

# The Old Curiosity Shop and the New Antique Store: A Note on the Vanishing Curio in New York City



## 🏰 A Cabinet of *Curiosities* 🏰

There is something delightfully vague about the term “old curiosity shop.” It may mean so much and so little.

—*New York Times*, February 5, 1899

The powerful first chapter of Charles Dickens’s 1841 novel *The Old Curiosity Shop* presents three kinds of curiosity. The first curiosity is the city itself. Traversed at night by an aging narrator, London and its representative characters are laid out in all their gaslight ghastriness: the beggar, the exquisite, the potential suicide on the bridge, the late reveler at Covent Garden. The second curiosity is the behavior of Nell’s grandfather. What kind of guardian would leave a child alone at night? The last, and certainly least, curiosity is the shop itself: “There were suits of mail, standing like ghosts in armour here and there; fantastic carvings brought from monkish cloisters; rusty weapons of various kinds; distorted figures in china, and wood, and iron, and ivory; tapestry and strange furniture that might have been designed in dreams.” Then the description ends. In what must be Dickens’s most misnamed novel, the shop hardly figures. Its gothic curios serve as a mere backdrop to the peculiar psychology of Nell’s gambling grandfather and her own frail beauty: indeed, the whole stock of the shop is sold off by the vicious Quilp by the end of chapter 13.

However inapt the title may be as a shorthand to the novel's plot it was evocative enough to supply the name to nearly every bric-a-brac and second-hand furniture shop in New York City for the remainder of the nineteenth century. Seventeen such "Old Curiosity Shops" existed in Manhattan and six in Brooklyn in 1880 according to Trow's business directories. From what little is known about the shops, all shared some of the characteristics that Dickens had managed to fix fictionally by 1840: they were disorganized, overstuffed, eclectic, and fading. Indeed Dickens's descriptive legacy seems to have hung over such premises much as it did with the Five Points after Dickens recounted his visit to New York's notorious slum in his 1842 *American Notes*.



Fig. 1. "Rare Colonial Provincial and Revolutionary Relics Recently Exhibited in Plummer Hall, Salem, Massachusetts, by the Ladies Centennial Committee; From sketches by E.R. Morse." Source: Frank Leslie's Illustrated Newspaper, January 22, 1876. Courtesy of the American Antiquarian Society.

Though Old Curiosity Shops continued to multiply throughout the nineteenth century they were, I believe, a recessive cultural form. New sites appeared to satisfy the public's appetite for the curious; the museum and library placed fine curios in a clearer interpretative light, while popular museums, such as Barnum's, illuminated their attractions in an ever flashier manner. Yet what happened on the retail side? The weak conjunction in this essay's title poses a question about whether our modern notion of an antique finds its origin in these stores or whether it is part of a different organization of the "curious."

## Emporia of Curios

Like the Five Points, curiosity shops shared in the general problem of the unknowable, uncategorizable, and therefore "indescribable." The Old Curiosity Shop on Broadway near Bleeker, as reported in the October 24, 1878, *New York Times*, contained vast quantities of material: umbrella stands (one made from an elephant's foot), walking canes, clocks, pen and ink stands, fire screens, old firearms, some particular objects of patriotic affection (including a Washington snuff box), and "ridiculous old chinaware . . . all dubbed

Japanese." Many of these emporia might strike us today simply as junk stores, and indeed there were places called that, as early as the 1880s, over on Avenue A. However, the curiosity shop seemed to aim at a higher class of object that was then handled by the French term "bric-a-brac." This import, according to the *Times*, meant "anything quaint and ugly." Moreover, curiosity shops, unlike their junk cousins, were located on main thoroughfares. By the 1880s there was a particular cluster of stores on Broadway between Eighth and Fourteenth Streets indicating that the trade in old furniture and chinaware has been rooted in one strip where it remains today—surely a New York rarity.

Certainly, there were gradations of curios between the shops. Over in Brooklyn Heights, William Harvey Strobbridge kept an extensive collection of classical antiquities, especially coins and Egyptian scarabs, as well as some fine Americana. A friend of the great antiquarian Henry Stevens and an advisor to the celebrated bibliophile James Lenox in his book and manuscript purchases, Strobbridge seems to have possessed a polymathic knowledge of the coins and classical pottery that he sold to collectors. The retail side of his trade however, conducted out the front of his house, presented much more of a Dickensian jumble with seal rings, English china, snuff boxes, and walking sticks.

Strobbridge knew more about the classical period than the typical shop proprietor; the true curiosity shop owner appeared to be unconcerned about general classification, piling in the new with the old. Marley's, on Broadway, had always included a mix of the two and when, in 1887, it moved uptown and upmarket to Seventeenth Street and Broadway under the new ownership of Sypher & Co. it compounded the confusion by becoming a specialist in reproductions of old furniture and paintings. Curiosities, of course, need not be ancient or, for that matter, authentic.

