

"Antiques Roadshow" and the Middle-Class Dream

By Paige Towers • January 12, 2017 at 11:53am

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I used to dream about being on the long-running PBS series, "Antiques Roadshow," the way some other, probably higher-reaching kids dreamt about accepting a Golden Globe. I played out the scene in my head countless times: I'd be modest, unsure, obliging, but when the appraiser gave me that record-breaking number — "ONE MILLION DOLLARS" — my eyes would well up with tears and I'd put my hand to my heart. Even the appraiser would break into a bit of emotion then. He'd shake my hand and say, "Congratulations, you of all people really deserve this. What are you going to do with all that money?"

And I'd say, "Well, Mr. Cummings, I'm going to start by buying some new shoes," and then the camera would pan down to my brown-but-once-white Keds with the holes where my big toe had pushed through, and we'd both laugh. And so would everybody at home.

These dreams had obvious origins: When I was a kid, my mom, sister and I would occasionally watch “Antiques Roadshow” together on PBS in the evenings. *Roadshow* wasn’t the kind of program that we’d pop popcorn for and wait around the TV for it to start (i.e., It wasn’t “Masterpiece Theatre”). But it was on — a lot — and strangely magnetic. Perhaps this was because of the bits of history you learned in each episode. Or perhaps because it was a show about normal, mostly middle-class Americans like ourselves — people who probably also ate Dinty Moore for dinner; people who also saved up for years to replace their stained, shag carpeting with laminate wood floors. Except that on rare occasions, these people's lives took magical turns.

The idea that a piece of old junk could be like a lottery ticket that bought your way out of the practicality and mundanity of the workaday world was just as exciting as the prospect of winning "The Price is Right," but with an added tinge of folklore.

"Antiques Roadshow" — originally a British show — first aired in 1979, and the American version has been on since the late '90s. Despite the passing of decades, the premise of the show hasn't changed since its inception: Each episode of *Roadshow* takes place in a different city (because, surprise! It’s a roadshow!) And wherever they go, the good people of Tulsa or Boise or Savannah show up for this strange hoarders’ fair, bringing with them their mid-20th century Papua New Guinea Slit Drums, their Victorian-era bird cages or their creepy porcelain dolls with frozen, dead-eyed stares to be valued by *the appraisers* — well-educated, East coast men

(and now more frequently, women) dressed in dowdy jackets and carrying wand-like pointer sticks.



PBS

Each episode features a dozen or so of these appraisal sessions. The appraiser and his wand stand on one side of the antique(s); the antique owner stands on the other. And then they go over all the details of the piece — the story of how it came to belong to them, how old it probably is, where it came from, what was it for, what it's worth (or not worth) now. Everybody is polite and muted; everybody nods and smiles.

But of course it all comes down to the grand finale: How much is this old piece of junk (or found treasure) worth?

Sometimes my dad, passing through on his way to the kitchen, would stop and watch, arms crossed over his chest, and the entire family would hem and haw — as if we were the tweed-laden historians analyzing that letter from Thomas Jefferson to some guy's great-great-grandpapa. As if we had any knowledge of what the hell an old letter was worth.

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When it came time to guess, I'd usually throw something out like, "twenty dollars!" Or, "No more than a hundred!" because there was nothing more embarrassing than over-estimating the value of the antique being featured. It was like gambling: You could guess high and be rewarded with the satisfaction that you knew, *just fucking knew*, that that bronze falcon paperweight wasn't a piece of shit and was actually likely to pull in \$25,000 to \$30,000 at auction. Or you could stay conservative, considering that the estimated values mostly resulted in satisfied but unsurprised head nods.

Most viewers' favorite *Roadshow* moments are the record-breakers, of course. I remember watching an episode in 1997 that featured a woman who had purchased a little, dirty side table at a garage sale for \$25. (The seller had wanted \$30, but she was short \$5.) The thing turned out to be a Federal inlay mahogany demilune Seymour card table circa 1794 that was preserved well enough to prove its historical significance. The appraisers, unusually excited and jittery, estimated its value at \$200,000 to \$225,000.

“That thing??!” I yelled. The cat, sleeping tummy side up in a corner, startled awake. "Are you kidding me?!"

