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Tacky tabby

Catty observations about compulsive shopping

Last year I was poking around an antique shop in town looking for a gift when I saw it. High on a shelf, fire-engine red, unlovely, forgotten—the red cat. I turned away, appalled. How could anyone create such a tasteless insult to feline beauty? Yet my eyes were drawn back again and again from the flower-patterned chamber pots, the iron door stops, the huddles of blue glass on old maple highboys.

I bought the red cat.

If I'd left that red cat behind, life as I knew it would have gone on. Instead, I set it on a shelf and grew to love the thing. How many more objets de non-art out there depicted cats? Wouldn't it be fun to have a Tacky Cat Collection?

Poor Lover. How was she to know when we got together that my addictive nature would take this form. How was I to know?

For a while I hit that same shop monthly. Then I branched out to another a few miles away. (I didn't want anyone to know I was out of control.) Bingo, another kitty collectible.

Meanwhile, Lover—inadvertently and to her subsequent dismay—thought to please me with little surprises from her favorite antique shop. Every time she stopped, she'd bring home another deliciously tacky cat. Except they weren't so tacky any more. They'd become too appealing.

Maybe, I decided, it's the concept of collecting cat figurines that's tacky. I remember all the old women of my childhood who set porcelain figurines of clowns and birds and children on doilies inside glass cabinets. Or political pins or crystals or stuffed animals. Ah, I'm just a late-blooming collector. Except for old books, that is. And miniature toy vehicles.

In any case, once I received Lover's unintentional blessing, I was lost. Anything was fair game. I now have a Cheshire Cat grinning from the bathroom wall, a crouching blue-eyed kitty under the chair by the hearth, several figurines prancing across my dresser, a cat clock on my desk, a shelf full of miniatures and several more shelves full of wood, glass, porcelain and ceramic cats.

It's been a challenging year. Not to find all the little guys, but to do anything other than look for them. The temptations go well beyond antique shops. As a matter of fact, I stay out of those—they're way overpriced. We went to a junk shop up north with friends, and one of them proudly revealed her find for me: a home-made, two foot tall, sitting, putrid-green cat. It

is truly tacky and resides next to the roly-poly papier-mâché tuxedoed cat, which is adorned with a rhinestone tie pin and cigar.

People are weird. Weird enough to think anyone would bid for such items in online auctions. But the prices! The oddities! The adorability quotient! I am convinced that I single-handedly drove up the price of cat figurines within a month of discovering eBay, partly because I didn't understand how some auctions worked. In between bidding on cat statuettes, I managed to purchase a new computer by mistake. Luckily, it was a good deal.

Soon, what with increasing numbers of gifts and exciting finds, I began to run out of shelving, and floor space, and windowsills and bookshelves. Lover suggested I purchase a CD case, one of those stand up jobs with multiple shelves. That soon filled up.

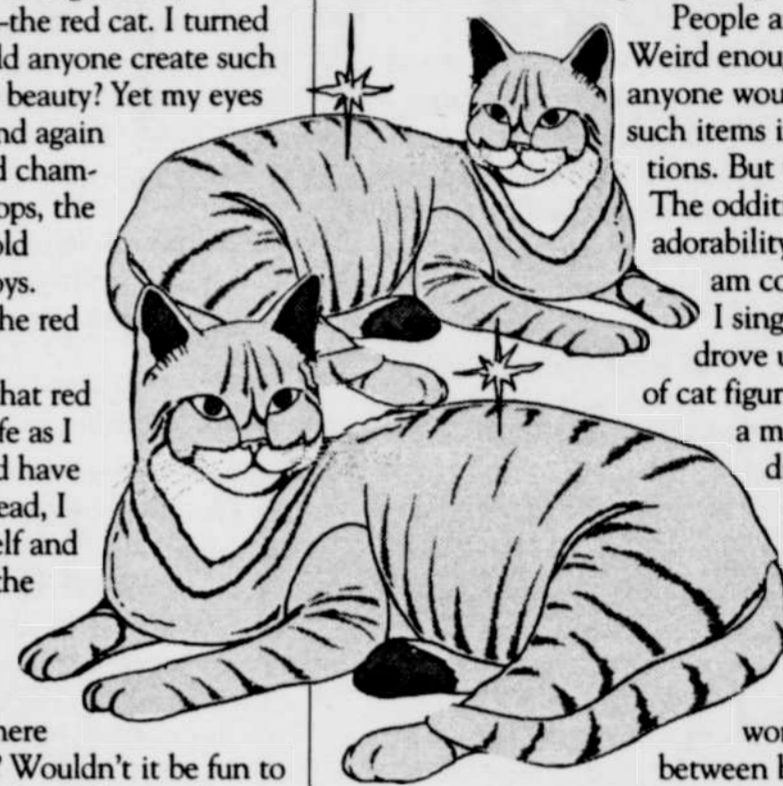
Then an eBay auction yielded the first three miniatures. Definitely the cutest doodads I've ever seen, with their pastel painted clothing and tiny detailing. This was the answer to the space problem! I'd only collect miniature domestic felines. Alas, other compulsives happened on that solution. Miniature cats are difficult to find, and the bidding is fierce at the auction sites. It's hard to win an auction when, like me, the buyer has a \$3 price ceiling. I found new miniatures in a gift shop in New Hampshire last fall that were a better buy. And, after an extensive wrapping session, flew them home.

Then last weekend, when I was buying some fabric at Wal-Mart (we don't have a fabric store nearby), I passed the button rack. There I saw a pair of cat-shaped buttons. They were smaller than the smallest figurines. They were hand-painted. They were under \$3.

In the blink of an eye, I had a new fever. I'd microspecialize! Kitty buttons don't take up much space at all. If I avoid brass and pewter, fabric-covered and large, I'll

reclaim that feeling of being challenged and we won't be crowded out of our house. If I can learn to resist every red, putrid-green and pastel cat figurine I see. But—will buttons be tacky enough?

LEE LYNCH is a novelist who lives on the Oregon coast.



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