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The Bridwell Quill. Issues 47-49: Of Antiquities and Mindfulness

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The Bridwell Quill

a note from the director



July–September 2022

A few months ago, I found the meaning of life in a cup of tea. On the 4th of July weekend, I sat in the living room of Afghan friends who had recently arrived from Kabul via the Persian Gulf and Germany. We bantered about language and history as the sounds of our children playing outside echoed through the open windows and the scent of wildflowers and newly cut grass mingled with the generous servings of sliced cutlets, cheeses, and bread. Occasionally, I picked up a freshly made Afghan *bolani* (a savory fried dough stuffed with ground meat and herbs) that I washed down with hot-brewed saffron tea tintured with local clover honey.

Tea is a curious thing. In some ways it is the forerunner of the iPhone, but more humble, warm, and delicious. As with other foods served by hosts, tea offers a pivot point, a diversion from pregnant pauses and distraction from the non-action of a conversation. But it also provides an opportunity to stop and think about what is going on around you, with your interlocutors, your colleagues and friends, while also savoring the well-brewed beverage. This saffron-infused drink unlocked a Proustian universe of thoughts, a revelation in our informal colloquy that led to considerations of sound, place, and feeling. The tea punctuated a mutual understanding of respect and intercultural fellowship. Smartphones, on the other hand, seem to alienate us in their distraction at similar moments. The quiet breaks in conversation that draw us into our phones seem like rude interruptions of these person-to-person

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encounters; an intrusion of a third character, uninvited, and then readily dismissed—almost as if we are pulled momentarily into another non-present personality, reappearing and disappearing like phantoms.

As I sat on their sofa that day, the saffron tea possessed me with an entranced vision while I peered down into its silky translucence. *How could a cup of tea change how I think about the world?* I thought. I had returned only a month earlier from a lengthy trip to Central Asia, where I'd spent several weeks in Uzbekistan, a country which shares its southern border with Afghanistan. My trip and stories were met with a shared sense of place and cultural understanding from that part



of the world and our conversations blossomed around these nodes of commonality. Then, while I sat there in a pause with that cup of tea, I realized two things: first, that these friends had cultivated a new home, thousands of miles from where they were forced to leave and had done so with grace, spirit, and poignancy, even if undergirded by struggle and loss; and second, they didn't take things for granted: the essence of what made this human-to-human encounter so meaningful and enlivening was the buoyancy of their spirits and not the materiality of place. The contrast with America has been how we live in a land of bounty, and often waste, and experience troubles over what seem like what we often call *first world problems*. While those who come from lands with intense conflict and warfare must contend with a completely new place, often without *stuff* and seek to survive and thrive in those new places.

This question of *stuff* hangs in the air like a petulant pollen bloom, a problematic necessity. But it has become part of how we both live in the United States and identify ourselves. Thus, the counterpoint of our own lifelong accumulations is the confrontation with those who have had no choice to gather *stuff* around them, because they could only bring themselves. More than seventy years ago, one of my great-grandfathers encountered a similar but distinct situation with the aftermath of the Second World War and the mass influx of peoples from Europe seeking asylum and refuge in America. As the story goes, he was out rabbit hunting and discovered an abandoned iron mine in upstate New York. At some point he realized that he could use it either for agricultural purposes, or more creatively, to build an underground atomic-proof storage facility. At the height of the Cold War and the burgeoning Atomic Age, the establishment, building, and development of such a facility would eventuate in what is now known as *Iron Mountain Corporation* in 1950-51. *The Saturday Evening Post* declared it to be the “safest place on earth,” where personal and important documents could be stored—indeed, my great-grandfather’s aim was to create a place that could protect a person’s, family’s or company’s most important *stuff*, like that lost by the hundreds of displaced persons he sponsored from Europe those same years. Today it is one of the world’s great information management companies, though no longer part of our family. All that from hunting bunnies.

Stuff certainly makes up our homes and our world. While thinking of how we navigate our lives, I often consider the relationship between



people and their stuff. This was the focus of Jared Diamond’s runaway best seller *Guns, Germs, and Steel: The Fates of Human Societies*, for which the author explores an ostensibly simple question posed by a native New Guinean politician named Yali, who asked: “why is it that you white people developed so much cargo and brought it to New Guinea, but we black people had little cargo of our own?” As an anthropologist, Diamond was curious about the inquiry and set out to answer the question through various approaches to geography, culture, and power. But what the local man was basically asking was about *stuff*—and how that defines and cultivates our identities.

The famed American photographer Peter Menzel did something similar, through photography in his fabulous book *Material World: A Global Family Portrait*, where he traveled around the world and asked families to pose with all their belongings before them; or his other photobooks *Hungry Planet* and *What I Eat*, with similar premises having families pose with how much they eat in a given week and what it costs. The contrasts are profound and striking, thus prompting us to repeat Yali’s question: *why so much stuff?*

It may be no surprise then that the word *stuff* comes from a German word meaning “to fill up” or “to pad, upholster, fill out” or “furnish.” Its various meanings make us think that *stuff* and *stuffing* simply mean to “fill up with indiscriminate materials,” which somehow provide us protection or comfort. *Stuff* has now become both an overt and very ambiguous commodification of our material selves. And while I’ve long thought about *stuff*

in general, I've also wondered what *stuff* means in the context of our own existence, how it fits within our construction of relationships, and ultimately what it does through the course of human evolution in society.

