

Locality, luck and family ornaments

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Abstract

Collecting ornaments is a popular pastime in Britain. This paper looks at cheaply produced collectables and the meanings and values attributed to private collections by their owners, who lovingly tend to them. Fieldwork consisted of ethnographic research conducted in 2004 and 2005 among people aged 60 and over in a town on the South Cheshire–North Staffordshire border, close to the heart of British ceramic production – Moorland, Wedgwood-Waterford, Argyle, Royal Stratford.¹ In particular, the paper focuses on so-called ‘lucky’ ornaments and figurines, especially the ‘whimsy’ – a small fanciful object or trinket created by a glass-blower or potter – and on how the rituals associated with collecting help to maintain the family and its social relationships.

Key words: collection, ritual, ornaments, luck.

Introduction

The relationship between luck and objects in contemporary society is a curious one. Of course, luck is often seen as primitive, irrational superstition and as having no role in a sophisticated, technological world (Parish 2001). Post-Enlightenment thinkers, such as Max Weber and Karl Marx, believed rationality to have defeated tradition, magic and superstition. Whereas it was thought that so-called ‘traditional’ societies had no alternative intellectual framework to draw on, from the eighteenth century onwards rationality and technological development, Weber argued, provided the backdrop for understanding and changing the vicissitudes of everyday life. The leading industrial nations that manufactured for world markets and mass production symbolised this golden age. However, ideas of tradition and custom persisted into modernity and we can see this embodied, paradoxically, in the mass-produced ornaments of the industrial age that embodied popular taste and matters of identity (Parish 2004). These popular, ornamental objects, such as souvenir postcards and ‘snowglobes’, captured a mystical dialectic of old and new (Parish 2004): on the one hand, as embodiments of the traditional, the inexpensive, sentimental object became a magical time-capsule containing a mythical time, a lost treasure of a bygone age (Olalquiaga 1999); on the other hand, they were cheap and kitsch commodities produced by the most up-to-date mass-manufacturing methods and were throwaway, non-durable objects (Olalquiaga 1999).

In recent years there has been a growing interest amongst museum-studies students in popular collecting practices and in the social compulsions that lead people to collect rather than merely to accumulate things (Pearce 1994, 1995, 1997). This sort of work has done much to help us understand how collections, other than those of the ‘great collectors’, come about. The subject is also important given that in recent years museums have become interested in the collections of ‘local people’ as is evidenced in the promotion of People’s Shows and so on. A third aspect concerns the relationship between contemporary collecting and consumer culture and, in this vein, I analyze the collection of cheaply produced ornaments such as whimsies² as playing in the imaginary distance between reality and fantasy; a romanticized idyllic England of possibilities and dreams and a contemporary Britain where as part of a global economy, misfortune, risk and anxiety dominate interlocutors’ self-perception. In this uncertain landscape,

the ornamental object rises to the occasion and becomes an important signifier of faith and mystery. The research which is reported here is ethnographic in character and draws on popular ornamental objects as heuristic devices to open up the changing arena of luck and misfortune as it emerges in and through the understandings and actions of social actors in the home. There have been many studies of consumption practices as sites for the ongoing construction of meaning (Miller 2001; Hurdley 2006). For example, domestic possessions act as carriers of memories (e.g. McCracken 1990; Brewer 1993) and objects in the home may provide their owners with a sense of identity, continuity and stability during episodes of disruption (Arnould, Price and Zinkin 1993). We shall see that, as well as providing a feeling of security and a sense of important times past (Stewart 1993: 139), the 'lucky' ornament also becomes disruptive of the future and signposts potential dangers as the personal collection of whimsies comes to represent to its owner a mingling of hope and conviction. The meaningless function of a garish object is replaced by a metaphysical lucky quality that is worshipped and adored (Calinescu 1987: 230).

The animism attached to inanimate objects is widespread in industrial nations. Gamblers in Las Vegas, it is said, habitually play on the same slot-machine, shout messages of reassurance at objects, such as the roulette wheel, while others have lucky coins, horseshoes, or favourite socks or ties which are worn in order to be 'lucky'. This is also what the anthropologist Frazer (1922) calls 'sympathetic magical rites', of which the most obvious case involves the use of particular objects so that the symbolic outcome of the ritual will ensure an envisioned sequence of events. What is captured is a power through the making of connections between objects (Levy-Bruhl 1975). In Evans-Pritchard's (1937) classic work, *Witchcraft, Oracles and Magic among the Azande*, African diviners are consulted because they discover a connection between a vast range of events experienced in daily life. Similarly, in contemporary Britain, everyday objects become heavily ritualized by people in order that they might seek explanations and answers for 'the inexplicable'. Whether, as Reith (1999:163) notes, we avoid cracks in the pavement or, like Rousseau, engage in stone-throwing, determining if life will go well according to whether we hit a tree or another designated spot, the completion of the ritual is linked to the outcome of the game. It is in the ritualized dialogue that owners construct around their favoured objects that, I will argue, we can see the remoulding of an inexpensive artefact as a magical vessel possessive of an intangible reserve of faith and mystery.

