



Artifacts rehoused (far left): an Indian silk pillow resting on a Syrian shawl. Left: Burmese lacquer bowls and pig, plus a Tibetan chest. All objects on these pages are from fabric designer Sherri Donghia's collection, shot in her loft.

Object Lesson: Was that treasure made by master artisan or Chinese factory? How to look smart when you don't know the wares.

BY BRADLEY W. BLOCH AND KAREN LEHRMAN BLOCH
PHOTOGRAPHS BY ALANA CELII

When Vasco da Gama, the Portuguese explorer, sailed to India in 1502, he had a clear agenda: to secure a trade route with the East and ascertain what spices and precious metals could be found there. Yet da Gama became so fascinated by the local culture that he also made time to take a bit

of it home with him, acquiring, as the expedition's log reports, "shells, which they wore as ornaments in their ears, and which looked as if they had been plated, and foxtails attached to a handle, with which they fanned their faces."

The urge to travel to distant lands has forever

been accompanied by an equally strong desire to take a piece of them home with you. Such is the allure of the artifact. A photograph of you in a Moroccan souk is a piece of your personal history. A kilim from that souk is a piece of the history of generations of Berber tribes: the spinning of yarn from

their flocks, the distinctive patterns developed by each village and region, the passing of weaving techniques from mother to daughter. "Artifacts are storytelling vehicles," says Tucker Robbins, a monk-turned-furniture designer who works with local artisans around the globe. "They bring

back stories of who we are, where we came from, and what makes us human beings."

Or so one hopes. Da Gama didn't have to worry that the earrings he fancied were actually cheap knockoffs made for the tourist trade. Or that new laws in India restricted their export. Or that better versions could be found back home. But every traveler shopping for artifacts today is faced with exactly these problems: How do you know that you're looking at the real thing? How do you judge quality in an object you've never seen before? And how do you know that you're not paying 10 times the going rate?

While traveling to remote locations has never been easier, finding artifacts that truly reflect their indigenous cultures has never been more difficult. Heightened demand, not just from travelers but from Western exporters looking for the new and exotic, has paradoxically undercut rather than fostered craft traditions: An Indian woman who might be able to create a few shawls at a time using generations-old techniques has little choice but to adopt factory methods once her work has been discovered by a Western distributor ordering in lots of 5,000.

Buying artifacts today is a transaction not just between you and the merchants but between your culture and theirs. The first step is to understand the broader context of what you're eyeing. Most artifacts have their origins as either utilitarian or sacred objects: African masks from the Punu tribe allow pubescent girls to commune with the spirit world in the journey to

womanhood. Japanese cabinets are light-weight so they could be carried out to the street in a region prone to earthquakes. Cultural awareness also gives you a foundation from which to build a rapport with the merchants. "Be very clear that you're looking for authentic items—not the things they typically sell to tourists," says Sherri Donghia, a fabric designer whose Tribeca loft is a showcase for everything from Indian paper to Central Asian headdresses acquired on her travels. Sellers don't automatically make their entire inventory available. And don't assume that country markets will be better than those in the city. It's not unheard of for villagers to buy artifacts in the city, then sell them at a marked-up price to tourists who think they're going off the beaten path. "Don't overlook anything," says Donghia, who has found memorable items in hotel shops.

Geoffrey Orley, co-owner of Orley & Shab-ahang, which sells woven baskets from Panama and carpets from Iran made to his specifications, foresees a time when prized artifacts—products of distinct, enduring tribal cultures—will all but cease to exist as the production of handicrafts shifts to more factory-like environments. "Today's Iran, for instance, is an advanced country," he says. "There's a huge difference between making a carpet as a laborer and as an artisan. Twenty years from now, there will be no one living the lifestyle from which these carpets came." Here's a guide to buying carpets and other artifacts, while supplies last.



Headaddresses from an Istanbul market (left), "origin most likely a country that ends in 'stan,'" says Donghia. Right: handmade Indian fabrics and Italian textiles on a Tibetan chest.

Carpets:

Thousands of years of breeding sheep and weaving rugs for demanding moguls have made Iran, Turkey, the Caucasus, and Central Asia famous for their carpets. But superiority can lead to arrogance, or at least good marketing skills. Carpet dealers have a saying: "The best carpet is a sold carpet."

WHAT TO WATCH OUT FOR:

"You're going to be told, 'Everything I show you is a work of art,'" says Murat Küpçü, owner of Double Knot, which specializes in carpets from this region. Mass-production techniques are now pushing out traditional craftsmanship to the point that more than a few "Turkish" rugs in Istanbul are mass-produced in China.

