Richard Jost and Charles Fuchs


**RICHARD JOST:** CHARLIE AND I have always lived in older homes. Indeed, we both feel more comfortable in older homes and would not consider living in anything contemporary. Our current house, built in 1907, still retains most of its original layout and feel. Our furnishings are mainly pieces that were handed down to us from our families and would not fit into a contemporary design. We were the ones in our families who expressed an interest in having the pieces of furniture that no one else wanted because they were seen as too heavy or old fashioned. When we have purchased furniture over the years, we have made sure that the style fits in with the older pieces we already own.

My interest in collecting old furniture began at a very young age. I seem to have always been scavenging discards from the neighbors or haunting Salvation Army stores for odd pieces of furniture that attracted me, even as I was trying to cram it into my childhood bedroom. I vividly recall the day of my grandmother's funeral, when my grandfather took me up into the attic of their house in Syracuse and told me that I was to have two pieces of furniture that were stored there: a brass and marble plant stand that was a wedding gift to a great-aunt in 1900 and a Gothic Revival chair, which had been in the family for a long time. I still have both pieces in my home and treasure them. My grandfather told me that I was the only one in the family who would appreciate these things.

Why did my grandfather give them to me? Certainly most adolescent boys were not collecting antique furniture, so even then my interests (which had always been very divergent from those of most of my peers) were on a decidedly different course. As my realization of my gay identity grew stronger, so did my interest in historic preservation and design. Did my grandfather sense this in me even before I might have been fully aware of it myself? Did he know that I would take good care of these pieces of family history for him and that to pass them on to anyone else would be a waste? I'll never know for sure, but I do know that his actions helped me to realize that this interest of mine was okay, which opened many new opportunities for me.
In college a study-abroad program allowed me to spend a year in Paris. I was a history major, and a strong part of my desire to go to Europe was my wish to enrich my grasp of history and have an opportunity to see the wonderful architecture that I had been reading about. It was a very fulfilling year, during which I spent most of my weekends taking day trips around the French countryside, visiting chateaus that were open for tours. This continues to be my favorite form of travel and touring, visiting historic homes and studying period design.

I have been a member of the National Trust for Historic Preservation for many years and have always had memberships in the local historic preservation societies wherever Charlie and I have lived, including Denver and Seattle. Since moving to Seattle in 1992 I have become involved in the Seattle Architectural Foundation, a group devoted to enhancing public understanding and appreciation of the city’s architecture, primarily historic, through guided tours and lectures. I now serve on the tour board and help organize the tours.

My interest in architecture and design brings me a great deal of satisfaction and has enriched my life beyond measure. I collect books on preservation and design and am constantly adding, subtracting, or moving around furniture within the house to come up with a new design. Lucky for me, Charlie is very patient with all this and lets me indulge myself without too much complaining. How all this fits into my being gay is somewhat a mystery to me. But many of the volunteers at the Seattle Architectural Foundation are gay men, and that has usually been the case in other historic preservation groups that I have been a member of. It would seem to argue for the existence of a preservation gene, which I would guess is located very near the Broadway show–tune gene.

Perhaps so many of us gay men gravitate to historic preservation because it is linked to a certain romantic past. The mansions and historic homes represent an idealized past where romance seems to be inevitable. I think most gay men have a strong streak of the romantic in them and can live it out vicariously by being associated with these fine old homes. It is also certainly true that there is a design element in historic architecture that speaks to many of us and that we are trying to preserve the best of the past just because there is something beautiful about good design itself, no matter what the time period.

For me historic preservation and friendship are bound together. Many of my friends are gay men I met through membership in preservation groups; with others we simply discovered that we had a shared passion for preservation and that brought us together. In Denver in the mid-1980s it seemed that all the gay men Charlie and I knew were buying old houses and fixing
them up. Dinner conversations were all about paint colors, period fixtures, and faux finishes. I remember my friend Dale, now deceased, who used to make scrapbooks for his own pleasure with articles on architecture and historic preservation clipped from the Washington Post. Last year I spent a long weekend in Newport with my college roommate Michael, touring the great houses and soaking up the local color.