A few years ago, there was a best-selling book by Margareta Magnusson called *The Gentle Art of Swedish Death Cleaning*, which interrogated the very notion of what it meant to collect and ultimately part with the *stuff* we've gathered throughout our lives in a very direct and honest way. Apparently, it hit a nerve with readers, because it was noted as a *New York Times* best-seller. Perhaps its success came with that uneasy relationship that Americans have with

stuff that has expressed itself through the exploitive and entrancing shows like *Hoarders* or its spin-off *Buried Alive*. We all know that there are mental and emotional lines in our heads that either push



or prohibit us from throwing away disposable objects (with logos or sentimental attachments, perhaps); old and tattered clothing, which may have been given to us by a now deceased grandparent; or long-outdated newspapers that have little or no value even decades later. The stirrings of attachment-detachment likely spring from our own personal memories and emotions; and a brief survey of the psychological literature tells us that there's a bounty of research done on this topic.

My own attachments to *stuff* are very much tied to the halls of memory and the acrobatics that my mind performs around constructed meanings, vestigial sentimentalities, and a deep desire not to lose the remembrance of something, or more likely, someone. This is

where antiques come into view and where we must pause to consider what drives some of us to hold the attachments of not just heirlooms and the objects of family histories, but also the motives behind seeking out and acquiring antiques. There is a subtle and constant drive for those of us to explore the nooks and crannies of said shops, to peer into the dark, crowded corners of the antique stall with our unremitting persistence to know about other things and other people. Objects have character, even the most inane, vapid, and tacky things. Behind aesthetic judgment is the presence of the usually unknown personal history that such objects maintain, and spoken or not, we imbue those objects with new meaning based on that prior life or hidden narrative.

Since my childhood, I've long curated a sense of propriety and purpose around *historical stuff*, specifically in the form of antiques. From at least the age of 11, I would walk down to our local antique shops (my hometown was once known as the Antiques Capital of New York State) nearly every afternoon and weekend. I would wander about the dusty, grey-carpeted aisles, packed and overflowing with rusty tuneless trumpets, boxes of nameless black and white photos, fourth-rate folk art, surplus holiday tchotchkes (faux snow dusted reindeer and pastel bunnies), and any number of wood, metal, and glass homesteader objects that gave the buyer that sense of closeness to hearth and home. What exactly is it for some that attracts us to such wares, while others are outright repulsed by this *stuff*?

Over the years, and through the course of exploring the mighty path of antique heritages, I've found wonder and comfort in meandering through the Midwest and finding those expansively voluminous antique malls, replete with industrial moving equipment and barn size doors to accommodate the volume and quantity of its objects. I feel solace and sentimentality in the unlimited versions of the same old-timey parlor tables, mechanical wall

clocks, and coal irons. I am enamored of the old New England fine arts shops, whose countless works of colonial and early 19th century portraiture and seascapes remind me



of the now unknown family estates, within which the plenitude of oil and canvases depicting frigates, wolfhounds, or bucolic *comscapes* were the modest bedfellows of Cole, Church, and Bierstadt. I've even found delight and surprise in the unexpected hollows of hole-in-the-wall establishments in Port Angeles in coastal northwest Washington, Arcadia in rural central Florida, New Braunfels in southcentral Texas, and Kingman, Arizona just south of Las Vegas, where I bought WWII-era typescript diaries. Nowadays, I've come to realize that most American towns have three things: gas stations, Dollar Stores, and antique shops, which goes to show the importance of this enterprise. The essentials, as we see them, are what makes this a business of commemorative commodities: we all have *stuff* that is held and protected by us, until we decide we are done with being driven or consumed by it. And instead, we would prefer its value in cash.

In many ways, my own relationship with *stuff* and *antiques* has prepared me to be a director of a special collections library, because much of it is about *stuff*, *antiques*, and the curious human attraction to those memorial objects that have often arbitrary meaning and value. Most such institutions have collection development and retention policies, but these are not always cut and dry. In fact, the discernment process is

almost like that of those who contend with their own spiritual calling or placement within a religious community. This is in part because there is a messy calculus in the operation and negotiation of objects, from who owned them to what they actually are. Provenance, practicality, and performance of objects are significant points of interest: donated archival collections, family bibles, or teapots belonging to John Wesley have as much varietal complexity as incunabula, musical manuscripts, or letters by Charles Wesley purchased from auction houses. Similarly, how they will be used and put on display will also usually impact the selection and retention process.

Notions of how we understand objects, how we understand *stuff*, share much with how we approach and contend with antiques. Indeed, in Bridwell this has been clear to me over the last four years, exploring the brilliant and variegated legacy of the first Bridwell director



Decherd Turner, whose own relationship with *stuff*—principally art and furniture—yielded a bounty of extraordinary, yet unusual objects for a Methodist, theological, and special

collections library to contend with into the 21st century. Mr. Turner’s discerning eye was very much attuned to what would be beneficial to a great library collection. He also clearly saw and delighted in the vibrancy of *antique culture* and the world of artistic commerce, trade, and acquisition that now marks Bridwell and its very singularity.