WHAT TO SEEK OUT:

Brilliant colors, patina, a soft hand. Wool is the most appropriate material—save the silk for robes. Interestingly,

the finest wool carpets are the most resistant to stains and wear, due to the high lanolin content of the wool. A carpet should feel like a blanket, not heavy or stiff. It should have a bit of sheen, lie flat, and have some imperfections—it's handmade, after all—but not too many. Turn the carpet upside down: The underside should show the same colors and reveal the structure.

DON'T WORRY ABOUT:

Knots per square inch. "Yes, more knots per inch means more labor and materials, but there are plenty of densely knotted carpets that are ugly," says Küpçü. It's all about the hand of the artist—how the knots are finished, the tension in the loom, the rhythm that the weaver achieves (which is one reason to stay away from carpets much smaller than four-by-six feet).

WHERE TO FIND THEM:

The Grand Bazaar in Istanbul. Check out Adnan & Hasan, which

is well-known among the expatriate community (nos. 89, 90, and 92).

WHERE ELSE TO FIND THEM: For quality handmade carpets, New York.

Furniture:

Purchasing artisanal furniture abroad is complicated, and not just because of the logistics and expense of shipping. Out-and-out fakery is common. Howard Ellins, who with his wife, Jocelyn Serfaty, co-owns the gallery Abhaya, specializing in Chinese and Southeast Asian antiques, points out that you're always at risk when trying to buy anything of substantial value, unless you're working with a dealer you know well. "Cheap fakes are easy to spot," he says. "It's the expensive fakes that are tough to detect."

WHAT TO WATCH OUT FOR:

Unscrupulous dealers who pass off newer pieces as antiques that have been

relacquered or who substitute a less valuable piece than the one you paid for when it's time for crating. Also, be wary if a dealer tells you a piece is made of *huanghuali* or *zitan*—these are the most prized of hardwoods and are difficult to find since much of the best of it was bought up 20 years ago, after China opened to the West.

WHAT TO SEEK OUT:

The texturing from decades of scratches and insect gnawings that even a refinished piece will retain. And the bottom of the feet should show the wear and multiple layers of lacquer that come with age.

DON'T WORRY ABOUT:

Originality. "That's a Western concept," says Craig Scharlin, who with his wife, Lilia Villanueva, owns TAMA Gallery in Manhattan. In China, for example, a wooden chest that we regard as "original" might be 1,000 years old, a "copy" 700 years old, and yet another "copy" be made

last week by a master, in a continuum of artistic tradition. A walnut altar table from Shanxi dating from the mid-19th century might have been relacquered over the years and had a missing crosspiece replaced. In the U.S. such tampering lessens the value; in China, it's how you take care of furniture.

WHERE TO FIND IT:

For Chinese antiques, Beijing Curio City. The fact that this four-story indoor market is supervised by the Beijing Cultural Relics Bureau shouldn't diminish your wariness of fakes.

WHERE ELSE TO FIND IT:

For Japanese antiques, the dealers on Kyoto's Shinmonzen Street.

Textiles:

Indian embroidery and block prints, Indonesian batiks and ikats, Lao brocades and Thai silks—Asia's remarkably strong and vibrant 3,000-year-old textiles

tradition is more varied and advanced than anywhere in the world. But globalization and technology are threatening to change the nature of this traditional craft more than any other, as demand forces weavers to abandon age-old techniques for machine methods. You can still find exquisite contemporary handwoven pieces—you just need to search a little harder.

WHAT TO WATCH OUT FOR:

Many markets have been overtaken by weaving that's not done according to traditional methods and patterns. Do your homework before you go so you know what a textile from a specific region is supposed to look like.

WHAT TO SEEK OUT:

Make sure that there are few tie-offs on the reverse side and that the sides are even. But as Mark Owen, a collector and sometime dealer of Lao textiles, puts it: "If it's \$20 and you love it, who cares if it's perfectly made?"



Left: 18th-century Ottoman velvet pillows with zari embroidery—a technique that uses copper and silver threads over a cotton core yarn. Right: a 19th-century Chinese leather box.

DON'T WORRY ABOUT: Frayed gold threads. “In antique textiles that’s typical,” says collector Payal Chaudhri. Just make sure the fabric dye isn’t bleeding.

WHERE TO FIND THEM: India remains the mother of Asian textile arts, with a kaleidoscope of designs and colors from each of its 28 states. Antique Indian textiles are hard to find (stay in the States or go to London), but try the row of antique stores in the center of Jodhpur for antique silk. For *chikan*, traditional white-on-white embroidery, Chaudhri recommends going to Lucknow, while the colorful, intricately embroidered cotton textiles from Rajasthan and Gujarat is found at Jaipur’s flea markets.

WHERE ELSE TO FIND THEM: Exquisite hand-woven textiles can still be found in Laos, though not necessarily at the Talat Sao (morning market) in Vientiane. Seek out initiatives like Ock Pop Tok (“East

Meets West”), in which Westerners have partnered with native artisans to keep traditions alive. Or hire a driver to take you to the weaving studios in Isaan, the northeastern region of Thailand.

