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The Importance of Being Provenanced

by Paul A. Shutler

The inclusion of the four letter word 'rare' seems to be the favorite tool used by anyone who wants their antiques to stand out above the rest and therefore become worth more. Regardless of whether they understand the meaning of the word, they include it not just to fill out the description but to ask a higher price. Rarity is one thing, but it's not the only tool in the box required to boost an object's value. When offering an object to a client be they a museum, a private collector or another dealer they all ask if the object has any provenance. This is what prompts some to include these words regardless of the facts. The trick is not to be fooled into thinking something is more than it actually is. The dictionary definition of the word rare is 'occurring very infrequently'. I think the key is the word 'very'.

This article will discuss the use of the terms rare, very rare, important and scarce and their correct application and how provenance can play a key role.

Clients come to me for advice when considering purchasing an item from another dealer or at auction, in some cases they are interested in objects described by the seller as 'rare' or 'extremely rare' or 'extremely rare and highly important'. My repeated response is laid out here.

Ask the seller why they think the object is rare, in most cases I can explain instantly why something may or may not be rare, certainly if I was describing something as rare I would make sure this could be done.

If someone hasn't seen a particular model colour or design of an object it is assumed to be rare. Is this assumption correct? Is it arrogant to assume that if you haven't actually seen something there can't be any others in existence? Or does something start off rare and slowly become less so with every example that appears? This was illustrated in the last few years when a small aesthetic movement table came on to the market.

The table in question was designed circa 1882 by the eminent architect designer Edward William Godwin (1833-1886) for his love interest, the

actress Ellen Terry's house in Kent 'Smallhythe' and so became known as the 'Smallhythe Table'. A fine example with metal feet and brackets joined the collection of The Metropolitan Museum of Art in 1990 (fig 1).



Figure 1 - Courtesy Metropolitan Museum of Art

A plain example without the metal feet and brackets was sold through Sotheby's in 2000 for £44,200 plus premium (i). After a six year gap another example of the same standard as the Met's table but this time ebonised sold by a UK dealer for £65,000 privately, then later that year another table similar to the Met's appeared on the market. Initially catalogued as a table of eastern origin with an estimate of few hundred pounds then swiftly re-catalogued as a table by Godwin the hammer fell in November 2006 at a huge £80,000 (ii). In March of 2008 a dealer sells a plain example in Sotheby's for a hammer price of £36,500 (iii) (interestingly this table had been part of his stock for a few years and was always priced at that level). In May 2008 another example comparable to the Met table (now three in all of the level of the Met's table i.e. with the fine metalwork feet and brackets) appears on the market, this time the hammer price is £40,000 (iv).

Could part of this rise and fall in prices be put down to auction fever on the day? Or can the keen bidding be attributed to a handful of collectors all having the relevant sized gap in their collections after waiting for their own example of a Godwin table of its type? I'm sure the assumed rarity took one of these tables past its recognised price band. Let's face it, the example in the Met and the table still in situ at Smallhythe were the only tables known in 2000. When in the space of a couple of years the known collection

has more than doubled, was it rare to start with? Or more importantly is it rare now? In reality it probably is a rare model but the marketing practices of the internet age encourages these sleeping rarities to be seen on the open market and find the right person with the relevant knowledge, more efficiently.

With the amount of antiques in general circulation around the world, whether they are in homes or endlessly being shunted around the trade, there can't be too many undiscovered treasures left. But it seems there are, items often slip through a saleroom un-noticed by dealers, collectors or auctioneers and find their way into a front room quietly waiting for their next outing to the auction house where they will then be declared RARE.

I believe something might be considered rare because a fixed number of them are known to have been made, but how high can this number go? In c1874 the architect William Burges (1827-1881) designed four tulip vases for the summer smoking room at Cardiff Castle, commissioned by the 3rd Marquess of Bute. The four vases were designed specifically to sit near the ceiling on stone brackets. Two of these vases are known to survive today; one is in the collection of the Cecil Higgins Art Gallery and Museum in Bedford (fig 2) and the other is in the collection of the Victoria and Albert museum in London, the whereabouts of the other two are unknown, certainly qualify as being rare, but how rare?

