

## Nostalgia Re-examined

Rena Neumann Coen

THE FALL, 1974, issue of *Minnesota History* published as its "The Editor's Page" feature some provocative comments by Philip D. Jordan on the current absorption of Americans with collecting almost anything old as antiques while they show less and less interest in intellectual history. "They purchase the past for cash, but they do not understand it," wrote Mr. Jordan in his "The Neurosis of Nostalgia" editorial. "They are possessed with things but indifferent to ideas." Part of the editorial was reprinted in the March 4, 1975, issue of the *Des Moines (Iowa) Register*.

Mr. Jordan, who himself collects antiques "as evidences of a former culture," wrote the editorial in part "to evoke replies and to stimulate," he told the editor. Following is one written reply — an art historian's view — by Rena Neumann Coen. She is an associate professor of art history at St. Cloud State College and the author of several art-related articles for *Minnesota History* and other journals. —Ed.

PROFESSOR Philip D. Jordan's comments in *Minnesota History* about the current tendency to escape the stresses of the present by backtracking to the past have some validity. Undoubtedly there is an increasing emphasis on collecting things, objects, gimcracks, whatnots, and the like largely because they are old and with little or no regard to their intrinsic worth. It is also true that self-discipline, self-determination, and personal liberty are qualities to be highly prized and that the documents articulating these national virtues should be constantly cherished.

These considerations should not lead us, however, to invidious comparisons between works of art and historic documents. One cannot equate a hand-wrought cherry chest with a copy of *The Federalist Papers*, or compare their values, for they occupy separate categories in the range of human experience. One is an object, the other an idea or group of ideas. One speaks primarily, though not entirely, to the emotions, the other primarily to the intellect. Both have intrinsic worth, and neither can be dismissed in a value system that ignores what Jacques Barzun so eloquently calls the "soul's history." Though the Declaration of Independence excites our admiration for the depth of its humanitarian impulses (and, incidentally, also for the beauty of Thomas Jeffer-

son's prose), the antique chest speaks directly to those human perceptions that transcend the purely intellectual exercise of social, political, and moral judgment. For art has the power of transfiguring the physical world, of exciting the imagination, and satisfying the soul. A contemplation of the principles of balanced design, rhythmic form, and harmonious combination of texture and pattern — all apparent in a good antique cherry chest — heightens an appreciation of aesthetic truths that man has valued since long before the Declaration of Independence or *The Federalist Papers* were written. The apprehension of a work of art is as precious a human experience as a grasp of history. Indeed, an appreciation of one enhances an understanding of the other.

ON THE LESS theoretical level, there is even something to be said for the enthusiasm for the old that sometimes leads to collecting antiques of questionable artistic value. Not so long ago primitive American paintings were literally "junked," antique furniture was indiscriminately and destructively "refinished," and marble sculptures — even large ones — were lost or "misplaced" because no one cared what happened to these tangible examples of nineteenth-century America's admiration for the classical past.

We all know, too, of historic houses — unique examples of the romantic, eclectic styles of American revival architecture — that have been torn down to make room for freeways or bigger and better parking ramps. It is precisely the growing awareness of the value of the old, the appreciation of the fact that one man's trash may be another man's treasure, that has, thank goodness, slowed down the mania for bulldozing away some of our finest national monuments.

Let us, therefore, value both ideas and objects. The objects despised by some may be prized by others, and it is far better to preserve than to destroy. At least some genuine works of art may then survive our throwaway culture and become a part of our artistic heritage. For if history gives us insight into the philosophy upon which a new nation was founded on principles of social justice and political morality, objects of art give us similar insight into the aesthetic principles that are equally a part of our nation's cultural identity. Both art and history can instruct, illuminate, and delight.



Copyright of **Minnesota History** is the property of the Minnesota Historical Society and its content may not be copied or emailed to multiple sites or posted to a listserv without the copyright holder's express written permission. Users may print, download, or email articles, however, for individual use.

To request permission for educational or commercial use, [contact us](#).