

Getting Lost in Old Chicago

by Auroriele Hans

Driving along in the perpetually grid-locked traffic of the 405 freeway, heading north, away from the imposing structures of Costa Mesa's—really Santa Ana's—South Coast Plaza, where ultra-luxury boutiques cater to Orange County's affluent, toward the monotonous tract-housing scenery of Fountain Valley, there is a patch of strip malls off to the right: one is completely dominated by a massive Fry's Electronics Store, another houses a newly-built Patio World, painted in Orange County's standard sandy brown and taupe color scheme, and adjacent to that is another grouping of boxy, dull-colored buildings—here you will find Old Chicago. Unlike its neighbors, where people's purchases are likely to be of a utilitarian nature—batteries, clock radios, and lawn chairs—Old Chicago sells antiques. People come here to escape to the past. It's not pretentious; it doesn't have shiny marble floors and stores that make you feel excluded. Rather, to walk down the never-ending rows, to see one booth after another filled with artifacts from the different eras of the last three centuries or so, is to lose all reference points to the hustling-and-bustling world beyond Old Chicago's walls.

At least that's what Old Chicago's owner, Gregory Drumm, thinks: he says that “for a lot of people, this is entertainment. They like to come in, get lost, look at the old stuff, get a cup of coffee in the back, and just enjoy themselves for a few hours—kind of get lost in the nostalgia.” People don't come in knowing what they want to buy; they might have a vague idea but will usually end up choosing whatever strikes them—or, as Gracie Redfield who works at the register and rents part of booth 18 puts it, “whatever catches their eye or speaks to them.” She says, “It's

an emotional purchase when people come in here: You don't come in here for a quart of milk or a loaf of bread; you come to find something that suits you—that stands out.”

Customers tend to agree. Standing in front of the black-and-white faces of Marilyn Monroe, Jackie Robinson, and Franklin D. Roosevelt that grace the covers of dealer #54, Perry Zimmerman's extensive collection of *Life* magazine, customer Mary Jane Turner tells me she isn't looking for anything in particular today because “you never can tell what you might find; you may find that treasure you didn't know was there.” She's here with her sister, Jan Hunt, who's visiting from the Cleveland suburb they grew up in and where she still lives. Mary Jane has lived in Seal Beach for the last 27 years, and, though she has known about Old Chicago for years, it's not her favorite antique mall, Country Roads in Orange is. She says this one's hard to get through: “It's really big and it's just not logical.” She's right. The aisles in this 16,000-square-foot showroom, with 98 antique vendors—though Greg says he's had up to 120—are illogical; they don't go straight up and down but twist and turn like a maze. “Getting lost” in here is not a term people only use figuratively.

Despite her dislike of the mall's layout, Mary Jane has found something here today: an old Singer sewing machine like the one her mother used to have in the fifties. She's not going to sew with it though; she plans on using the case around it as a bedside table in her guest room—though she's going to “do something you really shouldn't do if you're a real antique lover.” She's going to paint it black to match the new (not antique) dresser in the room. She calls the décor “Vintage Chic,” a term she admits she made up. But then again, she says, the sewing machine is not truly an antique because it is not over a hundred years old. She's right again. According to the United States Customs Bureau, an article must be over a hundred years of age at the time of importation to be deemed an antique.

A sewing machine is not all these two sisters found while “getting lost” in Old Chicago’s tangled aisles today: they found a memory of being teenagers.

Mary Jane explains, “It’s a firm, stuffed dog. If you had like a birthday party, you’d get it for a gift and then have all your girlfriends sign your autograph dog. We just saw one here and it was yellow—a wiener...”

Jan interrupts, “A Dachshund.”

Mary Jane continues, “You’d just take a permanent-marker pen and you would sign it and then as a teenager you’d just keep it in your bedroom. Wait—at that time we didn’t have permanent markers; you used a ball-point pen.”

The pair found me later in the mall to show me the worn, yellow wiener dog, its long, stuffed body covered in fading signatures.

* * *

It’s a dark and cloudy Wednesday. Outside, the 405, as usual, is more like a parking lot than a freeway, but inside the mall it’s warm, the smell of coffee wafts through the air, and Billy Holiday’s voice crackles through the ceiling speakers. Walking down the aisles with Greg, past the standard 10-by-10-foot booths, past the array of flower-patterned china sets arranged in heavy wooden buffets that make some booths look like kitchens, and the old chairs and coffee tables that make others look like living rooms, Greg lets out a long sigh, looks at me with his tired blue eyes, and tells me that it’s the “cross section of personalities that we have here that probably makes the business the most fun for [him]—the people, not only the customers but the dealers.” Just then, a customer walks by; Greg asks if she needs any help. She says she’s just going up front to see if they have a magnifying glass; he informs her they do. We continue walking toward the back of the mall.

