotamia as by the furnishings of Egyptian tombs or the accretions of modern coffee tables. A melanesian tribesman, who had walked through all but impenetrable jungle for five days to take part in the Goroka Sing-Sing, told me that one of the great blessings of civilization was saran-wrap which enabled him to preserve his Bird-of-Paradise feather ornaments from one festival to the next, or even from one generation to the next. Presumably the bone or tusk gewgaws which pierced his nose required less tender care. In assembling the current exciting exhibit of the "Art of the Sepic River" at the Art Institute, Allen Wardwell has found nothing older than a hundred and fifty years because of the deterioration of materials available to stone-age men in a tropical climate.

Yet he could not show the modern examples because of the deterioration of craftsmanship and design brought about by commercialism with its steel tools and synthetic paints and its reliance on copying traditional designs. It may also be that an artist when first learning about contraception doesn't pack quite the same wallop with fertility figures.

With the inexorable march of civilization, household objects and ornaments acquired an aura of importance and even sanctity. As Lares and Penates, Toko-no-ma, or Icons, their very age - apart from beauty or utility - made them venerable. Only when hard times required their sale did they acquire a commercial as well as a sentimental or artistic value and thus become antiques. "Antique" is defined by Webster as "a relic or object of ancient times or of an earlier period than the present." The United States Customs defines it as made before 1830. In local parlance it is a piece of furniture or bric-a-brac, often uncomfortable (people were smaller when antiques were new) inherited or purchased or "discovered" (in which case it may be expensive and in need of repair). After resale it becomes secondhand and, after its third or fourth donation to rummage sales, it may become junk. As junk its grotesque design plus its survival as the fittest may entitle it to be considered antic. From antic to antique is merely a matter of shifting the decimal point but from antique to antiquity is a shift of millennia. A student of antiquities is an antiquary (and probably sits in an endowed chair) while an antiquarian has a dilettante interest in old things (and probably sits in a wheel chair). The only antiquities known to be in current process of manufacture are used radio-active materials being stored in the salt-mines of Kansas where our Government has engaged to monitor them for the next 1500 years. 1500 years ago Attila made less definitive commitments.

The antiquity of the concept of antiquities is in itself formidable. On the ocean floor near Crete there rests a ship laden with hellenistic copies of sculpture from the great age of Pericles never delivered to the antique shops of the roman forum. Picture, if you will, the dismay of the roman insurance adjusters who had to file inventories and claims on quadruplicate clay tablets. Even greater must have been the anguish of the taste-makers of the Capitoline (with branch show rooms in Pompaii) at seeing such opulence elude their grasp. The loss of a consignment of reproductions of Whistler's Mother could not be more affecting.

The renaissance, of course, brought the antique mystique to its finest flower. Hardly had the burghers of Sienna, under cover of darkness, buried their antique Venus in Florentine territory, in the pious hope of transferring the curse of heathenism to their enemies, than a study of classical antiquities began to recover a consciousness of intellectual liberty. John Addington Symonds put it all in a two thousand page nutshell which includes this kernel: "Through the instrumentality of art, the Renaissance wrought for the modern world a resurrection of the body which, since the destruction of antique civilization, had lain swathed in hair-shirts and cerements within the tomb of the mediaeval cloister." Michelet is more succinct in saying: "The great achievements of the Renaissance were the discovery of the world and the discovery of man." Note that neither writer suggests that antiquities were copied or that antiques themselves added to the glory of the renaissance other than as tools of scholarship and training.

When Lorenzo de Medici commissioned Michelangelo to copy a classical fragment was it to add a forgery to his distinguished collection or to encourage a young artist to study the lessons of the past in order to build upon them?

From what classical models could the David or the Pieta have been copied? And yet how could they have been achieved without a thorough study of the classics? While they studied Vitruvius, the renaissance architects built St. Peter's, just as Justinian, surrounded by the greatest of Greek and Roman models, built the Hagia Sophia and, when the dome fell, had the faith and courage to build it again. Formation of the great collections to certify and display the owners' taste did not make the Renaissance as dynamic an epoch as did the artistic, scientific, or philosophical achievements which they stimulated.