The study: lucky ornaments

This article is based on ethnographic research conducted in people's homes in a medium-size town that lies near to Stoke-on-Trent on the South Cheshire/North Staffordshire border in the UK. The town acted as an overspill town to the nearby North–West England conurbation of Liverpool and Merseyside in the late 1960s. At the start of the research process, I wanted to look at the lucky mascots used by elderly bingo players who met three times a week in a local bingo-hall. Over a six-month period in 2003-4, three women agreed to be interviewed in their homes to talk about their gambling habits, rituals and their understanding of luck. The same three interlocutors were interviewed again in their own homes and the focus of the interviews was stories about their homes – when they moved in, family history and objects in their homes that they valued for particular reasons. They were also asked to name famous families whom they regarded as unlucky or cursed. Over a twelve-month period, I was introduced to other women in different social networks and built up a loose group of respondents totalling twenty-five.

From the analysis of this data about gambling, the focus of later research among the above twenty-five women shifted to encompass material objects within the home that were thought of as lucky. More in-depth interviews amongst this group during 2004-5 were conducted on lucky ornaments in the domestic setting, centring around very general questions which asked interlocutors, for example, to describe 'sentimental' objects kept in their homes, the 'life history' of such objects and rituals surrounding the movement, cleaning and display of family ornaments, major family incidents and whether they regarded their family as lucky or unlucky. Finally, interlocutors were asked about superstitions surrounding objects that ran in their respective families. By focusing on objects as an empirical ground of practice and meaning, understandings are situated within the everyday routines and meanings of participants. This

breaks new ground by focusing on the 'social life' of objects (Appadurai 1986) as a means of widening the scope and interpretation of luck. Objects are ideally placed as heuristic devices to understand modes of everyday kinship interaction and as an empirical site for identity formation and familial integration. For, as Hurdley (2006) identifies, different narratives can be related to the same artefact, depending on the specific identity that the owner wishes to invoke (2006: 721).

Manufacturing in the Potteries

Of the twenty-five women interviewed, five women, who had worked in Stoke-on-Trent as pottery employees, mourned the relocation of much of the great pottery manufacturing to the Far East. Although bigger companies such as Royal Doulton, Copeland, Wedgwood, and Wade remained in nearby Stoke-on-Trent, their labour force was much reduced and no longer offered 'jobs for life' for family members. Their most valued ornaments are a reminder of a time before many of the less significant factories in the area had ceased production. One woman referred to the subsequent decline of small scale pottery manufacturing as the undoing of her family, and the reason why her son remained unemployed for most of his adult life: prior to this, there were many jobs for people living in the surrounding area and in the Potteries, (the local name for the six towns) that encompass Stoke-on-Trent, and her family stayed closely knit, but the closure of many smaller porcelain manufacturers forced her children to look farther afield for work and to leave the area to take jobs.

Several, in the past, had visited the nearby Wedgwood Museum and marvelled at the display of expensive china plates, cups and other delicate expensive pieces. Others had travelled to Liverpool to see for themselves the collection of ceramics displayed in the museums, the Walker Art Gallery, Lady Lever Art Gallery in Port Sunlight, Cheshire, and in Sudley House in South Liverpool where George Holt assembled a Victorian art collection displayed in its original setting. My subjects compared their own collections to that of William Hesketh Lever (Lord Leverhulme), laughing that the eighteenth and nineteenth century aristocracy bought very expensive pieces which were also a record of each rich family's history and fortune, just like their own personal objects. While the above museum collections record Liverpool's heyday as a great trading port, their own collection of ornaments documents a similar period of grace and family prosperity.