Greg tells me, “It’s kind of quiet today, unfortunately.”

In a cheerful voice, I respond, “Gracie said the weekends are busy.”

Greg nods and says, “Busier, yeah. We definitely have more people through, but we don’t necessarily do a whole lot more dollars.”

We turn a corner and find ourselves in front of dealer #6, Jim Gabriel’s, booth. Sitting between two grand-looking dining tables, each one set with fine china, is Maggie, Jim’s little black “chiwienie.” With her long body and Chihuahua face, she is the only dog in the mall—well, the only dealer’s dog. Jim likes to tell people that Maggie is a good sales girl. He rescued her. A lot of rescuing goes on here at Old Chicago.

We make another turn, this time to the left, and find ourselves at the very back right-hand corner of the mall. We’ve arrived at Old Chicago’s break area, a dimly lit alcove where dealers can relax at one of the three dark green garden tables, drink coffee, and inspect their recent finds. This is where I can usually find Miyoko, her petite frame bent over the tabletop, eyeing a newly-found bakelite piece through her jeweler’s loupe—a small, circular magnifying glass that tucks into a metal case she wears on a chain around her neck. She’s checking for any wear scratches, tiny chips, or cracks the piece might have, a common problem with this brittle plastic, which tends to fade and crumble from sun exposure and time, the reason for which she thinks bakelite had a short production life. At this point, she already knows it is real bakelite because she performed the rub-and-smell test before she bought the piece. Made of a mixture of carbolic acid and formaldehyde, bakelite releases a sharp, pungent odor when heated—say by the hands; however, bakelite has become a general term for collectable items like jewelry, buttons, radio cases, and lamps made of either Bakelite or Catalin—the names of the corporations that

originally owned the rights to and produced them—though both types of plastic are basically the same compound: phenol formaldehyde.

Today Miyoko is inspecting an art deco brooch, she thinks from around the 1920s or '30s, made of red bakelite cherries dangling from green coated strings attached to a red bakelite bar. She says a piece like this is very hard to find. Estate sales tend to have the best stuff, but, because an expert usually comes in to appraise the goods before they're sold, they are expensive. She paid \$150 for this brooch at an estate sale and has marked it at \$350 for her booth. So the best place to find a deal, she says, is a garage sale or the swap meet; people don't know what they're selling—but then again, she adds, they usually do. These sources take longer too; she has to sort through more junk to find a gem. She says if you ask any dealer they will tell you it used to be easier before eBay to find items at a good price for resale. To make a profit. Now, everyone knows how much antiques are selling for; that is, they can check eBay for the article they have and see what other people who have it too are selling it for. There is so much more information out there. Before eBay, you would have to go to the library and check out books to find out about what you have and how much it was worth, not many people would do that. For these reasons, most dealers don't make a living at selling antiques; it's more of a hobby. They usually have other jobs, are retired, or are housewives whose children are grown up and have left the house, leaving them with more time. Miyoko pretty much falls in this latter category.

With all the work—all the time, effort, and money involved in driving around to estate sales, garage sales, and swap meets—why does Miyoko do it? Because it makes her happy. Like many dealers, she is addicted to the treasure hunt. She says she would probably make more money working a minimum-wage job, but this gives her so much more happiness and enjoyment than that. When she buys an item, like the ugly, brown miniature troll doll she picked up with the

brooch today, she does so because it makes her happy. Her booth is full of items that made her happy; she says it has good energy. She says sometimes a piece of plastic can cost around a thousand dollars. She asks, “Is it worth it? Somebody who it make them happy and it very collectable—yeah, it worth it. But to some people, it is plastic, and it not worth it. O.K., don’t buy it. If it doesn’t make you happy, don’t buy it. If it makes you happy, buy it.” Apparently, in the world of buying and selling antiques, everybody has their own “piece of plastic.”

