

**MEMORY JUGS ⇒ From Page 8**

You may find old baseball cards that your grandfather or father had; or maybe coins, marbles, war collectibles, toys, postcards, other old paper items; I could go on and on. The point is, these are items that bring back memories of our past in which we learn and recall family history. They allow us to discover aspects of our history we may not have known previously. They reveal good times and maybe not so good times but, nonetheless, a lot of memories and history.

I bring all this up because, on a trip into New England – Connecticut specifically – I searched out several small towns for auction sales and, at one, there was up for auction this very interesting clay jug that likely originally held whiskey. Around the outside of it was attached a bunch of small items. It was the most interesting-looking piece of art I had seen, very folk art-looking, done in an amateur fashion, but very well.

The auctioneer said, “How much will you give for this folk art memory jug? How about \$100 to start?” He worked his way down, as usual, to begin with a \$20 bid, but the piece ended up selling for \$165. And, no, I wasn’t the buyer! I do see the value though.

After the auction, I asked the buyer if I could look at it. I will have to say, with all the items attached to this jug,

you could learn a lot about the person and what they liked. There were coins, jewelry, small knives, pins, old lighters, small toy items, shells, buttons (both regular and political), a clay pipe piece, and more – all memories of this person’s life and past – stuck to a jug in a very artful way with some sort of clay-like adhesive. How awesome!

Some researchers say that such memory jugs originated in African culture, which influenced slave communities in America, according to Appalachian History. According to the Encyclopedia of American Folk Art, a surge of interest in memory jugs took place during the late 19th century as “scrap booking Victorians” sought to keep their mementos in one place.

When you see one of these jugs or vessels painted silver or gold it was to further glorify the recipient. You may also find these objects called forget-me-not jugs, memory vessels, mourning jugs, ugly jars, whatnot jars, and whimsy jars.

Also, according to Appalachian History, the material used to hold objects in place include mortar, plaster, river clay, or windowpane putty. Most makers did not sign their work, although the piece I saw sell at the auction clearly had the gentleman’s name tag from an organization in which he was involved attached to it. He may not have been the maker of the piece, but it does give some clarity as to who the piece represented.

In identifying the age of the piece, you can’t just go by the age of the items on it, because the piece could have been made after that period. But looking at the patina of the under-structure or identifying the type of adhesive used would both be better ways to tell true age.

There was also a grass roots revival of memory jug making that swept through Appalachia and the African-American south in the 1950s and 60s according to Appalachian History.

Being in the art, antique, collectible business now, I find a resurgence in the making of these items as an interesting project to remember one’s family history. With an art of re-purposing the past, Kitson Gallery has future plans to hold memory vessel projects, possibly calling them found art sculptures. I have seen cigar boxes, plant stands, radios, tea pots, mason jars, bottles, clay jugs and many other items decorated with people’s found objects.

I have seen them sell for \$48 to \$1,500, with certain versions topping \$2,000, depending on the objects used, how elaborate they are, and the provenance (the history written down about the person who created it and/or for whom it was created, and why.) So stay tuned for some interesting information about this memory vessel project with Kitson Gallery and certainly I should go back to all the treasures I found of my family when I was 11 or 12 and make a memory vessel of my own.



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