There appears, however, to be a marked difference between the motivation of Florentine collectors and later zealots. When Catherine the Great built and stocked the Hermitage, she relied, not on her own taste and scholarship, but on that of the encyclopaedist, Diderot. Thus Russian cultural pretensions were demonstrated to the, quote, "civilized world" at the expense of developing an indigenous art, and the fashion of collecting only foreign art became ingrained among the wealthy patrons. Similarly Henry Clay Frick formed his magnificent collection by buying whatever Duveen could have authenticated by Berenson and establish as a costly, and therefore valuable, work of art. Samuel Butler's comments are pithy in "The Way of All Flesh." He says: "Not long ago a much esteemed writer informed the world that he felt 'disposed to cry out with delight' before a figure by Michael Angelo. I wonder whether he would feel disposed to cry out before a real Michael Angelo, if the critics had decided that it was not genuine, or before a reputed Michael Angelo which was really by someone else. But I suppose that a prig with more money than brains was much the same sixty or seventy years ago as he is now.

Look at Mendelssohn again about this same Tribune in the Uffizzi on which Mr. Pontifex felt so safe in staking his reputation as a man of taste and culture.

He feels no less safe and writes, 'I then went to the Tribune. This room is so delightfully small you can traverse it in fifteen paces, yet it contains a world of art. I again sought out my favorite armchair which stands under the statue of "The Slave Whetting His Knife", and taking possession of it I enjoyed myself for a couple of hours; for here at one glance I had the Modonna del Cardellino, Pope Julius II, a female portrait by Raphael, and above it a lovely Holy Family by Perugino and so close to me that I could have touched it with my hand the Venus de Medici beyond, that of Titian. This is a spot where man feels his own insignificance and may well learn to be humble.' The Tribune is a slippery place for people like Mendelssohn to study humility in. They generally take two steps away from it for one they take toward it. I wonder how many chinks Mendelssohn gave himself for having sat two hours on that chair. I wonder how often he looked at his watch to see if his two hours were up. I wonder how often he told himself that he was quite as big a gun, if the truth were known, as any of the men whose works he saw before him, how often he wondered whether any of the visitors were recognizing him and admiring him for sitting such a long time in the same chair, and how often he was vexed at seeing them pass him by and take no notice of him. But perhaps, if the truth were known, his two hours was not quite two hours.'

Antiques perform the useful function of awakening interest and clarifying taste, so that the independent and creative thinker will be moved to formulate his own standards and criteria. Even in tradition-oriented seventeenth century China, Wang Hui was acclaimed for synthesizing the laws of landscape painting, not for his achievements in copying, when he produced an album imitating painters of the twelfth century. Except for patina and mellowness, antiquity alone does not make anything either beautiful or useful. There are no lost arts to make a thing unique, though arts have been abandoned when their utility was questioned.

Nor was craftsmanship superior in "the good old days" before unions and creeping socialism were presumed to have corrupted the innocent artisan. The artisan has not lost his cunning but has added new skills, new tools and new materials. The same or more units of energy are expended to produce a thing of beauty now, though more of it may be done by machine than in those halcyon days when labor was cheap and buying power limited. The talent to design a work of art is another matter for where is genius nurtured? In the gilded ostentation of Versailles or in "England's dark satanic mills"?

Had Thomas Chippendale been born a century earlier he would have designed Jacobean carved oak chairs and been forgotten. Had he been born a century later he might have produced the bentwood rocker and been the darling of the jet set. Had he been born two centuries later he could have designed the tubular chromium chair and been rich. Being born in 1718, he created brilliantly imaginative new designs responding to the excitements of the eighteenth century - the newly awakened interest in Chinese porcelains and lacquers, the swan - song of French rococo, and Walpole's romantic whimsies at Strawberry Hill. Though never sacrificing quality to flash, he was probably dismissed as "modernistic" by his more entrenched contemporaries.

