

ART & D SIGN

'The Porcelain Thief' Chronicle a Trip to Unearth Chinese Heirloom

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Antiques

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JOURNEY TO UNEARTH A FAMILY TREASURE

The writer Huan Hsu grew up in Utah paying almost no attention to family anecdotes about his ancestors' porcelain heirlooms, said to have been buried in a Chinese village during World War II. Mr. Hsu, 37, has turned his adult efforts to recover the treasure into a new memoir, "The Porcelain Thief: Searching the Middle Kingdom for Buried China" (Crown). His quest, starting in 2007, called for impersonating a tree deliveryman, fleeing cockroaches, uncovering forged documents, coping with stonewalling bureaucrats and gathering eyewitness testimony of horrific political persecutions.

Family members disagreed about what his great-great-grandfather, Liu Feng Shu, actually owned at his

estate in southeast China, and what might have survived wars and postwar reconstruction. But in the end, Mr. Hsu's preliminary shallow excavations at the estate, now subsumed by factory buildings, turned up nothing connected to his family. "I still have in my mind the desire to go back there and do a proper archaeological investigation," he said in an interview, "and there's another part of me that's kind of O.K. with not knowing."

Still, his journey did turn up some great stories, both about his family and other topics, he said, and they are a main subject of his book. He learned, for example, about China's venerable tradition of producing fakes. In one row of workshops not far from his ancestral town, he writes, "The narrow alleys echo with the chimes of pumice stone working over porcelain to dull their finishes, after which vendors brush on thin brown paint and refire the pieces at low temperatures to achieve an aged tint." He describes forgers who "sink new objects into the sea to cover them with barnacles so they can pass them off as recovered shipwreck items."

"I've never stopped being surprised at the ingenuity of Chinese commerce," he said. "They can be so reactive to what they see other people buying."

If the book causes some schemers from the Liu hometown to contact him about supposed rediscoveries of lost troves, he said: "I would probably fall for it. I'm a sucker for these things."

SHIRLEY TEMPLE COLLECTION

Shirley Temple, who died last year at 85, stored away tap shoes, dresses, dolls and memorabilia from her childhood days as a movie star. Starting next month, part of her collection will travel to museums as previews for a July 14 sale organized by the Maryland auction house Theriault's.

The pieces were kept in cases at her childhood home in the Brentwood section of Los Angeles. The family rarely lent them for public display. "She never really disclosed what she had over the years," Stuart Holbrook, the president of Theriault's, said. "It was painstakingly preserved."

Some dolls headed to the July sale are wearing outfits made to match the actress's costumes. Theriault's

will also offer Temple's Steinway piano and a car that she drove around the movie-studio lots.

The auction preview show, titled "Love, Shirley Temple," will appear at the Strong/National Museum of Play in Rochester, N.Y., from April 30 to May 3 and then at the Wenham Museum in Wenham, Mass., and the Morris Museum in Morristown, N.J. The July sale will be in Kansas City, Mo., in conjunction with doll collector conventions.

At auction and preview events, Mr. Holbrook said, bartenders will be encouraged to serve Shirley Temples.

The high estimates will be in the five figures, but Mr. Holbrook said he could not really predict how bidders would behave, given Temple's adorability and enduring fame.

"Gauging emotional buying is an impossible thing," he said.

OF DEATH AND BURIAL

Curators are turning coffins into educational tools this spring.

On Wednesday, the exhibition "A Tale of Three Coffins: Living and Dying in 17th Century St. Mary's City" opens at the Maryland Historical Society in Baltimore. The lead coffins on view were made for a Maryland governor, Philip Calvert, who died around 1683; his wife, Anne Wolseley, who died around 1680; and a malnourished baby who was probably a daughter of Philip's second wife, Jane Sewell.

The society will also show some Calvert bones, rosary beads and rosemary sprigs from the graves, which were excavated in 1990. Few other artifacts found at St. Mary's City, a colonial settlement, can be traced to particular families.

"These are people whose story otherwise would never be told," Alexandra Deutsch, the society's chief curator, said.

She added that the society had been careful not to play up ghoulish aspects of the topic. "This is not for shock value," she said. In a gallery painted a subdued gray, a partition has been built around the coffins.

“They have their own sort of sanctuary within the exhibit,” she said.

This fall, after the Baltimore display closes, the coffins and remains will be reinterred in a chapel at St. Mary’s City.

Scholars believe that Calvert somehow stayed plump and sedentary, despite the deprivations of Chesapeake life. Anne was malnourished, lost almost all her teeth and limped on a fractured leg with festering wounds. Burton K. Kummerow, the historical society’s president, said that the underweight infant buried beside the couple “never really had a chance to survive.”

This spring, the historical society will also show a fragment taken from George Washington’s coffin, for bicentennial celebrations of the Washington Monument in Baltimore. Another souvenir piece of that founding father’s coffin is on view through May 17 at the Hudson River Museum in Yonkers, N.Y., in the exhibition “Promoting the President.”

The Museum of Death, established two decades ago in Hollywood, is opening a New Orleans branch, where displays will include an 18th-century coffin containing a prostitute’s skeleton. Through Sunday, a white pine coffin that held the shrouded corpses of paupers during cemetery processions is on view at the Concord Museum in Concord, Mass., in the exhibition “Behind Closed Doors: Asleep in New England.” The interior of the pine box is scratched; it was never used for an actual burial, and a farmer eventually adapted it into a chicken feed trough.

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