

Anglais

Mention d'honneur – M. Dimitri Agratchev

THE MEANING OF VINTAGE: STUFF AND MEMORY

How does an old toy, a piece of the banished past, get rescued from the long line of forgotten things? How does a vintage item gain society's fickle favor to become fashionable even though it is from another time?

When the Pequod (the whaler that hunted Moby Dick in the South Seas) sank under the white whale's assault, Ishmael – the wistful narrator – survived only thanks to the (unused) coffin of his friend Queequeg on which he floated for a day and a night before the Rachel rescued him. Thus, what saved him from vanishing forever was a singular wooden box made for a burial at sea.

So it is with vintage objects: having escaped time's abyss, they survive by being *passé* - thus securing a continued existence in a world that, seemingly, has no place for them.

The first (maybe the only) requirement for qualifying as vintage is that the object must be at least 30 years old. Unlike the "brand-new ruins" famously commissioned by Prince de Ligne, or digital photographs treated with the "sepia" effect to impart (or remove) stereoscopic coloring, or the latest creations that have been artificially aged (the "classic" baguette, the retro look, the fake dial telephone, etc.), a vintage object must truly come from the era it represents. While vintage is a child of nostalgia and a close relative of kitsch and junk, what distinguishes it from its cousins is that vintage does not cheat. Like those performance artists who use their own blood to paint a canvas red (even though, for the spectator, a red dye would do just as well), vintage is proudly self-conscious in its refusal to imitate anything as it blithely displays cut-price authenticity, even drama, sold as truth.

How a thing appears matters less than where it comes from: the point is not to look out-of-date, but to be out-of-date. Therefore vintage is not backward-looking. The point is not a preference for the past, but the past's odd existence in the present. Vintage is yesterday's stuff today.

Vintage does not say, "It was better before." It says that it was before. That things were there before everything got digitized. The nostalgia it expresses is not for a time past but for the objects themselves, for the lost tradition of acquisitions that have weight and take space. The function of vintage is not to freeze time but, in fact, the opposite: to hold on, as far as possible, to an era when time was still flowing along.

It remains to be seen what will become of vintage when things stop growing old – in thirty years or a hundred years – when our immediate past would offer nothing but abstractions to those who, despite the end of history, might want to set off once again in search of lost time.