These women considered that the period stretching from the Second World War until the early 1970s coincided with their own relative youthfulness, a time when they were oblivious to age-related ill health. The ornaments made during this period, and which had been collected by relatives, children and friends, represented what was for them a less complex time. By far the most popular ornaments collected were whimsies and Wedgwood figurines. Wedgwood manufactured, in the 1950s, numerous series of handicrafts and small animal ornaments, woodland creatures, breeds of dogs and cats, etc. Throughout the post-war era, ornamental animal likenesses proved particularly popular in Britain as the crafts underwent a revival and people's nostalgia for better days led them to search for the chintz associated with the idyll of the country cottage and its surroundings (Woodham 1997: 215).

Whimsies were originally produced by Wade Ceramics in Burslem, Stoke-on-Trent. In the 1930s, as demand grew for the series, more lines of miniature animals were manufactured. Each series – zoo animals, farmyard animals, birds and domestic pets, averaging no more than two inches in size, came to be sold individually by tobacconists and newsagents in small-sized packaging (fig 1).

Outlasting more fashionable designs (Woodham 1990), collections of whimsies became a familiar part of the household furniture, preserving a national heritage that had never existed, but in some cases they seemed a unique representation of their owners' family history. Appealing mainly to children at first, for older women whimsies were reminders of particular festive events of the calendar – of Christmases when their children were young and whimsies were seen as fun objects. They were bought, the women recalled, when children, at a loss to know what to buy their parents on anniversaries, spent their pocket money on inexpensive ornaments. These most treasured ornaments were invariably human–animal heads or figurines, sometimes belonging to a once-full set of which the remainder has been lost or discarded until



Fig. 1. A collection of whimsies

only one or two remain. In the next sections, I examine why particular objects are considered to have a charmed life in spite of the economic disruption and recession all around them.

China figurines and family ties

The ornaments and knick-knacks described in this article have become embroiled with a talismanic life and an intangible sacred quality. In seizing the complex intertwining of luck and family relationships, the ornament par excellence is the Toby jug, produced by Royal Doulton since 1892 in Stoke-on-Trent. Jackie recalls being given a small Toby jug, a seated male with a mug in his hand, by her grandmother in 1939. As a child, she saw it as an enchanted creature, shaped not unlike a giant, decorated in the rustic hues of the time, and capturing the smell and presence of her grandmother's sweet shop and the flavour of traditionally shaped sweets and other foodstuffs (see Woodham 1997: 214). She was aware of its garish appearance: it was a chipped and not especially delicate piece, and even her grandchildren describe it as tacky. For Jackie, however, it was a reminder of a make-believe time when anything was possible, and even commonplace stores like sweet shops seemed exotic and strange.

China figurines, it is thought, are particularly bestowed with good qualities. This is often because their survival intact over time is seen as remarkable, almost as if their wholeness is 'charmed'. Joy recalled a miniature china seal, among other animal figurines, that her son had given her; she kept it next to her bed and it had outlasted every other, more expensive, present from her children. She had kept her son's own collection of whimsies largely intact – he had lost interest in his teenage years. She felt that the seal 'looked after' the other animals and, by extension, safeguarded her son and now his children. In cases of breakage or misplacement, the women interviewed believed that misfortune inevitably followed. One of the women interviewed spoke of her youngest grandchild as being constantly in motion, whirling around her

house. One day, she had thrown a tennis ball at her sister, missing her but knocking off the head of an ornamental owl. The owl had not been regarded as lucky in any sense, but a run of bad luck followed this accident. Subsequently, the owl was repaired and put in a safe place away from danger. In another example, an ornamental panda was regarded by its owner as so lucky that she would feed it 'bits of savoury' – necessary, its owner insisted, in order to 'keep it sweet'. It was only when the panda had been temporarily lost during a house-move that misfortunes occurred. The panda, thereafter, acquired a prominent status in the household: indeed, this interviewee told me that she now 'took more care of Fred', her name for the panda, than her husband!

Luck, according to those interviewed, derived from particular china ornaments that had remained – intact despite near breakages – within families for many years. In that respect, they differed markedly from expensive objects handed down through generations and kept well out of harm's reach. They have proved their durability and staying-power, so to speak. One such object was a china lion that had been in the household's possession for thirty years and had survived several near misses; in a different case the ornament was a small owl, bought for the mother by her first child in 1964, which kept turning up during periodic clear-outs of tat and bric-a-brac. A number of the interviewees recalled finding during clear-outs of the loft their own children's collections of objects, such as Matchbox toys dye-cast models of cars that were sold in small boxes similar in shape and size to boxes of matches). Such artefacts captured a time of innocence that many believed had been lost, especially to a post-war generation (Woodham 1997). This was equally true of the 'matchbox' sized 'whimsy' – figurines and farmyard animals, domestic dog breeds and British mammals like otters and moles that were of value to their owners because they seemed imbued with a sense of tranquillity and bygone times in an era of post-war industrialisation and social mobility.

