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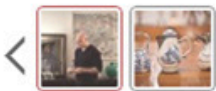
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Antiques & Collectibles: Make-Dos

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by [Catherine Riedel](#) in Jul 2011

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Ira Lippke

Andrew Baseman's collections include artfully repaired antique Chinese porcelain pieces.

One generation's recycling is another's treasure.

My dad wasn't the world's first recycler, just an early adopter of the concept. He believed in "reduce, reuse, recycle" when that idea was about as fashionable as wearing white socks with sandals. His thinking goes like this: Why use a bucket to bail out your boat when an old laundry-detergent jug with the bottom sawed off will get the job done? Why buy a new hockey stick when gooey strips of fiberglass glued to the blade of your old one will work just fine? Dad's mantra is "Get another year out of it."

These real-life examples of my father's bootstrap manufacturing remind me of his genius and my vanity. Growing up, I was the pearls-before-swine daughter who was always a bit embarrassed by his tendency to check out the swap table at the dump, and his quirky yen to make something out of nothing. Over the years, I've learned that his talent isn't born out of a skinflint frugality, but rather the sensible belief that something old can be breathed into life


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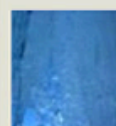
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anew: the notion that "purpose" is an evolving concept.

That's the spirit behind the charming collectibles known as "make-dos," perhaps some of this country's earliest examples of creative recycling. Aptly named, make-dos, as defined by interior designer, set decorator, and make-do aficionado Andrew Baseman, are antiques with inventive repairs. They were the result of an effort to "make do" with what people had, at a time when necessity and thrift walked hand in hand in homes of every social class.

"Make-dos weren't just for people of limited means," notes Stephen Fletcher, director of American Furniture & Decorative Arts at Skinner Auctioneers & Appraisers. "Most people believed that broken items were worth fixing—the idea that 'This is still good—why would I throw it away?'" Most make-dos date from the 18th and early 19th centuries, when hard work and great expense went into handmade finery such as pottery, porcelain, and glass. When an item broke, it was taken to a tinsmith, tinker, or woodworker for repair.

Make-dos are plentiful throughout New England, and as the "Frankenstein monsters" of the antiques shop, they're easy to spot: a mochwaware jug wrapped with a thick band of tin, with a makeshift handle affixed to it; a porcelain teapot with a metal cover or spout; a glass oil lamp atop a tiered wooden base; an oddly shaped piece of mirrored glass set in a carved wooden frame; a fancy glass compote with a metal base; a cracked platter, seemingly perfect on its face, but repaired on the flip side with metal staples. All are examples of make-dos, and the method of repair may range from humble and crude to elegant and elaborate.

If an item couldn't be salvaged for its intended use, it was often refashioned into something else. These are some of the most charming examples of make-dos, and they often fetch the highest prices. A leftover goblet stem might be topped with colorful fabric, sewn and stuffed to create a tabletop pincushion; an old piece of wood might be repurposed into a toy wagon. People held onto and used many of these reinvented objects much longer as make-dos than they would have if the items had been still in their original state.

In the past several years, make-dos have become highly sought after, but they're still affordable, selling from \$100 for the simplest fixes to several thousand for the most ingenious and decorative examples. Often the value of a make-do is proportional to the value of the item that was fixed.

Perhaps make-dos' recent popularity stems from the reprise of ideals such as sacrifice, thrift, and the notion of living with less, all of which are alive again in the collective psyche. For some folks, like my dad and the early recyclers who came before him, those ideals have never gone out of fashion. These sensible and pragmatic visionaries have always posed the question "Can I get another year out of it? Can I make do?"

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