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THE HISTORY OF REPAIR: PAST IMPERFECT

Posted on: January 9, 2013 at 8:00am — By: Julia



For most antique dealers and collectors, this little **19th-century mug** wouldn't be worth a second look. After all, it's broken. Or, at least, it used to be.

Almost 200 years ago, someone dropped the clay mug and it shattered. By modern standards, that should have been the end of mug. But it wasn't. It took 46 metal staples and 6 metal bands to hold the mug together again, but someone fixed it—and the repair has held together for centuries. Now—rusted, cracked, and patched—the unassuming little mug is one of New York designer **Andrew Baseman's** favorite things in the world.

Andrew collects **"make-dos"**: antiques that have undergone crude, home repairs. Shunned by most collectors, these cobbled-back-together "orphans of the antiques world" find a home in Andrew's collection.

"Until recently, dealers would discard broken or repaired pieces, never degrading the rest of their merchandise with anything less than perfect," he explains. "I felt like I was giving these deserving survivors a new lease on life by taking them home and appreciating them for their unique beauty...I like to think that the original owner, some of them hundreds of years ago, repaired their cherished damaged goods, and continued to use and display them, warts and all!"

For Andrew, the more warts the better. His collection includes **a broken tobacco-pipe-turned-vase**; **a delicate Russian teapot** with a tin-can patch and metal ribcage-like buttresses; and a tiny **toy dog with a wire-and-nail leg**. Every new piece he acquires is featured on his blog, **Past Imperfect: The Art of Inventive Repair**.



If it ain't broke, don't fix it:
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<http://t.co/7uY3p6N8og>, 24
hours ago

Repair is more than just an action;
it's a frame of mind.
<http://t.co/JQ9nZkfRjk>,
2013/04/17

"Unlike today where we discard anything chipped or cracked, broken household items were repaired at home or taken to a metalsmith to be brought back to life, often with whimsical results," he writes on his blog.

The motley crew of patched-together objects have a beauty all their own. The more damaged they once were, the more beautiful the repair becomes: a **spiderweb of cracks overlaid with an intricate pattern of staples**. Each fix leaves an imprint of the fixer behind: you can't help but conjure up the image of the 19th-century tinkerer hard at work over a broken plate.

Bottom line: Perfect is boring; repair is better. It can even be inspirational.

In 2011, Andrew purchased an early **19th-century teapot** with a repaired spout. Unfortunately, the teapot arrived with a broken handle. "There's nothing as redundant as a 'broken' make-do," writes Andrew, so he decided to repair the teapot the old-fashioned way: with staples and rivets. Unfortunately, old-fashioned ceramic repair is something of a lost art.

"I would like to learn the extinct art of ceramics stapling and help bring back the once thriving method of repair," says Andrew.

Still, in an age before Krazy Glue, repair took a lot of work. Tin handles had to be hand-shaped to fit broken ceramic jugs; wooden bases were specially carved to set broken glass goblets upright again. For every metal staple, **repairers of yore had to hand drill two tiny holes through clay, ceramic, or glass**, then carefully hammer the staple home.

Andrew's collection is a testament to the tenacity of their repairs. Once fixed, the objects continued to be used, loved, and passed on for generations. Some of the "inventive repairs" in Andrew's collection date back to the 1700s.

Indeed, Andrew's make-do collection casts our throw-away society into sharp relief: Most of the goods we make, from toys to computers, are designed to be short lived. Very little—repaired or otherwise—will last long enough to be passed on to the next generation. And that has consequences.

"Nothing freaks me out more than stepping inside a big-box store like Kmart and seeing acres of large plastic things we don't really need," Andrew says. "I imagine piles of ugly plastic toys, water bottles, storage bins, and garden furniture languishing in landfills for decades. We really need to find a better solution to over-manufacturing unnecessary items because recycling them just isn't enough."

Repair is part of that solution. And Andrew's blog helps to draw attention to the history of repair. As much as we like to think of the **Maker** and **Fixer movements** as modern inventions, *there have always been Fixers*—and their ingenuity is infectious. So, maybe the next broken plate you encounter will seem less like an accident and more like an opportunity.