



Punters and Collectors

Out of date can mean big money!

You may have seen one of those antiques programmes when people bring their old furniture and ornaments to have them dated and valued; or the quiz shows featuring informed individuals discussing the merits and possible prices of selected items. They are entertainment for anyone interested in the subject and can also excite the imagination of ordinary folk - doesn't that brass coal scuttle look like the one Grandma had? I'm sure we didn't throw it out. Then off they go, rummaging in the attic or the basement where they may find not only the thing they are looking for, but are likely to uncover possible valuables among the junk. Specialists actually make a living by buying and selling collectables: anything from china cabinets to butter dishes. Then there are the punters. As long as there are collectors, there will be opportunists around who think they can cash in on a ready and gullible market. Anyone who fancies being one of the latter, however, might want to give it some serious thought first.

The bottom line is: no matter what the experts may say, a piece is only worth as much as someone is prepared to pay for it. Another mistake amateurs often make is to try bringing an article back to its original glorious state. Antique furniture is a good example. Restoration by a professional is expensive, and after the job has been done, the owner might expect the value to have increased. In most cases, the reverse is true. Had it been left as it was, damaged or not, it would have fetched considerably more. Short of ready cash, my Grandfather decided to sell some bits and pieces including the upright piano. The buyer offered him a good price for the lot, but only because of the piano stool. Although riddled with wood-worm it was, he said, worth more than the rest put together. Certainly, one man's junk can be another's treasure; conversely, buying what seems a good profit-maker based on looks and price is a trap if you know very little about the market.

Research can help to a degree. At least knowing the basics about valuing collectables is a start. Depending where it is acquired, however, this information can be as dated as the items being researched. Anyone hoping to turn a profit needs to find out about current trends. What may have been in vogue for decades can rapidly become passé, leaving the prospective seller hard pushed to break even. On-line searches make life easier, but there's no substitute for the real thing. Especially when buying, it is advisable to see the goods in the flesh, so to speak; and before picking up that bargain from a private seller, it might be a good idea to check around the appropriate shops for something similar that will be a guide to price based on condition. Just keep in mind that dealers are into making money, sometimes by doing business with other dealers, so they'll always be thinking about the sell-on profit. Even when you trust one to be absolutely straight, make the effort to visit a few more for comparisons.

Stamps

Most of us had a stamp collection when we were kids. The inclusions were usually steamed or soaked off letters. Sometimes extras, especially foreign ones, were purchased from shops or mail order companies. We stuck them in albums, often carelessly, not realising that one or more might be sought-after and worth much more than their face value. We are wiser now, but not nearly as informed as we need to be if stamps-for-profit is our goal. Essentially, old is good as long as the item is undamaged. Unused with no postmark and the glue still on the back is a bonus if, of course, anyone is interested. Apparently, US stamps printed in the last 70 years are worth nothing except for postage - I'm told they are still legally useable. First Day Covers, they being stamps post-marked on the first day of issue, may be worth something, but much depends on the integrity of the buyer, and the envelope - with an address it is worth less than one that is left blank. For detailed information on collecting and valuing stamps consult: the Scott Postage Stamp Catalogue (USA); and the Stanley Gibbons Commonwealth and British Empire Stamps Catalogue.

Coins

I have an old tobacco tin containing coins my Dad saved. Some are Victorian, quite a few apparently minted from solid silver; I doubt they are worth any more than the value of the metal they were made from, because they are all worn or damaged. Coins need to be in very good condition, excellent in fact, before a buyer will take interest. Certain ones are in demand, but usually they won't be considered unless in mint condition, meaning exactly that – straight from the mint, unused and unadulterated. Polishing dull ones up with metal cleaner just makes them shine, but it won't impress a knowledgeable numismatist. In fact, the grading of coins is very specific, differing considerably depending on a country's standard. This can mean that a coin won't pass muster in the UK, whereas it might sneak through in the US. Check with The American Numismatic Association to learn more about grading coins.

Precious Metals and Gems

All that glitters is not gold; and dazzling could mean diamond or dud. When there's big money to be made, the rogues will be out in force – selling over-priced, low-quality items, or just plain fakes; they also buy cheaply from anyone who believes their appraisal and valuation to be truthful. If you don't know these people and their integrity cannot be verified absolutely by someone you trust, have nothing to do with them!