**Charles Fuchs:** I collect John Deere antique tractors, the old ones that are started by cranking the flywheel. It’s not that I want to go back to the times when these things were made or when I used them in Nebraska. In fact, I’ve spent much of my life trying to escape from those times and places. But old tractors evoke for me strong and nostalgic memories of my own working on the farm and the simplicity of small-farm life. I now value my life in a big city, but my journey began with those machines. The old two-cylinder John Deeres were used at a time when a farmer was close to the land and could understand how his tractor was put together and how it worked. Today’s tractors, gigantic earthmoving machines, are almost certainly a mystery to the person inside the air-conditioned cab. “Homesteads” of today look more like industrial dumping grounds than they do places for aesthetic enrichment. Orchards, gardens, shelter belts, milking barns—these are things of the past. They’re not functional; they don’t make money.

Back in Nebraska I got acquainted with an old farm neighbor who lived with his sister and never married. He began taking photos when he was sixteen or seventeen. The last time I visited him, when he was still living on the farm, he showed me his original camera, which he still used, an old 120 bellows-type that he bought from a Sears catalog. For something like eighty years he wandered around the countryside taking pictures, mostly of parades and often of weddings or social occasions. His house was a museum. Only in recent years did he get a telephone, and I’m not sure he ever had a TV. Water came from a windmill on a hill behind the house, and heat was provided by a cook range in the kitchen and an oil stove in the living room. A closed-off pantry next to the kitchen served as the refrigerator. He farmed with horses as late as the 1950s, when he quit farming and rented out the land. He and his sister took care of their parents until they died at an old age.

The original house his parents built he kept painted and trim, though no one lived in it for many years. He lived in the “new” house next door. Avidly Catholic, he had a collection of photos of what must have been every Catholic church in Nebraska and many from neighboring states. He also had a collection of matchbooks and key chains, the kinds of things businesses would give away as gifts at Christmas. Something of a hypochondriac, he religiously took vitamin pills and patronized about every chiropractor within...
a day's driving distance. I'm sure this man was gay, though his times and his religious background prevented him from ever really knowing what he was.

I need to go to the hospital to have a hernia taken care of. I've been telling everyone that the surgeon recognized it immediately as an EFM hernia: excessive furniture moving. Twenty years of helping Richard arrange and rearrange his heavy furniture. Richard and I are interested in such different things that we complement each other, in an odd sort of way. We're both interested in old furniture, but he's constantly playing with his old china, about which I know little. Richard collects china and has acquired too much of the china his mother and aunts had. I don't know what he plans to do with it all. But I genuinely enjoy looking at china with him, and he accompanies me to look at antique tractors, about which he knows little.

I also collect old typewriters, mostly the beautiful black monsters designed for simplicity and enduring performance, like locomotives. When I type on one of them, the neighborhood knows it! The typewriter that I use regularly, given to me by my father in 1959, still works well, not only because it was well made but also because I've valued it and taken good care of it. It's more than an inanimate object; I think of it as having a personality. I shudder to think what will happen to it when I am no longer able to use it or care for it. I think I know: It will become an orphan, sold to some auction house, which will in turn sell it for junk—landfill.

Richard is fond of saying that when he met me, I didn't even have a bed, that I slept on a pile of rags. A couple of years ago, when we happened to be wandering around Harrod's in London, looking at the Royal Doulton china, I commented on some pattern that I liked. That stopped Richard in his tracks: he just couldn't believe that a Nebraska farmer would say such a nelly thing. On the other hand, when he goes with me to tractor exhibitions, he's exposed to a world that is both amazing and amusing to him. We've wandered around antique stores in tiny towns in Kansas, Nebraska, Iowa, and Missouri, places that he would never have found had it not been for me.

Whenever we go to antique stores, which I very much enjoy, I have the feeling that I am picking around in someone's private history. At one time these objects were given as gifts and taken home with great pleasure. I have a painted glass egg, "Easter 1909," that my mother won at the one-room school she attended in rural Nebraska. Often she told me how thrilled she was as a little girl to win that treasure and how carefully she held it on the sleigh ride home. Will it ever find another custodian as careful as she?

Richard and I have pictures and pieces of furniture that others in our families didn't want. They're important mostly because of the family history and stories that go along with them. We treasure these things, but we're
unsure what to do with them. Richard has nephews and nieces, but our feeling is that they would not be much interested. I have no close relatives to whom I could tell stories told to me by my father. For example, my father had his appendix taken out on our dining-room table in 1919. Richard sometimes reminds me that dinner guests need not know of this event, but I find myself telling these stories to some of our visitors. I'm a little sad that the stories will probably end with my death. We gay men collect and preserve this stuff, but we often have no one to pass it on to. I’ve given some thought to writing the stories and the histories on little sheets of paper and pasting them behind the photos or stuffing them in the legs of tables. That way, someone at another time and in another place will know.