Nowhere is antiquity less prized than in the oldest profession for, as Max Beerbohm observed "Women are not so young as they are painted." However, in the rough and tumble of the newer and less inhibited professions, antiques are synonymous with profits - profits too often without honour - and they are described in circumlocutions as artful as an undertakers'. A dealer can run down a "mahogany chair with serpentine crest, shell, fluted terminals, pierced splat, cabriole legs and claw-and-ball feet" with the singleness of purpose of a pig unearthing a truffle, but is he as certain of its authenticity? Reproductions are customarily

advertized as such and are usually identifiable by experts. Restorations are another matter for, in the course of repairs, a true antique table may become six, each having one authentic part (a leg, a top, or a stretcher) and , hence, an authentic pedigree. These tables, complete with prostheses, may then be stored in a damp basement next to rotten timbers until the worms have completed their cosmetic work, or they may be "distressed" by flagellation with tire chains, or they may be "improved" by carving or the addition of elaborate hardware. Finally they may be "planted" in the house of a patron of more substantial pedigree than fortune, there to acquire respectability by association with collectors items, and finally to be "discovered" by wealthy period buffs who, in the words of Talleyrand, have "learned nothing and forgotten nothing."

I lick my lips as I think of these innocent little diversions for I, too, have dabbled in such rustic enterprise or, before a move is made to impeach me as an officer of this club, may I say that I too, have struck out boldly to make the American dream a reality. In 1943 the best grass skirts in the Solomons were made by Platoon B of Headquarters company, 63rd U.S. Naval Construction Battalion. The materials and workmanship were the finest, the production schedule was geared to the arrival of fresh troops, and they were retailed by betel nut-chewing natives in their own abbreviated mufti whose only English was "one dollar." An allied cottage industry provided efficient packaging in hollow sections of bamboo stalks. My particular piece of the action was to address these packages in india ink and (for an additional quarter) decorate them with palm trees and lactating mermaids. This not only dispatched the souvenir from the hero to his girl-back-home, it removed any possible glut from the market - a market limited only by the breadth of acquaintance of the G.I.s. Naturally, diversification followed and assembly line techniques were applied to the manufacture of beads, combs, and bracelets to spare the natives the pain of parting with their primitive heirlooms

and keepsakes while enabling our mates to cajole and bargain for, and finally to send home a bauble fashioned of the traditional local materials by White hands that were learning a new skill. Perhaps some of these souvenirs still cause a thigh to be slapped, another drink to be poured, and the same old stories to be newly adorned and embellished. Have the missionaries done better? When the same men made the necessities of life for themselves - hunting knives, chairs, beer-coolers, even a washing machine activated by a rocking chair - the designs were clean, functional, and uncluttered, but for business the way was clear - follow tradition!

Concern, whether authentic or spurious, for antiques, whether authentic or spurious, is by no means limited to the home-furnishings and housewares industry. It is shared to some degree by every businessman, professional or individual who can draw profit or inspiration or lessons from the achievements of the past.

Builders and Architects have, with varying degrees of taste, plagiarized every available design to win for their clients the approbation of their peer groups. The results range from the suburban chateaux, manor-houses, or villas which bespeak unquestioned taste, inculcated in surroundings of beauty and ease, to the architectural taxidermy of the banks of fifty years ago which could find no other way of suggesting solidity than a display of the classical orders. Could the unceasing use of the Baths of Caracalla as a model for banks and railroad stations have pointed to complexes hitherto unexplored by the muck-rakers? Besides imprinting for all to admire the seal of sound judgement and popular approval, the application of full-blown classical mouldings can cover very bad workmanship just as carriage-lanterns, hex signs, or American eagles can distract the eye from the worst proportions. When a new interpretation of the American eagle was conceived by Eero Saarinen to complete the design of the American