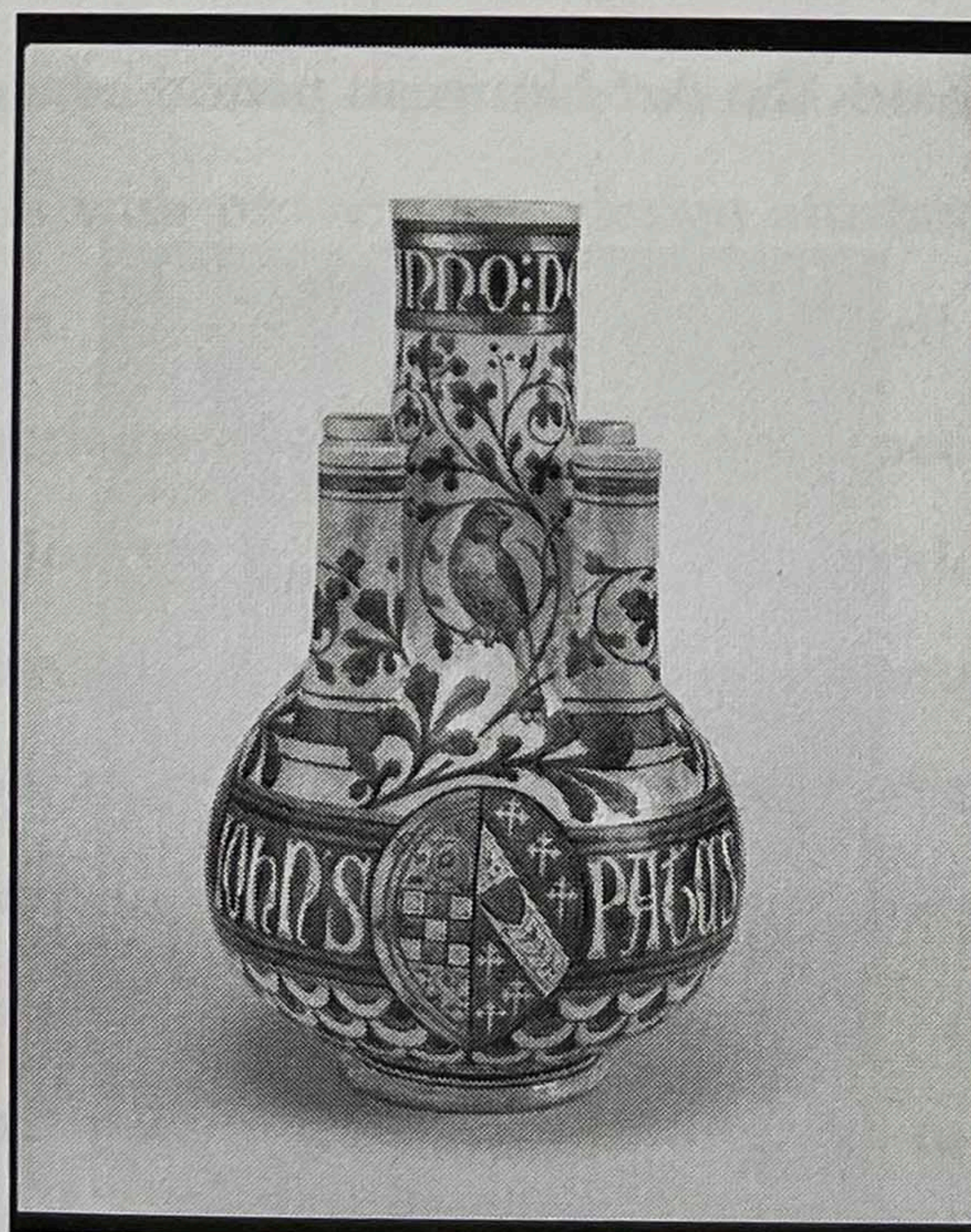


Figure 2 - with kind permission of the Victoria & Albert Museum

It is known that Gerald Summers designed and made only 120 one-piece plywood chairs circa 1933-4 using his company 'makers of simple furniture'; does this make them rare? With more of them entering public collections they will certainly become scarce to find on the market; (the definition for scarce is 'insufficient for demand') and with a finite number produced soon they will run out. It could be considered important given that it's a great example of a chair successfully made using only a single sheet of plywood, no fixings or joints, an industrial designer's dream.