Miyoko takes me to see her booth, #94, and, when I see it, it makes me happy too. Consisting of two mirror-paneled glass cases, each one chock-full of glittering rhinestone and beaded jewelry, and an armoire with windowed doors revealing shelves brimming with bakelite cherry- and orange-brooches, bangles, and necklaces, Miyoko’s booth sparkles. In the armoire is a red bakelite brooch; it is a heart with a keyhole in the middle of it that hangs from a key. She tells me it’s called a “MacArthur key-to-my-heart pin” and that during World War II women would wear these pins for their sweethearts fighting overseas. She says the one in the case here is not an original, and that an artist put it together—though all of the pieces are bakelite. She says she had the real thing two years ago and sold it for \$1,600.00 on Valentines Day; the day after she sold it, a women came in and was crushed to hear the news because she had been saving up for it since Christmas. She just keep repeating, “I can’t believe you sold it.” Miyoko has been looking for another one ever since but has only managed to find this reproduction—it only costs \$350.

After she tells me this story, something else in her booth catches my eye: hanging on the wall, next to the armoire are two brown ceramic seahorses, their bodies painted in glittering gold and silver. I tell Miyoko that I have to buy them for my mom because last Christmas I bought a yellow pair for my boyfriend’s mom and when my mom saw me wrapping them she got jealous—she wanted them. My boyfriend already knew I had bought them for his mom, so I

couldn't give them to her. I felt awful, and, ever since, I've been looking for a similar pair for my mom. Miyoko took them down from the wall and handed them to me—at \$100, I'd have to save up and come back. When I tell her this, she gives them to me for \$50. I couldn't wait until Christmas to give them to my mom, though. I gave them to her the minute I got home. They now live in our bathroom.

Miyoko is a fairly new dealer at Old Chicago; she moved in just last spring. Before that, Lake Forest Antique Mall housed her wares—but that mall went under last January. Greg knows the owners and he says it was an increase in eBay shoppers and sellers that hurt their business—that's what they told him. Like Old Chicago, Lake Forest Antique Mall was large, 24,000 square feet, housing up to 170 dealers at times. Business kept getting worse, they weren't renting spaces, and they weren't selling, so they had to shut their doors. Greg says, "eBay has really hit the business hard. Very hard. Not only has it taken customers away and dealers that I could potentially rent to, but it's kind of taken the fun out of the business." He explains that "before we used to have to—you might search for years to find a certain item, but you can go on eBay and find five or ten of them now. So the real fun of the business, the hunt, is somewhat gone." While eBay has created competition for him, it has also eliminated some: "My bricks-and-mortar competition is dropping like flies... antique malls and antique businesses are going under a lot."

For Greg, this is a business. He tells me that he doesn't collect anything specific. When people ask him, "What do you collect?" He responds, "The money." But lately, most weekdays as he walks down Old Chicago's lonely aisles, he thinks about how quiet it is.

* * *

It's Saturday and the scene here at Old Chicago is completely different than a weekday: every dealer is at their booth, or each others' booths, chatting with customers and other dealers.

Customers fill the aisles. Some have never been here before; they just saw the sign from the freeway. They don't collect anything, just having fun looking at all the random, far-from-present-day items. A twenty-something man, Justin Powelson, points a toy rifle made of wood at the corner of the booth he's standing in while telling me all this old stuff reminds him of his grandparents' house back in Kansas. His girlfriend Allison says she's looking for a Bob Dylan record; I point her in the right direction and inform her I'm getting to know the place pretty well. Later, a customer with a long, braided beard, Gerry Wolf, tells me he's been coming here for about six years—the mall has been in Fountain Valley since 1994, though Greg originally opened it in Buena Park in 1985. He collects building banks—replicas of banks or other buildings that you store money in like you would a piggy bank. He just found a building bank of the original General Motors World Headquarters in Detroit a week ago at Wertz Brothers Antique Mart in Santa Monica; he says he's from Detroit and remembers that GM used to give these banks out for people to save money to buy a Chevy. He likes to come to Old Chicago to “visit” antiques he can't bring himself to buy or find a place in his house for. Apparently, some items have been here for years, like a big red arrow that lights up—it used to be a casino sign. He can't believe it's only \$18 and no one has bought it in the five years it has been here.

Earlier in the day, Melinda and Linda, two saleswomen who work at the register on Saturdays, and who both refuse to be interviewed—though they consented to me including this episode—complain about a dealer who has decided to make their job more difficult: he has decided to put items on sale depending on their price, 50% off \$5-\$10 items, 40% off \$15-\$20 items, and so on. After complaining to each other for about ten minutes, shaking their heads, letting out big sighs of frustration as talking about him agitates them more, Melinda snatches up the phone and calls him; she explains firmly to him that her and Linda are going to apply one

discount to all items and he must choose what it will be of they will do it for him. As he is responding, Melinda looks over at me, sticking out her tongue, giving a sour face, and nodding her head back and forth as she listens to him. He gives up in the end.

