

Mr Curiosity: Objects in Sepia and Other Colours

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Is it possible to sell 'curiosity'? Stories and memories are triggered through the commodification of curiosity in an unusual store in St Andrews. How is the concept of 'curiosity' employed by the owner of the store? Is there such a 'genre' as a curiosity store? How is this concept, invented by Mr Curiosity, the owner, understood by the employees of the store, the customers and me, the anthropologist?

'This is the story of a man who crossed the earth and stormy sea, and went to China when no one else could. Life was rough after the Great War and he was in the bloom of his youth. This was very much extraordinary, for an Englishman visiting China in the early 1920s was considered a folly. Knowing that upon return to England nobody would believe his story, he brought a lot of artefacts with him: Chinese emperors of different dynasties, beautifully hand-painted on silk canvases. The years went by and his story became known to many others. One of them, a Londoner, an antique collector, fascinated by the story sought to add the paintings to his collection. So he did, and today one may purchase those exact paintings that stand memento of a courageous Englishman's journey in a small unusual shop in St Andrews, Scotland.'

This is the story as told to me. It is, also, the story of how the tale of a curious man, who lived a hundred years ago, became the tale of another curious man—curious enough to be called Mr Curiosity. He is now the owner of a 'Curiosity Store', a shop of *antiques and oddities* in charming South Street, St Andrews. It is in this particular shop that Mr Curiosity hands things and stories over to other people, his employees, and his clientele, the heirs of quirky objects and their stories.

Curiosity is usually entailed in the encounter of *collecting and narrating* (Kenny 2004: 161). This is highly problematic for the purposes of managing curiosity in a spatial context. When curiosity is arrayed in space, the Renaissance fascination of *cabinets of curiosity* is usually employed. By cabinets of curiosity ('*Kunstkammer*') I am referring to the encyclopaedic collection of types of objects whose categorical boundaries are yet to be defined. An arbitrary display of artefacts, facsimiles and originals, a *Kunstkammer* represents a microcosm and a memory theatre. In this context a 'curiosity shop' seems more like a joke. By any impromptu definition, it is a shop that

juxtaposes apparently unrelated artefacts in order to show their interconnectedness in ways that universally encourage curiosity. The Curiosity store in question, which I will refer to as ‘the Curiosity store’, stocks all sorts of odds and ends, or ‘curiosities’, collected throughout the years by Mr Curiosity, who is the mastermind behind the invention of this *sui generis* category of consumption: the one that appeals to and triggers one’s curiosity.

Before proceeding to present my ‘findings’ in the field, as a novice anthropologist, I find it ethically appropriate to explain the approach I am taking in this ethnography and to throw some light on my methodology. I had opened a box full of encounters, all of which at first resembled a kaleidoscopic blend: an amalgam of entities all of which I could not categorise under one single label. I had encountered a space and a brand (the curiosity store), an experience (curiosity), and several people who held different relationships with each other and the store. My initial speculations drove me to the conclusion that buying those oddities and, more particularly, antiques, marked a pursuit of self-transcendence where people were aiming to construct ‘shadow-identities’ of themselves in another era or genre. However, this was removing agency from other actors I had encountered. Feeling ethically obliged to, I shared my observations with some of the people involved. On a personal level, that was when I progressed from the role of observant, ‘omnipotent’ anthropologist, to reconsider the relationships I had made so far. I came to realize that I was just another link in this strange group of relationships that was formed around one single person: Mr Curiosity. Therefore, the strategy that I aim to follow in this paper is to give each link agency by placing Mr Curiosity in the centre. Taking Mr Curiosity as my point of departure, as the inventor of the ‘curious’ brand, I describe my encounter with customers and two of the employees separately to depict their views on their relationship with Mr Curiosity and the curiosities themselves.

The textual representation of my encounters is the result of a variety of experiments: participant observation, recorded interviews and, eventually, casual conversation and role-play, putting myself in the place of the ethnographer, the customer, a student, a friend and, finally, the employee, since I spent some time working at the store myself. My aim was not to take the narration agency away from my encounters.