Being rare doesn't automatically make something important, However, it's worth remembering that if something is rare it might simply be because the maker decided not to continue making an object because it just wasn't very pleasing, meaning not all rare objects are good objects. For example if a potter throws a handful of pots but then doesn't throw any more because he just didn't like it, it may well become rare because just one example survives. This pot is rare, but so what, this pot doesn't qualify as being important, at least not unless it is important in highlighting that the otherwise brilliant potter sometimes had an off day even if he did realize it.

For a work of art or an antique to be described as important shouldn't it mean it had a part to play or was responsible for something of note? A useful example would be Arthur Heygate Mackmurdo's (1851-1942) famous mahogany side chairs made by Collinson & Lock circa 1883 (fig 3). They are universally considered to be important because their sinuous Art Nouveau design pre-dates the Art Nouveau period by a decade.

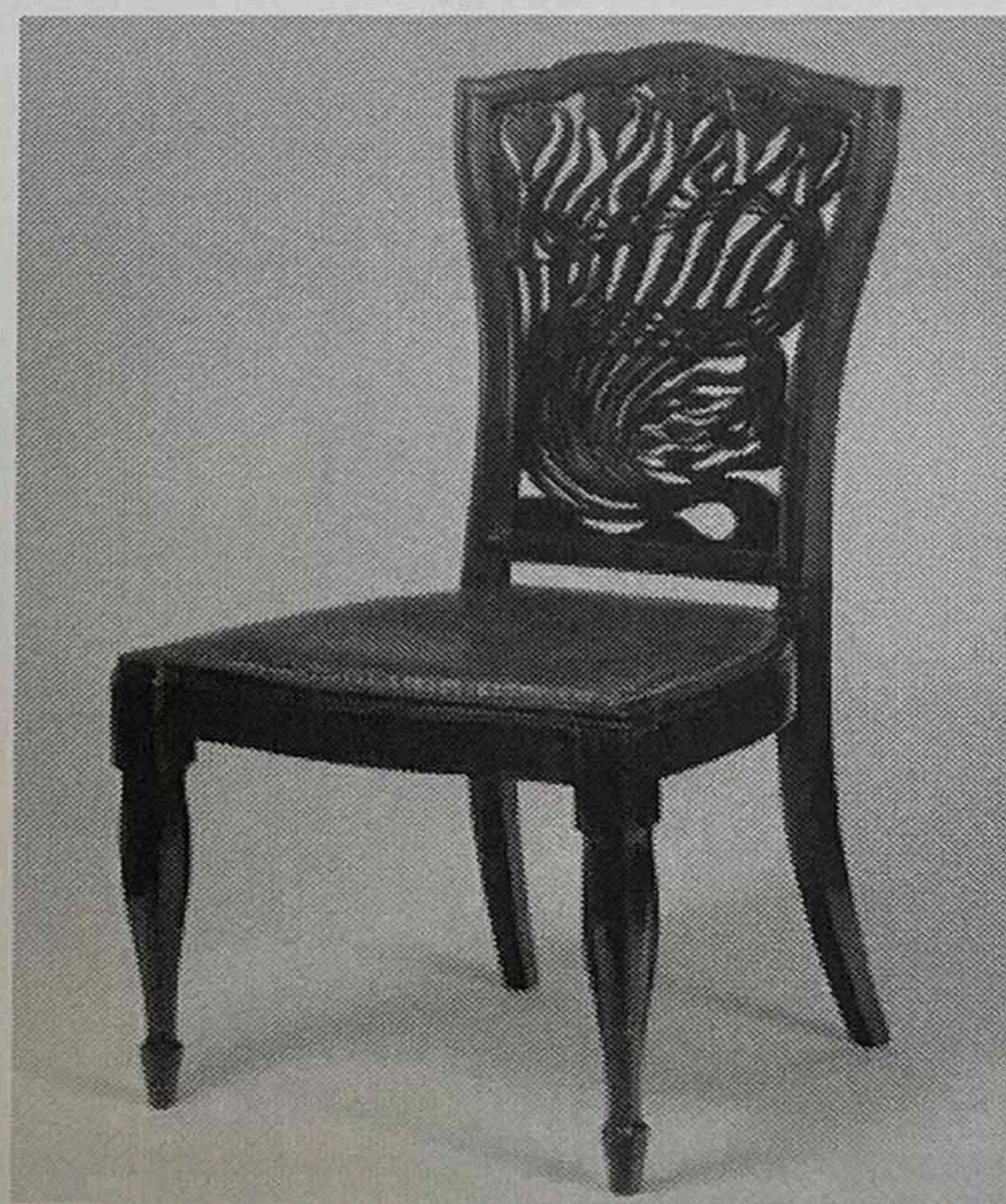


Figure 3, courtesy of Paul Reeves

However to be of use, the word important should be followed by the word 'because', as sadly this word too can be used to embellish an otherwise ordinary (but perfectly genuine) object. So, Mackmurdo's chair is important because it predates the Art Nouveau period and designs by a decade.