Passing by the alcove in the back of the mall I find Miyoko at her usual table. She has just come from the Japanese market and has brought sushi for her best friend at the mall, Lupita Watson, a dealer of American Indian jewelry and artifacts. She offers me a piece of the cake she got at the market and leaves to go help a customer from Japan who visits her every time he's in the states. I sit down to cake and hear the love story of Lupita Watson: Born in San Luis Potosi, Mexico, Lupita never thought much about American Indian things until she met her husband, James Watson. Astronomy was her passion. While teaching geography to schoolchildren in Guadalajara, she would take astronomy classes at night. One day a professor told her he had a friend who could help her with her English, but Lupita told him she was too busy. When he told her James had a telescope, she consented to meeting him at the observatory. She remembers what she thought when she first met him: "I saw beautiful eyes, tall English man, you know—beautiful." She didn't go on a date with him until six months later when she came to Irvine to visit him; upon returning home to Guadalajara, a bouquet of roses was sent to her house every Saturday. She says she fell in love with him, but first she admired him for his knowledge. She says he taught her everything she knows, that "he gave [her] this love not only for his person but for his country—to respect the art." He passed away on August 16, 2003 after a three-year battle with cancer. Before he went, Lupita told him she was going to give up their booth—which at the time was at Lake Forest Mall—but he told her it was her responsibility now to carry on their collection. So she kept the booth, and in a sense it helps to keep him alive for her. She even

keeps his name on their business license, which is now displayed in one of her cases at Old Chicago, where she moved last spring when Lake Forest Antique Mall closed.

Lupita takes me to her booth. It is filled with turquoise rings and necklaces, orange Maricopa vases, and green and black jade fetishes—small carved animals that are used as talismans by southwestern Indian tribes, with the Zuni tribe being most recognized for its skill at carving them. A bear represents medicine, a snake, lightning, and a coyote is supposed to bring luck in hunting. Her husband also used to collect pocket watches; however the bands of braided human hair men in Victorian times used to wear them on are perhaps more interesting: in the late 1800s and early 1900s women would collect the hair from their brush and store it in porcelain dish with a hole in the lid called a hair receiver. In their free time they would braid the hair and give it to their husbands to put their pocket watch on. She tells me she learned about them because one day her husband came to her with a hair receiver—jokingly—and said, “Lupita, do you want to make me a band for my watch?”

Upon leaving her booth, I immediately run into two twenty-something vintage-T-shirt-clad customers who allow me to follow them around while they shop, Angel Esquivel and Andy Leishman. They say they’ve been coming here for years and just like to look at all the “cool stuff.” Angel, who paints, likes to check out all the art, be it a lithograph of a bird or the geometric poster of a cucumber he carried around the entire mall before he decided he’d rather buy the reproduction of Picasso’s *Guernica* because it inspires him. Andy, on the other hand, came in with a lamp and coffee table in mind but was immediately drawn to a dull green-and-brown afghan, which, despite the saleswomen’s offer to take it to the front for him, was carried under his arm for an hour until he bought it. He says that’s how he knows if he really wants something; if he gets sick of carrying it, he probably doesn’t really want it—he adds that he also

uses this technique at Target. Angel tells me that one of his favorite things that he bought here was a book about surfing; he says it has '60s surf lingo in it and "talks about surfing like it was a new thing in the '60s—it totally makes fun of the fifties." Angel says the book "made fun of how people used to ride heavy, solid wood boards, but, like, now if you read that and you know what surfing is about now, it totally puts that to shame."

As we come to the last aisle we haven't covered and Andy has wandered off, Angel stops in front of a display case and says, "I mean, look at all this stuff. It exists because somebody liked it. And it's still here because somebody liked it enough to hold on to it because they knew that somebody else will like it. You know, we're all people, so we run through the same things. So somebody's gonna like it. Somebody likes it now. It's weird."

Before I leave, I see Greg at the register and ask him how the week has been. His eyes brighter than usual, he responds, "Well, it's been a little bit on the slow side, but it picked up yesterday, and today we're pretty active. I don't know what the dollars are yet, but we're pretty active." He smiles. It's time to close—but just until tomorrow.

* * *

That night, while brushing my teeth I can see the reflection of the two seahorses I bought from Miyoko in the bathroom mirror from where they hang on the wall. They sparkle and shine in the light, and the way the long, painted-on lashes of their eyes curl up makes them look like they're smiling at me. I smile back because they make me happy.