Sacred Objects:

Not surprisingly, the sacred objects of a culture often carry a special depth and richness. Many of them follow strict rules of craftsmanship and material composition. Given that the religious objects of some cultures were destroyed during periods of colonization, there are generally few antiques that haven’t already been snatched up by serious collectors. There are, however, high-quality contemporary pieces to be had.

WHAT TO WATCH OUT FOR: Objects that have strayed from their own history. “Africans have gotten the idea that

Westerners like happy, angelic faces, so now in the markets you’ll see masks of smiling figures,” says Tucker Robbins. This sort of cultural syncretism is neither new nor uncommon, which is why you’ll find a plentiful assortment of carved Buddha statues for sale to Westerners in Bali—an island with a population that’s 90 percent Hindu. Also be mindful of regulations governing the export of religious objects. Thailand, for example, has strict laws controlling Buddha statues. (There’s a room in the Bangkok International Airport filled with confiscated Buddhas.) A reputable dealer can help you obtain a license from the government’s Fine Arts Department.

WHAT TO SEEK OUT: In all artifacts you want to see the hand, the soul, of the artisan who created it; this is true of all in sacred objects.

DON'T WORRY ABOUT: Objects made for the tourist trade. Although

truly authentic masks, for example, are carved by village shamans for use by families within the tribe, those made for tourists can still be meaningful enough to take home.

WHERE TO FIND THEM: In Africa, fertility dolls, amulets, and masks are easy to find in village markets. In Bangkok, head to the River City Shopping Complex for Buddhas and other sacred objects.

WHERE ELSE TO FIND THEM: In shops around Indian temples, you’ll find bronze, terra-cotta, or wood sculptures of Ganesh, the elephant-headed Hindu deity revered as the remover of obstacles.

Other Utilitarian Objects:

You’re on vacation, not studying for a master’s in cultural connoisseurship. What to do? “The safest things to buy

are things without high intrinsic value, the things no one would bother to fake,” says Abhaya’s Howard Ellins. An old leather Tibetan bag, oxcart hubs or wheels, Burmese lime containers—functional items in Asia can often be beautiful because of the great skill used to create them. An old mortar and pestle, rice measure, or spice box can be as evocative as a statue. A decorative tent band may be a safer and less complicated purchase than a carpet.

WHAT TO WATCH OUT FOR: Differentiating between a mere souvenir and a more substantial object. Remember that artifacts don’t manifest their allure in a vacuum but in the incongruous juxtaposition that comes from bringing them from Bhutan to Brookline. “You need to visualize how to incorporate it into your home,” says interior designer Vicente Wolf, who has a showroom of artifacts in Manhattan. Wolf mounts his pieces on black-wire

stands, to great effect. If you come across some Burmese cow bells or Thai sugar scoops, you may not find them worth lugging home. If you can imagine them properly presented, though, they become art.

WHAT TO SEEK OUT: Patina. You want something that shows its age and character—that has some life. You may also want more than one. Wolf buys smaller artifacts in groups of three or more, for critical mass. “One is a tchotchke, two is chance, and three is a collection with a persona,” he says.

DON'T WORRY ABOUT: The object’s original use. A Chinese pickling jar can be so finely crafted that it looks like an 18th-century vase.

WHERE TO FIND THEM: City and village markets, particularly in Bangkok and Istanbul.

WHERE ELSE TO FIND THEM: The Panjiayuan Weekend Market, Beijing. ■

COMPASS: ARTIFACTS



Know your artifacts: Istanbul's Grand Bazaar, Kapali Çarsi, is one of the world's great stomping grounds for treasures from copperware to carpets.

Shopping in Asia (and New York)

BANGKOK:

RIVER CITY SHOPPING COMPLEX

Bangkok is all about shopping, so don't get scared off by the suburban-mall feel of River City. Head to the third and fourth floors, where more than 100 art and antique shops represent most of Asia (there are 10 more antique shops on the ground floor). You'll find high-end artifacts like Buddha statues, intricate wood carvings, gold and silver ornaments, and *benjarong* wares—a multi-colored painted porcelain unique to Thailand. 23 TROK RONGNAMKHAENG, CHAROEN KRUNG 30 66-02/237-0077 rivercity.co.th

ISAAN, THAILAND:

ARTISAN STUDIOS

Rural Thailand, particularly the northeast region of Isaan, is the best place to shop for textiles. In the villages of Chonabot (an hour's drive south of Khon Kaen) and Pak Thong Chai (in the Nakhon Ratchasima province),

you'll find a traditional tie-dye technique called *mudmee*—the Thai counterpart to Indonesian *ikat*. In Baan Thasawang, about 10 minutes from Surin, find elaborate silk brocades. Most fabric is produced in homes: Look for the looms in the yards.