If an object is early in date of manufacture, let's say pre 17th century, the object becomes more of a rare survivor rather than rare because so few were ever made. If a fairly ordinary stool, of which hundreds, if not, thousands were made in the 14th century, were to come on to the market today it would cause a stir, simply because it was never designed and made to last this long. Although the combination of a rare survivor and an object known to have been made in few numbers is still possible, it is perhaps more difficult to prove, but if it can be the use of the word rare is surely deserved. A good example of this is a simple three legged Egyptian stool in the collection of the British Museum that when made no doubt was common place and used by all, but today is a rare survivor.

Can an object ever be 'very rare'? After all rare means very few exist, I would suggest if a small number (perhaps less than five) are known to exist and are connected to a documented commission, such as the four William Burges tulip vases, then they can be called 'very rare' simply because there were only four ever made and two of those are in public collections, with two still out there waiting to found.

One stage further from 'very rare' would be unique. The only way this can be verified is with provenance, design attribution, manufacturer or sound documentation. All of these factors combined allow the use of the word 'unique'. A perfect example of this is an occasional table (fig 4), designed by Owen Jones. He only used the London firm Jackson and Graham to make furniture to his designs, it is documented that Jones only designed furniture on a commission basis. This particular commission was for the copper mining magnate James Mason Esq. of Eynsham Hall, Oxfordshire. Helpfully the drawings for this commission survive; they clearly display all the furniture and decoration to be included in each room. Amongst the sets of chairs and tables in the drawing room there is just one occasional table, meaning only one occasional table was ever made,

making this table unique. This attribution is confident and water tight because contemporary resources have been used.



Figure 4, courtesy of Paul A. Shutler

If an object can be made in large numbers, such as a vase, why would we assume that they were not? This is where provenance comes into play. It is true that the potter may have made some more of these vases as blanks after the Burges commission, but the inscription 'IOHNS. PACTS. MARQ. DeBUTE' verifies their provenance. This is why provenance and rarity should go hand in hand.



Figure 5, with kind permission of the Chippendale Society

A perfect example of a situation where provenance is essential is as follows: let's say in front of me stands a chair made around about 1770

from the finest Cuban mahogany and the lyre back follows the widely published designs of Thomas Chippendale (fig 5). If that was the end of its story it would simply be a fine example of a Chippendale period chair after his published designs available to all. When you add the 'Provenance ex. Brocket Hall' suddenly the chair is in another league. This is because the provenance confirms the attribution of a maker. Thomas Chippendale (1718-1779) who is known to have supplied Brocket Hall with furniture; and so this chair is now from the workshop of Chippendale and not just after the design by Chippendale.

Another good example of when provenance alone lifts something above its contemporaries is a small ebonised and gilt stool (fig 6), catalogued by a Scottish auctioneer in 2007 as just that, a small 19th century ebonised stool. Having been bought by myself and thoroughly researched the stool is now on loan to the Beckford Tower Museum; today we believe it probably formed part of the suite of stools from Lansdown Tower just outside Bath. The tower was completed in 1827 by the famous collector and patron to the arts William Beckford (1760-1844) to act as his study retreat and to house his art collection.



Figure 6 courtesy of Paul A. Shutler

Today provenance is added as freely as salt to a meal. We find people describing items as having provenance but on closer inspection it turns out they simply came from the vicarage, around the corner and when only a few miles around the next corner there is another vicarage, perhaps this is not really important in the grand scheme of things. It would however be useful if the vicarage played a part in the object's creation. For example if

the vicar was a known patron to the maker or designer would be important, but sadly however this often isn't the case. Even when large furniture makers like Gillow produced tens of thousands of pieces of furniture, today it is possible to trace some of these pieces back to the Gillow sketch books (held in the City of Westminster Archives, London) where you can see the original customer's name. This allows us to identify this provenance which is useful but that's all. The difference between good provenance and simply... provenance

For provenance to be of use it needs to point directly to the creation of an item, therefore let's call this the primary provenance, and if formed as part of a later collection of acknowledged significance, call it secondary provenance.