Gold is a marketable resource, as is silver to a lesser degree. There are many ways to acquire precious metals in a variety of forms, and each has its own advantages and drawbacks. One thing that should be considered is the law of the land – some countries may limit the amount that a private individual may own, so it pays to check before starting to collect. As an investment, bullion purchased from a reliable dealer, or directly from the mint, is probably the safest option if long-term investment is the plan. Ingots and bullion coins are stamped with the type of metal, its grade, and the weight, so you know exactly what you are buying. Once the metal has been crafted into a functional or decorative form, such as jewellery and ornaments, the purchase price will increase, but the selling price of the basic material will not. Picking up old chains and rings that are damaged or unwanted can eventually net a profit for a lower outlay, but the current market and bullion price will always determine their actual worth. Beware of fakes and those jewellers who seem to have massive discount sales nearly every week – chances are, if you took your new 50%-off gold bracelet to the shop down the road, they'd tell you it wasn't as good as the identical one in their window and would almost certainly offer you a lot less than you paid.

The same applies to gems, perhaps more so. Could you tell a genuine ruby from a paste one? Can you be sure that a pink sapphire isn't actually a zircon? And how about the quality – what is a carat, anyway? Anyone who fancies precious gems as an investment needs professional advice from a reputable expert. Without it, you may as well stick your money in a slot machine!

Do your research. There is a wealth of useful information on the Internet giving details of what to look for, plus some of the pitfalls. You will also find the names of a number of publications and associations which you can source for in-depth opinions and advice.

Art Works and Intellectual Property

I have very little to say on this area, despite being an artist myself; in particular because of it. I know how hard it is to break into the limelight and become collectable. Having said that, contemporary art can be a good investment, as long as the artist is going places. Buying a canvas or two when they are just starting up can turn a handsome profit later when they are eventually discovered; but if they are still starving in a garret years down the track, I just hope you didn't pay over the top. There are, of course, examples of former artists, perhaps one of the famous masters, that are to be discovered languishing in the most unlikely of places – in sheds and spare rooms, consigned to boxes along with a deceased aunt's bric-a-brac; from car-boot sales; maybe hanging on your own wall – oils, prints, sketches and suchlike. If you believe you may have unearthed a lost masterpiece, have it authenticated by a recognised and reputable auction house. If it turns out to be a winner for you, good luck; if not, hang it back up as a reminder of what might have been.

Cars and Motor Bikes

Definitely for enthusiasts, owning and restoring vintage or classic vehicles is more than just a hobby. These passionate collectors spend a small fortune on their machines, and are always on the lookout for "new" acquisitions and spare parts. They do, however, know their stuff and can spot non-genuine a mile off. Anyone thinking of trying their hand at buying and selling should remember this. A classic is only that if all parts are original. Anything less is simply old and nice-looking.

Admittedly, there would be times when something is beyond repair and the only available replacement is for a later model. Should this be the case, be up front and tell the prospective buyer before they discover it for themselves, as they surely will. If the part cannot be sourced in any shape or form, it will need to be custom-made. Rather than tackling this yourself, it may be better to offer it for sale as is, take a lower price, and let the buyer sort it out. They probably know how to without compromising the value, both monetary and aesthetically.

Just Collectables

Whatever takes a person's fancy can turn into an obsession. Dolls are quite popular, as are teddy bears, ornamental owls, guitars, garden gnomes, et al. Some items are manufactured specifically for collectors – souvenir spoons, sporting cards, anniversary coins and china, plus limited edition memorabilia. Art Deco was popular once and people would scour junk shops and church jumble sales for specific items, or just to gather more and more examples. All of these are considered priceless by the collectors; but sellers beware: fads come and go, display rooms get filled to overflowing, and a market that could never get enough can quickly degrade to one where only the most sought-after items are of value. Better to find out first who wants what and how much they are prepared to pay, or you could end up being a collector yourself – mainly of junk nobody else wants!

Whether you are a punter or a collector, make sure you enjoy your passion and don't get swept away by thoughts of making a small fortune in five minutes. Values fluctuate with the weather, so realising any profit at all may take some time. At the end of the day you could still be out of pocket; and then, the only thing you may be able to take comfort from is to find another preoccupation that doesn't cost as much.

Next issue: Auctions – not always as genuine as they seem

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