Embassy in London and to symbolize both the building's function and the protection to be found under its wing, it brought down the wrath of the honest, God-fearing tourists who know nothing about art but know what they like. And what they like is tradition and prior approval, not recent innovation nor integral design. Viollet le Duc's embalming of Carcassonne survives, his inspired creation of Les Halle has been demolished. When the building of the Hay-Adams Hotel necessitated the demolition of the John Hay and Henry Adams houses the loss of Henry Hobson Richardson's imaginative adaptation of romanesque architecture was assuaged by the reappearance of its fragments in a nearby subdivision. A builder purchased the entrance arch of the Adams house from the wrecker to use in the garage of a house built in the style of the Cotswolds. Match that, if you can, for prior approval - LaFayette Square, Henry Adams, Richardson! It's hardly surpassed by re-building London Bridge in Arizona to sell lots to the antique migrants to Lake Havasu.

Forty years ago one of the finest georgian houses in Chicago was rented furnished to a man who, by his own industry and invention, had risen from the most abject poverty to a position of affluence and importance in the business world. When the owner, looking forward to retirement in his own home and to the enjoyment of his books and pictures, declined to renew the lease, the tenant insisted on buying the house with everything in it - at any price. In vain did the owner protest that the crest on the old silver, the engraved book-plates, the monogrammed linen, or the family portraits would be of no use to a stranger. The adamant tenant only added more zeros to his offer. The owner tearfully salivated. The tenant ogled the antiques and entered a state of musth. The affair was consummated. In heaving a sigh of relief the new owner explained his acquisitive compulsion thus - "I have no family. I come from nowhere that I want to remember. When I could finally afford a back-ground and ancestors I rented

yours - Now that I have constructed a family tree, complete with intimate anecdotes and family jokes, to give it up would be not only to disappoint my sycophants but to kill my unborn antecedents." Were the plunderings of Napoleon, Hermann Goring and Elsie De Wolff not also motivated by a desire to establish an unassailable background rather than, like Lincoln, to look ahead?

The greatest myth of antiquity is that its espousal enhances security. Isabella Stewart Gardner had an innate and individual taste deftly channelled by Berenson but, even with the choicest of collections charmingly housed, she never felt secure in Boston. When asked for a contribution to the Boston Charitable Eye and Ear Hospital, she asked - "Is there a charitable eye or ear in Boston?" Henry Ford's place in history is more positively assured by the flivver, certainly not copied from an earlier example, than by the vast and indiscriminate collections at Dearborn. Even the security of ritual and dogma hallowed by antiquity can be shaken or strengthened by "Jesus Christ, Superstar" or Bernstein's Mass. Reverence for the most questionable myth of all marks the metamorphosis of a politician into a statesman in the best tradition of Clausewitz. And yet, as Clemenceau heard a child crying the night, do we not hear the stumblings and gropings of searchers for an alternative to the concept of war as a solution to the problems of peace?

Of what, then, can our security blanket consist? Where shall we hide from the slings and arrows of the categorizers when they issue from the media or from the fastnesses of suburbia? If, like the creatures of Picasso, we could look ourselves straight in the eye would we have pursued pure science to discover the Mendelian law or profitably mocked it to invent the Aryan race? Would we dare to create a masterpiece such as the Chicago Stock Exchange building, the "Sacre du Printemps", the "Nude Descending the stairs", - and keep refining the art without waiting for critical acclaim - or would we play it safe with the Wrigley Building,

"Let Me Call You Sweetheart", or Joyce Kilmer's "Trees"? Who has such strength that requires no security, such fortitude that requires no refuge? Only those without time to ponder the question, whose lives are complicated merely by the "sturm und drang" of creation. When the young Brahms was playing the piano in a sporting house do you suppose that he confined himself to Mozart and Bach like a symphony orchestra ensuring bequests? In similar circumstances did Toulouse-Lautrec paint insurance calendars? In fact, had the innovators among our forebears sought the sanctuary of traditional approbation, would we be here now or would we be chasing mastadons over cliffs to provide our collation?

As long as there are creaking floor boards in country houses and weekend guests with round heels, ghosts will be the only irreplaceable myths of antiquity.