The Curiosity Store as seen from South Street

Mr Curiosity

Mr Curiosity is the connoisseur, the expert and, most of all, the storyteller. He is the inventor of the genre of the 'curiosity store'. Other than 'The Old Curiosity Shop' immortalised by Charles Dickens, and today an exhibition space in London, no such category exists, at least not in the United Kingdom. Through his unique version of salesmanship, Mr Curiosity has managed to *commodify curiosity* per se. As such, his stock is of an odd and imaginary kind: that of the curious one. Daniel Miller (1998) observes the emergence of a historicized facet of consumption, in accordance to which ubiquitous 'historic' touches can be found in many shopping areas: Victorian furniture, antiques and so on. Albeit one being able to find items of this historical kind at the curiosity shop, to consider it as an instance of historicized shopping would be to trivialise it. Even I had originally thought it as merely an antique store, only to be later caught by surprise.

Dusty glass shelves and embellished Victorian furniture are bursting with quirky objects which have a quality that overcomes their materiality. They harbour a curious, yet mute and motionless, character which is stimulated by the stories that Mr Curiosity has for each of them. *Curiosity is the encounter between objects and narratives*. This principle embodies Mr Curiosity's strategy for the

invisible commodification of curiosity. The concept of curiosity is employed by him to trigger memories and desires to the perspective buyer. Each object becomes 'curious' simply because it is accompanied by a story. Each story is fluid, adjustable. Once clients attain ownership of a story, they elevate it to another level or personalise it. In other words, the new owner of the object can attach brand new narratives to their possession, inspired by personal desires and memories. How this works is a matter of transcendence. Within the culture of commodification, curious objects are variously, 'rare', 'uncommon', 'exotic', 'strange' (Kenny 2004: 69). Marking an attempt to escape from the ordinary, *curiosity is the mask of discontent, the sign of a pursuit beyond what you have* (Benedict 2001: 2). In this vein, *these objects transcend the borders of our own ontology between commodity and non-commodity, usual and unusual, utility and non-utility, tradition and novelty.*

I spent hours talking to Mr Curiosity sitting by his large Victorian desk. I listened to the stories he shared with me and those he told his customers. Once, he gave me a first hand insight of his personal relationship with objects. He drew my attention to a hand-carved mirror in the store:

'Most people think it's a mirror and it's pretty. I look and I think when it was made; before they had electricity. So some poor guy—maybe under pressure from his girlfriend or something—slipped and had to start again, or he got sacked because he chopped off a piece. And it's the same with a statue I see the person behind it; I see the problems he might have had). Was it made by some guy who didn't have a pencil, or didn't have that very strong blue...'

Stories are the cornerstone of the unusual, given that curiosity is essentially an act of the *imagination*. The passage from the 'real' to the imaginary is itself an act of transcendence. Mr Curiosity is aware of that when he talks about the initial reactions of people upon their encounter with the Curiosity store.

'It's not a pigeon-hole', Mr Curiosity says of the unique character of the Curiosity store. He sells nothing specific but all sorts of 'eclectic items'. The motivation of people entering the store is different to that of going to the bakery, or a bookstore, where people's motives are explicit. Mr Curiosity understands this as another variant of how *'people like to put everything in compartments.'* Thus, the *experience* of the Curiosity store transcends the ordinary domain of our known ontology, because it exceeds people's expectations: *'it is not a definite motive to actually make a purchase... there are certain stores where you have a definite reason, whereas this is*

unknown because people don't know why they walk in, they don't know what to expect... it doesn't make sense...' This I will call the stage of '*illusionment*', when the visitors are still a '*tabula rasa*'. Once the concept of the store is revealed to them, they enter the stage of '*disillusionment*' and they become regular consumers seeking to purchase '*curiosity*'.

The customers

The Curiosity store attracts the occasional '*flâneurs*': curious cats, artists, collectors, passers-by, bargain-hunters and backpackers, all of whom are bearers and receivers of objects and stories. They are those who will prescribe continuity to each story, or perhaps alter it completely. In a sense, Mr Curiosity installs an element of desire to the candidate buyer, which is interpreted and internalised differently by each individual. His method, the '*seduction*' of the flâneur, is epitomised by this: he '*targets*' the customer who is closer to being a '*blank canvas*' onto which he can '*paint*' the story and install the desire of transcending normality. Certainly, it would be an impossible task to account for each visitor's motivation when entering the store. Instead, I will concentrate on two specific encounters that were to me most interesting in seeing how curiosity is '*transmitted*' to visitors by the narratives attached to each object and how they domesticate them.

