Possessing the Past

For a few years now I’ve been teaching a course in Russian culture and cuisine that ends with an extravagant feast. It’s always fun, but this semester the class ended with a question, in the form of an object. A student called not long before the party to say he had something to show me—could he come to my office right away? Almost immediately he appeared, toting a huge box and puffing from the effort of carrying it across campus and up three steep flights of stairs. He could hardly contain his excitement as he opened the box to reveal a gleaming brass samovar, perfect for his feast dish of Suvorov cookies served with Russian tea and homemade raspberry jam. I gasped. This was no Soviet-era, factory-produced samovar, but an elegant vase-shaped model, its interior grate and elongated chimney extension still intact, a genuine antique worthy of The Cherry Orchard.

He had bought it on eBay for two hundred dollars.

Initially thrilled by my student’s purchase, I later found myself wondering. What did it mean that this emblem of Russian hospitality had become a commodity to be bought and sold on the Internet? Of course there was nothing new here: in desperate times people the world over sell their family keepsakes, and the Internet is just the latest flea market. In my own era, Muscovites had eagerly swapped these tsarist heirlooms—or white elephants—for much-prized American Levis. So why did this purchase make me uncomfortable? The sale of jewelry wouldn’t have bothered me in the same way. But a samovar!

The samovar is an object closely identified with leisurely afternoons on Chekhovian estates, equally necessary for the regalement of guests during summer picnics or winter blizzards. It’s as iconically Russian as apple pie is American. The samovar represents a certain ideal for Russians, a national identity now in danger of being lost as Russia transforms itself into a place more like the rest of the Western world. My student had purchased not only a tea urn, but a way of life that had been packed up and sold to the highest bidder. How unfair!

And how romantic of me to construe the samovar’s cultural significance into this facile narrative. In the midst of my musing, I realized I’d fallen prey to a false idealization of what was, in all honesty, a pretty brutal past: tsars, serfs, massacres, starvation. Did the samovar represent a real past, or merely an imagined one? And what, in fact, is the nature of keepsakes? Aren’t they merely anodynes to comfort us as we attempt to hold on to a way of life no longer possible in our accelerated times? Or do they retain contemporary relevance?
My inclination to romanticize became apparent again a few days later when I happened to visit a new exhibition, “Yankee Remix,” at the Massachusetts Museum of Contemporary Art. Organized in collaboration with the Society for the Preservation of New England Antiquities, it features the responses of nine contemporary artists to antique objects they discovered in the Society’s storehouses. The exhibition explores the nature of what we choose to keep, and how these objects define us. Rina Banerjee’s installation, “Contagious Spaces, Preserving Pinkeye (2003),” made me think again of the samovar. In this piece, a vast altar is arrayed with small tables set for tea. The various tea services—for both people and dolls—seem fanciful in their swaddling of hot pink Reynolds plastic wrap. Tea in Victorian England was high fashion, as it later became in the United States, but the fad wasn’t homegrown. Banerjee’s work reminds us that the teatime rituals we still associate so closely with Britain resulted from colonialism, and she comments on the way that the “exotic” elements of a colonized culture often become, for the colonizer, the height of chic. The exhibition wall text explains that “By mixing the toy tea sets with the adult version, Banerjee hints that to drink tea in the West (at least 150 years ago) was to ‘play at’ India.” Uh-oh. Did my preoccupation with the samovar (the Russian equivalent of British teatime) put me in the metaphorical position of “playing at Russia”?

I was back at my original question. Do keepsakes connect us in any vital, meaningful way to tradition, or do they simply sit on a shelf or in a drawer, a reminder of how much life has changed? Often these objects are dining-related. Think embroidered tablecloths, rococo silver services, cumbersome Thanksgiving platters. Or they may take the form of scribbled recipes that bear the stains and splatters of the meals they resulted in. Or even the form of heirloom vegetables that we increasingly seek in our modern life as a way to reconnect with the past, with a time of ostensible leisure when, it seemed, things were better, tastier, or at least more real. Do these keepsakes—material or vegetal—continue to signify, or are they now empty objects that we pass on without meaning, just because we know that we should? Does our attempt to possess the past, through an object or the consumption of artisanal food, mean that we are looking forward—progressively—or backward, retrogressively?

Thinking of white elephants, I’m reminded of how circus elephants parade by, obediently grabbing with their trunks the tails of the elephants that go before them, and I’m left to wonder which traditions and beliefs I perpetuate unthinkingly, or sentimentally, and which remnants of the past I might consciously choose to pass on.

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