In an obvious departure from Dickens these stores always included quanta of Americana. In Flushing, New York, John Halleran's shop was full of Revolutionary caps and swords, buckles and epaulettes, a copy of the "Village of Flushing Trustee Reports" from the eighteenth century, and old editions of Brooklyn and New York City directories. His specialty, however, was in collecting documents relating to the disposition of Indian lands on Long Island. All of these were strewn about the floor according to a visiting journalist. Historical curiosities need neither to be beautiful in themselves or in their presentation. Henry James may have said, "[T]he ancient can never be vulgar," but a general appreciation for the past and especially a sense of patriotism does not have to wear an aesthetic face. There was nothing especially beautiful about the patriotic in these shops no matter how valuable they were in terms of national or local mythology. And, like a saint's relic, the patriotic or historic material did not even have to retain its original form. At Sypher's furniture store one could buy a new Andrew Jackson chair made from the hickory on his estate.

"No museum ever equaled the interior," marveled the *New York Times* in an 1894

report on the Old Curiosity Shop on Broadway and Bleeker. "It is piled high from floor to ceiling with a nondescript condition of everything in all stages of unrepair. There is literally only a passageway through the center of the shop. It branches off where the stairs lead to the floor above and then goes on further into some mysterious rear apartments." Mysterious, indeed. But the greatest curiosity in these shops, at least to the eyes of the press, was not the oddities of inventory but rather the character of the male proprietor. John Nicklin, for example, who ran New York's most visible Old Curiosity Shop on Park Row, was known for his collection of old clocks, jewelry, and musical instruments, but he was also celebrated for his ragged hands deformed from employment in an iron works. John Halleran's interest in Native American material was clearly odd, but as further generous proof that he possessed the eccentric confidence of an autodidact, reporters commented that, along with his less-curious collection of illustrations of and letters by Washington and Jefferson, he savored artifacts from the Franklin Pierce presidency!

### **From Curios to Antiques**

Overall then it seems that the New York curiosity shop kept faith with the Dickensian model. None of the stores presented much awareness of period or style, or much concern over authenticity, that would be prerequisites to our modern interest in the art object. In other words, none of these shops dealt in antiques.

Although the term "antique" begins to appear in the 1870s, it was seldom used in the nineteenth century and then usually as an adjective connected to furniture and not as a general category of old, rare, and aesthetically pleasing material. The earliest instance of the word's use that I have been able to find in the New York press was in promotional material disseminated by the important Levitt Brothers' auction house, which maintained large rooms in Clinton Hall on Astor Place in the old Opera House building. In 1874 it offered an exhibition of "antiques," namely Etruscan and Roman pottery, along with some Renaissance Italian majolica, that it advertised as "of interest to the scholar and antiquarian." Not, one should note, to the homeowner.

Levitt's auction material could only have been intended for the Metropolitan Museum of Art and other new museums in formation or for the very wealthiest of collectors. But Levitt's use of the term "antiques" was an anomaly: the word "antiquities" was more often used to differentiate the rarest classical item from the general run of the recently "old." A modern notion of "antique," I would argue, finds its place *outside* of the museum within the overall sense of taste established in the domestic interior. It was not an object distinguished by an aristocratic patina or, for that matter, a republican gloss; nor was it defined by extreme rarity or links to known historical figures. After 1900, places to purchase these aesthetic objects—that is, the familiar antiques shop—rapidly filled New York business directories. Though still sometimes designated "curiosity shops," their selectivity of objects and their display strategies differentiated them from their Dickensian namesakes that continued

to exist in less fashionable locations.

How do we then account for the transition from curios to antiques? Why was the change in nomenclature and character so rapid? Cultural historians have noted important long-term changes in popular historical consciousness. The "past" was indeed unappreciated in America until the very end of the nineteenth century, at least in terms of its material preservation. In this view, Americans' obliviousness ended with an outbreak of nostalgia at the turn of the century, fanned by general concern over the heedless pace of industrial society. However, who or what exactly carried out these changes remains obscure; moreover, these changes covered decades, not years. So, we are left asking whether the rise of the antique had anything to do with Americans' looking towards the past for guidance at a time of rapid transition, or was it the result of something more grounded in the material world—for example, the short run changes in retail display or the fashions of home decoration?

Taking the latter course, let's consider three possible culprits.