After starting to interact on a more personal level with customers when I actually got to work at the shop myself, I came to realise that there seems to be no logical correlation between the curiosities people buy: a china pot, an ostrich leather Africa-shaped keychain, and a precious stone were in someone's shopping basket. In fact, the element of *irrationality* is prominent in the action of purchasing curiosities, since the desire to buy is externally injected to the perspective buyer who suddenly becomes interested in an object that is marketed exactly as something '*curious*' through an accompanying story.

The first encounter I describe here is an illustration of all the above. It is a sunny Saturday afternoon, a time of the week when many families enter the store, usually to prevent a child of theirs from grapping some sword or breaking some valuable china. A little boy, about 7 years old, finds a dice key-ring. His mother discourages him: '*You don't want it. It's just a piece of plastic.*' Mr Curiosity changes their mind: '*well, that's an original La Vegas dice that's been used in a casino, and the law in a casino is that each session of dices that has been used, afterwards has to be destroyed...*' Two minutes later, the dice on a keychain has a new owner. It is doubtful whether the

purchase is a conscious choice. Mr Curiosity's stories and employment of the concept of curiosity remove the agency of the consumer and replace it with a guided desire for transcendence. The problem of rationality has been stretched by several scholars with regards to consumerism. It is often assumed that consumers make definite choices as a result of discrete actions (Campbell 1996). Nevertheless, what is significant about curiosities is that they only become commodities once their story becomes known. Before that, they are just another useless oddity. In this vein, I would suggest that curiosity deliberately transcends logic. When people become the owners of stories, they further desire to become the owners of the objects, since the unusual is branded as the end.

The second encounter was certainly more interesting regarding how the stories are internalised by perspective buyers. Frequently someone will find Mr Curiosity's stories rather familiar. Suddenly the curiosity becomes the bearer of past memories. Such objects spark dream thoughts, a walk down memory lane: *'history brings the half-forgotten back to life, very much in the manner of dream thoughts'* (Samuel 1999: ix). I experienced this first hand when I was introduced to two British women who were extremely intrigued by a brown teapot decorated with a particular orange pattern. Mr Curiosity informs them that it is an original 1970s piece and one of them declares excitedly: *'they could only make those in the 70s! I once wallpapered my whole house with the same pattern.'* In an instance, the three of them navigate in time, with spontaneous nostalgia. One of the two women says: *'I'm a 60s girl!'* Then a playful talk starts as the three of them reminisce about the old days: apparently they had all spent time in Majorca back in the summer of 1968. The rebellious ambience of the austere times that followed the War is re-enacted before my eyes, while they keep searching for other curiosities that remind them of the 1960s-70s, the time of their youth. They found a clock; one of them said she had had an identical one on her kitchen wall in the 70s.

I had just witnessed how a simple artefact, which would have been quite trendy in its time, awoke the chronicles of an entire generation through the story told about it. A teapot, an orange pattern and a clock, triggered dream-thoughts of the past, allowing me to catch glimpses of the new stories that were from now on about to be attached to those objects. They were personalised, domesticated. Transcendence in this instance is performed on a temporal and emotional level. Mr Curiosity had triggered nostalgia for a long-gone time of youth, a desire to return and to

commemorate. The curiosities became symbols of passage from the blissful times of youthfulness to maturity. Consequently, for the new owners those curiosities suddenly gained value, became worthy of purchasing, simply because of the past stories attached to them; from that moment on, these would be their only stories, until they were passed on to a new owner.

The employees

For most of the time I spent at the Curiosity store, two out of the nine employees—all students—were mainly on duty: Peter and Quay. They both agreed that they work for Mr Curiosity to feed their fascination for anything unusual and antique. Mr Curiosity is their ‘mentor’ and from him they learn stories about the curiosities in the store. However, they both have their own personal views. On the one hand, for Quay no object is without a story. On the other hand, Peter believes in a purely aesthetic and practical motive of purchasing those objects. I will now discuss both views separately.