It was just *a table*, which, through my amateur eyes, looked no different from what people might stash in the corner of a spare room or use to hold a mail pile in a hallway. Even more shocking was the fact that the woman who received the news calmly responded by asking, “Are you going to write that down for me?” like someone had just given her directions to a restaurant. My mom and I exploded in fury, yelling at the TV screen, like, what *is* your life if a number like TWO HUNDRED THOUSAND DOLLARS isn't something you'll remember? (In hindsight, she possibly had a touch of dementia.)

Still, the table was now instantly transformed into solid proof that you really could stumble across some moldy, old piece of rubbish while persuing your neighbor's garage sale or checking sticker prices on the undersides of lamps at flea markets, only to have it be the thing that divides your life into a "before" and an "after."



PBS

The opposite of those who broke records were those who'd been duped, of course. Being a nice Midwesterner, I felt bad for the people who'd been swindled into buying some cheap, misshapen reproduction of an ancient artifact, maybe while on vacation in Cancun. As a kid, we all clucked our tongues and shook our heads: There was nothing worse than watching someone swallow their shame, sadness and last smidge of hope, thinking that this thing they'd dragged into the *Roadshow* arena would change their life. Nope.

But as I've grown up and hardened into a former version of my kind self, these are the moments *I now live for*, especially if the owner drones on and on about the antique's authentication and cultural significance and blah blah blah. "*Roadshow* fail!" I yell at the TV, from my tiny apartment, after the true value is revealed.

Still, I admire that enduring spirit of human hope, which is evident every time the camera pans over the long line of people waiting to show their wares — demonstrating both the lasting popularity of the show and the desperate way we all cling to this idea that maybe something magical will happen in our lives for once, and why shouldn't it happen on PBS?

I think part of the reason I invented all of this drama is because in typical PBS-fashion, the show doesn't provide any itself. Each episode is like a social interaction in Iowa: affable and friendly but with a million unsaid thoughts and feelings. If a room of Bravo executives got their hands on *Roadshow*, there'd be backstories set to Imagine Dragons, commercials cuts right before the potential value was revealed and cameramen circling around arguments regarding line cutting and accusations of forgery.

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Yet this is exactly why the show is so amazing.

It's *entirely* uncool. The guests mostly look like my extended relatives — white, slightly pudgy, maybe sporting J.C. Penney casual wear. It's outdated and dull but as reliable and comforting as a visit home. The main focus isn't the reveal of the projected value; It's the story and history behind each piece — that tiny detail of red stitching in a 1850s-era Navajo blanket, the pure linear shapes that you've appropriated onto most of the sweaters that you wear, and the sudden realization that someone long gone, someone who lived and was sort of like you, sat and dyed that wool with indigo after she'd spun it to be as fine as silk.

And that person likely led a life that was so, so much harder than yours.

From watching *Roadshow*, the way I thought about everyday objects around me changed; I'd always been exceptionally curious and nosy about people's belongings — particularly the belongings of my friends whose families were well-off — but I started to analyze how those things represented the era they were from, how the design, function or artfulness of things was connected to events and changes in time. The show taught me more American history than I ever learned in public school. It filled in little details, just how Howard Zinn later filled in giant gaps.

Hell, "Antiques Roadshow" even sunk deep enough into my psyche that I dreamt about being on set, standing beside some some arcane object that deserves to be seen again, or, *really*, seen for the first time. And who was I to be the one

to unearth it? To be the finder and keeper of an object with sun so much backstory felt like a privilege, I eventually began to realize, regardless of its monetary value.

The last time I visited home, *Roadshow* was playing on the TV while we all sat around talking. My mom brought up a memory of how the cat, now long dead, used to press his face against the front window when he wanted inside. Someone had even popped popcorn. At one point, my dad, turning towards the TV to look at what appeared to be a fake majolica cheese keeper, loudly stated, "Why, what a big piece of crap," and then took a sip of his tea. We all nodded and laughed in agreement. After getting the bad news, the woman on the screen, who'd probably waited in line since sunup, smiled politely next to her antique, looking like she'd been punched in the gut. She'd wanted that moment — that moment when someone tells you that your life just changed in an instant, that things really can and should be this easy.

"Yeah, that's too bad," my mom said. "She really thought she'd found something there." I grinned, as if I was in on some cruel *Roadshow* joke. "Yeah," I said, "But she'll be fine."