### **Agents of Antiques**

The first possible agent to clarify the new distinctions between curios and antiques may have been the male collector. To the kind of antiquaries that had been operating since the early modern period the Gilded Age added a host of new-wealth hobbyists. As the *Brooklyn Daily Eagle* noted on May 6, 1888, it was *de rigueur* for financiers to make it known they were an enthusiast of some arcana. Henry Clews collected Sevres and Worcester pottery; Jay Gould, orchids; and Austin Corbin, Japanese swords. The journalist judged this to be "an elegant divertissement and an intelligent way of getting rid of superfluous income," but did not consider it of cultural importance. He dismissed the amateur collector with the standard, unanswerable refrain: "great collectors are born, not made." What is not so certain is whether the great collectors necessarily predate the standard levels of interest among the acquiring bourgeois, whether they are in the vanguard of popular taste. Pioneering collectors of American furniture and ceramics such as Irving W. Lyon and Alice Morse Earle only got going at the turn of the century and organized collaboration between collectors even later, with the formation of the exclusive Walpole Society in 1910. It is also noticeable that women were by 1900 (and contrary to Wallace Nutting's notable remark that "Men, because they seek prettiness less than solidity, are better collectors than women") very solid in their collecting interests: Abby Rockefeller, Gertrude Vanderbilt Whitney, and Electra Webb were outpacing their family members in the preservation of Americana.

A second character appears in the 1870s to adjust, as it were, the relations of the producer to the consumer. Clarence Cook, a student of A. J. Downing and Calvert Vaux, published an Eastlake-influenced series of essays on home decoration that he later collected together as *The House Beautiful* (1878). Together with H. Hudson Holly at *Harper's*, Cook led the movement to bring an

arts-and-crafts sensibility into American taste. But however one may wish to place this advocacy of vernacular simplicity within a linear development of the modern concept of "antique," it is not clear whether their advocacy of lighter lines and clearer organization in domestic furnishings made much difference to the late Victorian clutter of the parlor. A journalist in the *Times* (January 2, 1879) suggested that such expert advice only further clouded the issue. He argued that neither the Eastlake, Queen Anne, or Renaissance modes had done much to clarify the standard of taste: "These three great troubles," (anticipating the voice of today's "Living Section"), "have revolutionized household art. Indeed household art has revolutionized the household. What with painting and patching, glueing and mortising, our homes are wholly given over to the demon of unrest."

What was the nature of this unrest? It was not, I suspect, a new appreciation for hand craftsmanship or the patina of the ancient piece brought on by the rush of factory made goods. Factory-made "colonial revival" furniture appeared in the mid-1880s without any corresponding rush to collect the original, and "authentic" pieces were still recarved into more modern forms. The real unrest issued surely from women's growing notions of domestic taste and control over the shape of the household. A parody from "Dark Mahogany" contained this imaginary conversation between two women in a Brooklyn curiosity shop: "My Tom has no elevated tastes, not even in high backed chairs. But must the principles of art be sacrificed to a husband's selfishness? No man shall call me wife who cannot climb o' nights into an Elizabethan bedstead. Think what glorious memories of a golden age of literateer, as well as furnitoor, the objects of virtoo revive."

In the path towards the modern version of the antique these two tracks, the antiquarian collector and the aesthetic tastemaker, may not have been continuous, let alone in parallel. Elizabeth Stillinger, in the only scholarly account of the early U.S. antique's trade, imagines an innovative male collector loving his Revolutionary forebears' chair while at the same time holding a copy of Ruskin or Eastlake in his hand. Yet there is little evidence that such a composite character ever existed.

It is perhaps to women holding their copies of Ruskin that one should look for the new placement of curios. From the Civil War onwards old curiosity shops, short-lived charitable endeavors, appeared as a regular feature of church and voluntary association fairs. Despite their name these did not originate as ways to sell objects unearthed in the parishioners' basements, like today's bring-and-buy stands, but rather as little tableau of interesting curios, mixing the patriotic and the exotic. The origin of the charitable curiosity shop appears to lie in the fairs organized during the Civil War by women's relief agencies and the national voluntary United States Sanitary Commission. The 1864 Brooklyn Sanitary Fair featured a whole New England kitchen, complete with a fireplace, roasting spit, and ancient kettles, all worked by upwards of thirty ladies *en costume* who also engaged in quilting bees, donations, wedding preparations, and other old customs. The only thing on sale was the food; objects such as a

Revolutionary-era teapot and pewter set belonging to a signer of the Declaration of Independence were "relics," a spiritual form of placing detail.