Many items that we now possess in Bridwell might be seen as out-of-scope, but if we are to look through that very lens that Mr. Turner had, we might better consider that these very artistic and design-oriented objects have great historic and pedagogical value. I certainly feel an affinity for his collecting, even as much as I would be less likely to buy furniture or portraits today, for example, than fifty years ago.

I personally do like oil paintings (especially portraiture, which nowadays is often criticized for unbalanced representations of wealth and Eurocentrism), but also manuscripts, musical ephemera, crystal and glass works, wood carvings and unique furniture. I enjoy the *thrill of the hunt* for materials that have aesthetic or historic significance and meaning. There is an underlying but often unattended principal in collecting, which is the winning equation for successful acquisitions: range of knowledge + more information than the seller + timing. (I’m sure that Mr. Turner had a similar approach to his own collecting in this regard, as I continue to hear stories about his powers of persuasion, convincing resistant artists or sellers to give up their wares to Bridwell!). I engage with the history of painting and design, consider themes, styles, and even studies on art reproduction, as well as knowledge of languages to help guide me around shops and antique malls (just as much as with archival



acquisitions). Many times, a tag reads “portrait of gentlemen,” but if I am able to ascertain said gentlemen, it could be the difference between \$25 and \$2,500! The same with inscriptions, which are often misrepresented as *Ancient Egyptian* only to be Coptic, Syriac, or Tibetan—key factors that will change the calculus, history, and value of objects.

The antique industry and its associated *stuff* also plays into the American notion of holidays, sometimes depicted as a reproduction of a New England autumn or winter—a Thanksgiving or Christmas full of pecan, apple, and pumpkin pies, or at

least an array of candles effervescing those scents; to overstuffed pillows embroidered with a variety of scenes or statements about love, family, and joy. Beyond the *junktiques* (or more crudely expressed *craptiques*), which are really the places full of old and even new low-value *stuff* marked-up for sale under the same banner of *antiques*, there are the *nouveau antiques* (or, *noweantiques*), which are replicas of old objects, purposely stressed and worn out wood, cloth, or metal products to give a sense of age and respectability. Sometimes sellers don’t want you to know these items have been aged, but you can generally tell. You may also find the imitation Dalí or Monet for mid-century martini bar walls; or the even more tacky trends, like the weird fad of *Disneysified* Regency or Victorian couture that flourished in the late 1960s and early 1970s—as if the spry man-in-tails and tights riding in an open carriage was justly understood during the Nixon administration.

I’ve somehow come to identify antique shops with a quintessentially American idea and identity—that we are consumers in this soupy

capitalism that constantly produces disposable objects without end, in great part because we are serial, consummate, and unrelenting customers. In that regard, these shops are no longer about quality, but about an enterprise of commerce and community, where locals in more rural areas come to talk, share gossip and banter, and find community; they also serve social interactions with locals and feed an economy that is often struggling. In many areas where there are few discernable industries, lagging production, or financial instability, nearly everyone in every place has



stuff. And in having stuff, you have potential for commerce and capital—signatures of our country and world. Nowadays too, the great American antique shop is almost not complete without the accoutrements of patriotic Americana, flags of various shapes, sizes, and ages, and the vast assemblage of military regalia, paraphernalia, and outfits. Antique shops mirror our strengths, weaknesses, identities, honors, and fears; they tell us something about where we have been, where we are, and where we are going, including and perhaps especially with the abundance of politically branded materials and even the more outrageous objects of our curiosity that many buyers seek, and attentive sellers are quick to accommodate.

Whatever we make of the contemporary antique shop, whatever there is to be said about

the multiplicity of objects that populate these thousands of local stores, markets, or kiosks, I am reminded of what led me to this reflection on antiques in the first place: a cup of saffron tea with friends. It also made me consider the fragility of our life with the *stuff* by which we are surrounded. I think now of another family, close cousins on my mother’s side, who were by far the most adventurous and avid collectors of antiques I’ve ever known. They gathered a houseful of wares, from statues and fine china to books and landscape paintings and filled a home with everything they could find. Yet over the last few years, the entire family all passed away, leaving a home empty of their joy, love, and generosity. Now only a faint reminder of their presence lingers, while a house full of *stuff* remains to be sold, with little meaning, few attachments, and no joy.

Our Afghan friends on that last 4th of July had asked if fireworks were illegal in the United States, because the sudden explosions reminded them of gunshots and the conflict back home. We live in a space where an event like fireworks can bring on two very different reactions—celebration and commemoration on the one hand; shock and paroxysm on the other. We might say the same about a cup of tea—for some it is a modest beverage that sates our thirst and gives us comfort; but for others a cup of tea can awaken the imagination, unlock the gates of the mind, and make us realize our mortality—perhaps even shake us into grabbing the present and living into it, rather than ignoring what’s really important while we all still have some breath.

Pax vobiscum! ~ AJE

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