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Taste is always a matter of taste

By Curtis Seltzer

BLUE GRASS, Va.—I looked around the other day and realized that I’ve made very few of the things I own or use.

I turned a couple of walnut bowls 40 years ago that now hold things that don’t exactly belong in other places. The only handmade, one-of-a-kind anything I regularly produce is writing, which is just another cluttered-up depository for my own odds and ends.

Two hundred years ago, almost everything was made by hand and much of that was more or less one-of-a-kind. Survival for most people required basic hand skills with common materials like wood, stone, leather and fiber. Factory production of tools and goods was in its infancy.

Even though I have a general idea about how to make a steel hammer, I realized that I don’t have the practical knowledge or the wherewithal for actually doing so. There’s little in my life that I could make from absolute scratch.

Without Home Depot, I’m back in the Stone Age, except worse because I don’t know how to knap a decent spear point just in case a giant sloth comes along when my wife, Melissa, has let it be known that she could do with a new winter coat.

I backed into this sobering realization after I took Melissa to a big antique show a couple of weeks ago where old hand tools are usually bought for display as living-room accents.

I am always reluctant to go antiquing with her, because we have different tastes.

I was looking for a Christmas gift. When I go alone, I usually buy jewelry. I look for “bridge” pieces, things I like that I think she might like too. I occasionally succeed, but I think her jewelry box is filled with stuff she would have never bought for herself.

My father bought antique jewelry for my mother in the 1950s and 1960s. He started with two bracelets assembled from old slides that were once used to cinch the chains of pocket watches.

My mother had a good eye for quality, and, to his credit, my father had a very good ear. When she said, “Bob, don’t you think that’s nice?”—he wrote a

check.

Melissa has remarked more than once on my bad hearing.

I think my mother really wanted bling—big, flashy stones that are dragged to parties with a team of Clydesdales. (Since my father had no draft horses in his stable, my mother redirected her taste to what the acute of hearing could afford—the old and off-beat.)

So here's the question: Should a spouse get a spouse the kind of jewelry the spouse likes or the kind of jewelry the spouse likes? (Other ways are available to word this question, but I'm trying to clean up the gender bias in my prose.)

On our hour-long drive to the antique show, I heard the word “emerald” about every three miles, sometimes in strategic combination with the word, “ring.”

To my credit, I had been keeping my eyes open for several years for something that fits this very description.

Melissa already had a blingy emerald and diamond ring that she'd inherited from her mother. It had been a gift from her husband who is generally remembered as someone who gave what he wanted to give.

I'd never found anything that looked much different, except for the not-for-sale, Hummer-size emerald that belonged to a Chinese emperor.

So instead of an emerald ring, I've bought Melissa a seed-pearl, necklace-and-earring set strung on white horse hair. A naturally occurring seed pearl -- there are several thousand in the set -- is about one mm wide, or 5/127 inch, and weighs less than a quarter of a grain. Each is hand-drilled with a primitive bow. Melissa's set was likely made in China or India in the 1780s or so.

Melissa liked the horse hair, which was used because it's thinner than silk. I didn't tell her that it had to have been plucked from the tail of a live horse; it's too brittle otherwise. (Long marriages are based on the prudent concealment of certain details.)

I also had a jeweler make her a bracelet from 18th Century watch cocks that I'd collected. Watch cocks are exquisitely crafted brass covers -- no two alike -- used to protect the mechanical guts of the bulky pocket watches of that time. (Click on watch cocks at www.twigsdigs.com/horology.)

Wives and kids of watchmakers cut and filed these quarter-size screens in

unpaid squalor. I hope their fanciful designs -- flowers, faces and dragons -- lifted their spirits on the thermals of their own imaginations.

One of my first gifts to Melissa was a cylindrical, brass cigar cutter from about 1900. I put it on a necklace and suggested that she work the clipping action any time a pompous male lawyer started acting out in court.

My taste in women's jewelry runs to the handmade. It's the skill, not the stone or the metal, that attracts me.

So instead of an emerald ring, I was looking for a piqué bracelet. Tortoiseshell inlaid with gold was popular during Queen Victoria's extended mourning for Prince Albert who died in 1861. Tortoiseshell is dark, but it has depth and color. Piqué designs are usually a little abstract -- like some quilt patterns -- which give these pieces a contemporary touch.

I finally found the bracelet I wanted...that is, that I wanted for her. It bore one small nick, but who doesn't at that age?

Melissa looked. She judged. She...moved on.

I think she felt more comfortable with a horse around her neck than a turtle on her wrist.

Nonetheless, our antiquing produced a win-win. I didn't spend any money, and Melissa wasn't given jewelry that she doesn't like.

The show's 150 dealers offered many items that had a similarly beneficial outcome. I did not buy Melissa anything that looked moldy and smelled musty. And she did not have to pretend that she liked a pre-Revolutionary chamber pot that might work for casseroles.

Unlike Democrats and Republicans, Melissa and I have figured out how to get things done despite our differences.

I continually look to span our gap with old oddities, and she is ever-hopeful that if "emerald ring" is said enough times, I may understand that she does not want an authentic stone ax that with a little hand work could be turned into a hair comb.

Melissa bought herself a pair of 1950s pearl earrings. Very nice, but not for me.

I passed on a leather football helmet from the 1930s that would protect me from future blows to the head.

I've been thinking about a green ring this week, though, of course, nothing as sensible as colored glass.

I've also been thinking that marriages, like old jewelry, are always handmade. .

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