Collections with primary provenance include the famous collectors of the early nineteenth century, people like Thomas Hope and William Beckford. They, at the end of the 18th and the beginning of the 19th century, spent vast sums of money commissioning items designed by them or by architects, and they also collected antiques. In the case of the latter, without the provenance of 'ex. Thomas Hope collection' they would simply be objects, albeit of fine quality no doubt.

Then as we move to the 20th century we can think of collectors such as Samuel Messer. Messer was collecting under the guidance of Robert Symonds, a man who was involved in the formation of all the great collections of English furniture of the first half of the 20th century including the collection at Colonial Williamsburg. Whilst Messer didn't do any commissioning of contemporary furniture he did buy the best he could afford. When in December 1991 his collection was sold at auction the combination of quality, design attributions and his own secondary provenance (and some primary) ensured the collection commanded high prices. The Samuel Messer provenance still stands proud today.

Some items today have provenance stating they are part of a 'Private Collection'. I believe the addition of this today is most likely to remove the fear that the item has been consigned by the trade, after all if it were of any use the collection would have been named, example the Lord Simon Sainsbury's collection of English furniture sold in 2008 for £16.5m (v). This

collection was amassed with the finest dealers and experts at Lord Sainsbury's disposal, thus re-enforcing the quality of the collection as a whole.

There are some instances where the object itself is irrelevant, as the celebrity provenance is all that is being purchased. This provenance is harder to gauge because the item that usually holds the value, no longer does, usefully illustrated when in July 2009 a shabby Victorian chesterfield was sold with a footnote stating it came, Winston Churchill's office, by repute. Suddenly the shabby un-useable chesterfield makes £7,500 (vi) and is bought by an anonymous collector.

To conclude, great care must be taken when using any of these words to describe an antique or work of art. In today's world of legal dispute even the inclusion of a four letter word could have an un-desirable affect if proven incorrect further down the line, so do your research or don't use the word and if you do use it, back it up. With so many people in the antiques trade using words like rare and unique it's only a matter of time when they attach it to an unworthy object (I can think of a few examples today) and sell it to the wrong person. Do your own research and don't always trust the vendor; they can be wrong, don't be misled. Always research from the very beginning and hopefully you will come to the same conclusion. Just because they have paid over the odds for an object believing it to more than it is doesn't mean they are correct. It is worth remembering an object's rarity has to be re-evaluated on a regular basis in order to be accurate today.

Sadly, the practice of over egging one's stock is not a new one, many people own objects today that were bought years ago under the heading rare but are either simply not in the slightest, never were, or have since been proven not to be any longer. The latter cannot always be predicted but in order to be prepared against this happening, take into account provenance, even the smallest morsel of information can tie everything together.

Experts and scholars often change their minds though with the discovery of unknown contemporary documents, trade catalogues, receipts or accounts. New light is often shed that can disprove previous theories and thus weaken arguments. This can never be foreseen which strengthens the following argument, when referring to a document to verify an object's provenance or attribution, always refer back to the earliest point of refer-

ence. So look at the contemporary sources and then work forward from there. Don't just trust what someone else has said or written because they can be wrong. I often see auction catalogue descriptions referring to a previous auction catalogue description. If the first description is not accurate of course the current one is equally incorrect. Often it is more convincing not to call something rare but instead to list all the known examples and all the facts; then if someone else feels the need to call it rare, that's up to them. You can be assured in the knowledge that you laid out the facts. The best case scenario is that those who insist on describing everything as rare will only be fooling themselves and no one else.

Based In the UK, Paul studied furniture conservation for five years, three of which contributed to a degree in the subject. He has previously worked for Bonhams Auctioneers and now trades as a specialist dealer in designed furniture & works of art from his home in Warwickshire, trading solely from his website is www.invest-in-antiques.com

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Museums and Public Collections referred to

The Victoria & Albert Museum, London, UK

The Cecil Higgins Museum & Art Gallery, Bedford, UK

The Beckford Tower Museum, Bath, UK

Cardiff Castle, Wales, UK

Smallhythe Place, the National Trust, UK

The Chippendale Society c/o Temple Newsam House, Leeds, UK

The Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York, US