

Commentary... Art and individual identity

By Chris Morin
Columnist

Erin Thompson serves as an art professor at John Jay College, City University of New York. She has written that for most art buyers "... art is a means to create and strengthen social bonds, and a way for collectors to communicate information about themselves and the world within these networks ... art can send a message about who the collector really is – or at least who the person sees themselves as being."

The oil tycoon and billionaire J. Paul Getty poured millions of dollars into art. He fluently spoke eight languages. The J. Paul Getty Trust is the largest art institute in the world. His personal collection favored 18th-century European painters along with antique Greco Roman sculptures. But J. Paul saved his greatest respect for Europe's old-money aristocracy. All this seems incongruent with a man who was so miserly that he installed a pay-phone in his mansion for anyone who needed to make a long-distance call.

Many, including Thompson, believe that Getty embraced art and languages in order to overcome the perception by the European elite that he was an unpolished, new-money Midwesterner whose family got lucky via the oil boom. So he attempted to shed his old skin for a cosmopolitan costume. Alas, being an art maven and polyglot could not overcome being a skinflint and womanizer; J. Paul Getty never attained the respect he craved.

A jeweler whose work we carry (at Raven Makes Gallery) makes heavy bracelets of sterling silver that have a textured, sand-cast-like appearance; gold petroglyph symbols adorn the outside. The inside of the bracelet is a finely detailed scene depicting the lives of the Navajo People living in Canyon de Chelly. These works are called "Storyteller, Inner Beauty" bracelets.

The jeweler, Cody, is a full-blood Navajo raised in the heart of the reservation. He fervently travels the rodeo circuit. A roper, he's told us more than once, "If I were good enough at my roping to make a living, I'd never make another piece of jewelry."

Despite being one of the premier Native American jewelers today, for him, making jewelry is a profession, not his identity. In his heart, he's a roper, an Indian cowboy. But outside of his inner circle, he's "Cody the Navajo Jeweler

... who loves the rodeo."

People typically associate more exterior type of personal possessions with their identity than they do art. The arc of an American male's maturation process can often be discerned by the car or truck he's driving. However, clothing probably provides the best accessory to saying, "This is me."

Thirty-five years ago, Mitch served in my military unit at Fort Bragg, NC. During the day, when we were in garrison, Mitch wore camouflaged fatigues and a maroon beret. At the end of the workday, he headed out on his Harley after donning motorcycle regalia, to include his club's sleeveless blue-jean vest with embroidered "colors" on the back. All day long, Mitch had on some sort of identifying uniform, first as a paratrooper, later as a 1%er.

Homeowners can go to great lengths to transform their house into a gallery of sorts. A modest pre-fab home might have a décor of well-chosen folk art pieces from places visited. At the other end of the spectrum was the Manhattan townhouse suite of David Rockefeller, where a Picasso, Monet, and Matisse were displayed in the same room.

Umpteen condos and homes on the Oregon Coast have a nautical theme. World travellers often exhibit an eclectic collection from all walks of life in their house. In this area, a plethora of abodes display at least one Sisters Rodeo, Sisters Outdoor Quilt Show, or Sisters Folk Festival poster.

On one hand, these art objects are purely inanimate; on the other, they represent amulets that surround us, marking the radius of our perceptions about existence, humanity, and character. For the individual with two or three differently decorated homes, they can offer the opportunity to be another self for part of the year.

While living in a log cabin in Alaska for eight years, I had a wood stove for heat and no electricity, running water, or telephone. The cabin was sparsely decorated; a few inexpensive works honored the natural world. The large contingent of us who lived this way provisioned our cabins in a relatively similar manner.

Near the end of this period, I became a schoolteacher and romantically involved with a professional woman in the medical field. She was not going to adapt to my preferred lifestyle, so I gave up the rustic ways and moved into her

fully modern, chalet-style home.

The surface of my personal world changed, and I resented the appearance of this new me. Having old friends over felt embarrassing; I apologized profusely. However, some years passed and, unbeknownst to me, my perceptions shifted a bit.

We acquired an expensive, large and delicate Yup'ik Eskimo, fossilized whale-bone sculpture of humpbacks breaching. Brightly colored, contemporary prints of Alaskan wildlife were not only purchased, they were matted and framed. Thick, vibrantly sumptuous carpets from a Nepal trip covered the floor.

I continued to pine for the former "good life," but, admittedly, this one had opened new doors. The Spartan idealist drive became tempered. The home and its décor gradually began to reflect my development, almost as if it anticipated what I was to become even before I did.

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