The tradition of "relic rooms" and small-scale reenactments was revived during the nation's centennial year. Although the Philadelphia Centennial Exposition glorified the promise of an industrial and commercial future, some material from America's past, including another New England kitchen, was on display. Moreover a range of local celebrations in 1876 paid even more attention to antiquities in part because local antiquarians were especially keen on collecting history at the county level. The centennial festivities at Salem, Massachusetts, included the first exhibition on record where old furniture was arranged by century and a progression of style noted. It even drew the attention of *Frank Leslie's Illustrated Newspaper*, which judged the event to be "by far the most complete and interesting exhibition of antique furniture, we venture to say, ever held in this country." By the time of the Washington Centennial Exhibition in 1889 at the Metropolitan Opera House, New York, American materials—ceramics, furniture, and metalware—relating to the first president were organized by period and displayed with aesthetic clarity. In short, a shift from the curio to the antique emerged in the practice of the fairs and charity "curiosity shops": national sentiment remained important but old objects were gradually loosened from their relic status and resituated in a new strategy of display.

The advent of the modern antique store was announced by the *New York Times* on February 5, 1899, with the straightforward title "How to Start an Old Curiosity Shop." Though the article began with the usual aphorisms about the great collectors being born and not made, it immediately reversed itself with the claim that modern women's knowledge of the cycles of fashion was even more essential than capital or connoisseurship in starting an antiques business. Knowing, for example, whether Lowestoft china is "all the rage" allowed one to judge the market clearly. Thus the business of antiques was primarily about style, and thus better suited to educated middle-class women than to male collectors with large amounts of discretionary cash. A fine discrimination had to be on display; one should foreground only a few choice pieces in the shop window to suggest to browsers that a selective mind was at work within. Of course, finding the ware to sell at auctions required a certain amount of pluck and publicity—but traveling abroad also had commercial advantages: "Here and there in Europe you find a peasant with an old cupboard" (although this observation came with the warning that nowadays even peasants were aware of cash value). The final piece of advice, however, was incontestable: a location for the shop had to be obtained near "the haunts of men and women of culture and money."

Here then was a thoroughly modern antique store in which the objects were arranged in cabinets or placed on tables according to style, period, and maker. Beyond their classification and physical placement, the objects were housed in an environment informed by the "taste" of an individual proprietor that, in turn, was aligned with collective fashion. A "relic" room perhaps, but one

shorn of sentiment and arranged with an eye to exchange value. Gone were the piles of undifferentiated clutter, the narrow passageways, and the mysterious back room. If Little Nell had avoided her apotheosis she might have lived long enough to have made something out of her grandfather's inventory.

### Further Reading:

As with all particular areas of New York's trade and commerce, other than printing, banking, and shipping, the antiques trade needs a historian. This small essay has used newspapers and business directories yet the next best point of departure would be to search the archives of R. G. Dun and Company in the Baker Library, Harvard. The only general treatment of the business remains Elizabeth Stillinger's *The Antiquers: Early Collectors of American Antiques* (New York, 1980), which understandably privileges the pioneer collectors of Americana. Russell Lynes's stalwart *The Tastemakers: The Shaping of American Popular Taste* (New York, 1980) remains a good resource. The transformation of the environment for the retail object is covered wonderfully in William Leach's unmatched *Land of Desire; Merchants, Power and the Rise of a New American Culture* (New York, 1984). The passage of the charitable woman into the world of commercial arts and decoration is an exciting area of scholarly activity. Among the best treatments are Michele H. Bogart's *Artists, Advertising and the Borders of Art* (Chicago, 1995); Diana Korzenik, *Drawn to Art: A Nineteenth-Century American Dream* (Hanover & London, 1985); and Laura R. Prieto, *At Home in the Studio: The Professionalization of Women Artists in America* (Cambridge, 2001). Two essays are especially useful: Amelia Peck's introduction to Metropolitan Museum's exhibition catalog *Candace Wheeler: The Art and Enterprise of American Design, 1875-1900* (New Haven, 2001) and Peter McNeil's "Designing Women, Gender, Sexuality and the Interior Decorator, c. 1890-1940," in *Art History* 17 (34) (1994): 631-57, which explores the *Vogue* 1921 quotation, "Someone once said that a woman is either happily married or an Interior Decorator." The works of Ruskin, it turns out, were seen more in the hands of women in design than in those of male collectors. See Lisa Koenigsberg, "Arbiter of taste: Mrs L. C. Tutill and a tradition of American Women Writers on Architecture, 1848-1913," *Women's Studies* 14 (1988): 339-66. The next stage in what was then called "antiqueering" awaited the motor car. Clues to that development may be found in Virginia Scharff, *Taking the Wheel: Women and the Coming of the Motor Age* (New York, 1991).

This article originally appeared in issue 4.2 (January, 2004).

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Peter G. Buckley teaches history at The Cooper Union for the Advancement of Science and Art and is a fellow of the New York Institute for the Humanities at NYU. He is currently at work on a history of education at The Cooper Union, 1859-1984.