BEIJING:

BEIJING CURIO CITY

Although this place is the first nationally supervised secondhand market in China, you still need to be discerning. Check out the ceramics, calligraphy, jade, furniture, carpets, and jewelry. NO. 21 DONGSANHUAN NANLU, CHAOYANG 86-10/67-74-77-11

PANJIAYUAN WEEKEND MARKET

Near Curio City is Beijing's cacophonous "Dirt Market," where you'll find everything from Ming vases to Mao memorabilia in a flea market free-for-all. Better to pass on the stone and furniture and check out the old books and photographs, which can be reasonably priced. Arrive early and dress comfortably; shopping here means kneeling to see goods displayed on the ground. THIRD RING ROAD

HONG KONG:

HOLLYWOOD ROAD

This road is the center of the Chinese antiques market, with expensive wares: Chinese furniture, Buddha sculptures, Tibetan rugs, and Japanese *netsuke*.

ISTANBUL:

GRAND BAZAAR

Kapali Çarsi is Turkey's largest covered market, with an estimated 4,000 shops. It's great for carpets, tiles, copper, and brassware, and although it looks like a tourist trap, locals frequent it as well. Some stalls date from the 15th century. Check out Adnan & Hasan (nos. 89, 90, and 92), well-known among the expatriate community. Closed Sundays. BEYAZIT

JAIPUR:

RAJASTHAN FABRICS AND ARTS

The flea markets near the City Palace are good places to find antique embroidered cotton. This trio of stores specializes in new and vintage fabrics—hand-stitched quilts, handwoven cotton shawls, and cashmere blankets. By appointment only. 36 BENZAITEN-CHO, HIGASHIYAMA-KU 81-75/561-1568 info@konjaku.com

JODHPUR:

HIGH COURT ROAD

Go to the numerous stores along High Court Road in the center of town for antique Indian silks, which run anywhere from \$20 to \$10,000.

MAHARANI ART EXPORTERS

Here are great examples of Rajasthan weaving techniques such as appliqué and crewelwork. TAMBAKU BAZAR 91-201/261-4520 maharanitextile@sify.com

KYOTO:

GALLERY KEI

Owner Kei Kawasaki's passion is for handwoven textiles of hemp, ramie, wisteria, elm, linden, and banana. She also has top-notch examples of indigo-dyed cotton and a wide range of examples of folk textile techniques. 671-1 TERAMACHI-DORI, NAKAGYO-KU members.aol.com/gallerykei

KONJAKU NISHIMURA

Find antique textiles from the Edo through Showa periods. Check out the kimonos and the stacks of *sarasa*, an antique Indian-export cloth highly collectible in Japan. 36 BENZAITEN-CHO, HIGASHIYAMA-KU 81-75/561-1568 info@konjaku.com

SHINMONZEN STREET

The world's highest concentration of Japanese art dealers, at all price levels: For antique tea bowls, hanging scrolls, folding screens, and furniture. Try Takashi Yanagi (195 Shinmonzen-agara; 81-75/551-1284), or Antiques Shimonaka (199 Nishino-choi, 81-75/541-6645).

LUANG PRABANG, LAOS:

OCK POP TOK

"East Meets West" is a textile gallery and weaving center good for traditional Lao weaving techniques. You can also participate in a weaving class or workshop. 73-5 BAN VAT NONG 856/71-25-32-19 ockpoptok.com

NEW DELHI:

COTTAGE EMPORIUM

This place sells handicrafts from all over India. It's government-run, which in this case means trustworthy. Go here for Hindu sculptures. 8A CONNAUGHT PL. 91-11/23-32-44-64

M-BLOCK MARKET

Find the latest designs in textiles at this market in the upscale Greater Kailash I neighborhood.

VIENTIAN

LAO TEXT

American updates a technique silk brocade ikat scarf and pillow. BAN MIXAY 856/21-21-laotextiles.co

NEW YOR

ABHAYA

Howard A. Jocelyn Seize in high Chinese furniture antique sculpture. 145 HUDSON 212/431-69 abhayatribed

DE VERA

In exquisite galleries, Vera show beauty from Japanese Philippine sandstone. 1 CROSBY 212/625-08 29 MAIDEN SAN FRANCISCO 415/788-08 deveraobject

JACQUES GUES GAI

Come here utilitarian Indian spice Philippine drums, Tibetan pets, Chinese tables, and Gujarati. 21 GREENE 212/925-81 jacquescarca

SRI THRE

Stephen S. by-appointment specializes Korean textile folk textiles dyed *boro*. 18 ECKFORD BROOKLYN 718/599-25 srithreads.co

TAMA

In an elegant find antique Asian art and bronze Buddha from Cambodia and Philippines. 5 HARRISON 212/566-70 tamagalley.c —K.L.B. AND