Quay and I spent time together sitting by the entrance, underneath Hank, the proud head of a Highland cow staffed on the wall. She told me that people usually ask to know the origin of a specific object. However, a lot of times she finds it hard to provide them with an answer, especially if those items have been purchased at some auction. Unlike items brought in the shop to be resold by their owners, it is usually impossible to know the origin of such objects. Since she dislikes disappointing costumers, she wishes she could have the ‘specifications’ for every single curiosity: in her own words, as if selling toasters or cars that come with a manual that contains all important information about them.

As for Peter, it turned out that my original thoughts about him were not what he believed himself. To me Peter was, initially, the embodiment of my idea for people’s desire to create ‘shadow-identities’ for themselves through these oddities. When I first met him, he confessed how his greatest dream is to live in a Victorian mansion. He even showed me his dream house online: a 14-bedroom detached house near Dundee. On a later date, I talked to him about how my ethnographic data was leading me to the conclusion that people seek identity-altering devices in the Curiosity store. He disagreed. Instead he argued that most people seek nothing but aesthetic pleasure. They buy these objects, not because they are ‘curiosities’, but because they would like to

see them in their living rooms. In fact, the only 'desire' they evoke is that of a time when things did not really break! Indeed, many of the customers I talked to would come to the Curiosity store merely in search of things of quality, a lot of them blaming IKEA for the fragility of modern objects. In Peter's view, the Curiosity store served as a space for a kind of ceremonial exchange: money exchanged for *hedonism*. He tried to demonstrate his case with some wise words he said he was having trouble recalling, but which are something along these lines: *'a pocket watch should be an extension of a personality, not a replacement of one.'*

Nonetheless, Peter and Quay, as well as the rest of the employees at the shop, do amuse themselves by assigning stories to the curiosities. A lot of the time they personify objects in the most literal sense. Both Peter and Quay sometimes feel the urge to baptize an object, to make up a story about it every time they find themselves unable to help a customer. Especially for particular objects which are not simply ornamental. They seem to be emotionally attached to the marvellous animal taxidermies in the store, all of which have their name and story. There is Hunk, the Highland cow head and store mascot, Agnes the kudu, Bianca the badger, Vincent and Philip the fighting pheasants and Raphael, the squirrel. Recalling the day Agnes, the kudu, was sold, Peter said: 'I kissed Agnes goodbye. I think I must have been the only one to ever kiss Agnes!'

Final remarks

In this light, I consider it essential to conclude with the theoretical framework which has influenced and facilitated by fieldwork, which draws mainly from the anthropology of consumption and the historical study of curiosity. Curiosity is 'seeing your way out of your place. It is looking beyond' (Benedict 2001: 2). Curiosity is transcendence, a sign of the rejection of the known as inadequate, even uninteresting. The greatest influence to my ethnography was the essential tendency identified by many theorists, that curiosity was implied not in the collection of objects, but rather as a narrative, whether fictional or true (Kenny 2004: 161). Moreover, another principal influence was David Miller's work on alternative forms of consumption which are moving far from postmodern critiques of 'the commodity regnant', as pioneered by Baudrillard and Bauman. In their ways, they both viewed shopping as 'empty games for empty people; the flâneur turned into just another shopper' (Miller 1999: 8). Unlike mass production, the commodification of curiosities returns the agency back to the consumer, since each object, accompanied by a story, is

elevated into another level of personal relationship with the new owner. Curiosities and wonders escape our known ontologies and taxonomies.

I have never met anyone more curious than Mr Curiosity. Just like curiosity embodies novelty, so he manages to invent a new genre and capture curiosity in space, the Curiosity store, in a way more rational than in cabinets of curiosity. All the oddities have an identity assigned to them by the stories he has for each of them; they are all categorized as 'curiosities'. The Curiosity store sells the impossible: it sells curiosity and this is a magnet for the flâneurs. It marks a drama of attractions and interests, desires and choices, in which minds are forever seeking to transcend the ordinary.

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