While geographical mobility is usual among the region's young, older generations of the same family are still to be found living within streets of each other. Individual ornaments serve to cement local family ties. For example, Judy referred to people from her mother's home town who used to meet on Monday evenings and recalled that her mother would polish each ornament until it shone before they arrived, a practice Judy continues to this day prior to her sisters coming round for their tea. Judy lamented the cessation of family gatherings such as these as she detailed social changes in the town that meant that she no longer knew everyone who lived in her street, likening the loss to the disappearance of the mantelpiece from British homes: in her view, everyone once had similar 'classical' mantelpieces, each featuring an array of objects and signifying sameness and tradition, whereas today, similar houses can no longer be relied on to share such features. Instead, continuity is an ongoing construction made by individuals around talismanic objects that are now displaced from their traditional position at the hearth.

Jane, who lived on a large council estate, had as neighbours until recently a family who had lived next door for over 40 years. There were few houses in her street whose occupants she knew. Her children's friends, now middle-aged, had also left to buy houses in different parts of the North-west of England and the North Midlands. She was willing to wager that all of her friends and relatives had at one time displayed the same types of object in their homes – spoons, ornamental dolls and suchlike. Their popularity was in large part down to their association with lucky and mystical qualities, metaphysical features not only associated with 'home' but also an exotic 'otherness' which I will now turn to analyze.

Exoticism, luck and knick-knacks

Many of the women I spoke to believe that the circumstances in which they came to own an object changed their lives because it brought them into contact with a far-away world, one which they'd never thought they could encounter in any way. For example, Jean had received her lucky object – a small Cleopatra figurine decorated with Egyptian symbols – as a souvenir of Cairo, her father's Second World War service in Egypt. She recalled seeing the film *Ali Baba and the Forty Thieves*, which featured a bizarre figurine, just like her own, containing gold coins. Although she had rarely travelled abroad, the ornament conjures for her an exoticism and a mythical world of make-believe creatures and lost treasures of the kind depicted in old

Hollywood films. The figurine had brought her father safely home from war, and the figure itself had survived house moves and knocks but remained robustly intact.

It is in representing a complex back and forth dialectic of faith and fear, as in Jean's case, mentioned earlier, that most 'lucky' artefact collections assume the greatest significance (Reith 1999). Among Judy's collection of 1950s china was a 'genie-in-a-bottle', a gift from her late husband, purchased in Chelsea, West London. It reminded her of a time in her life when, although she had little money, she was carefree and had more hope for, than anxiety about, the future. She felt that the genie, an item of little worth, had guided her through rough times. Her friend Pat collected china dogs, one of which was a Border Collie figurine, regarded as 'lucky', given to her in the early 1940s by her mother.

It had helped to protect her as a young girl from the bombs that fell on Liverpool, for when frightened she would speak to it and, she believed, it had reassured her that no harm would come to her or other family members. It reminded her of the famous fictional dog Lassie, a habitual rescuer of those in peril. Her house had remained untouched by the bombing and her grandfather returned safely from the fighting in West Africa. Likewise, Pam told of how her father had bought a small brass figure of a snake when stationed in Burma at the end of the Second World War. She laughingly called it her own little genie and would reprimand it over the amount of money she had since spent on brass and silver ornaments. Prior to owning this brass snake, the family had experienced much misfortune: two children had died very young; her mother had drowned and her aunt had been jilted on the eve of her wedding day. Since the figurine had been brought into the home, there had been no major misfortunes for the family, or at least no happenings which she felt she could not explain.

The lucky quality of collections which remain in ownership long past their date of purchase is that they capture a fleeting moment of 'otherness' about which the interviewees often reminisced, using artefacts of particular sentimental value to represent a hidden power (see Reith 1999). For example, Jean believed that her Cleopatra figurine – to her a somewhat cheap-looking item – embodies a portion of her dead father's spirit, which protects her family. Eve described a series of 'lucky' china clowns, kept on her bedside table, which had been passed down through her family; although having little monetary value, it was prized because it had been won in a raffle by her great-grandfather, the only such win by a family member! He had collected masks of clowns since boyhood and they had since been passed to her. Eve believed, like Jean, that the clown protected her family from hard times and helped individual members in times of need – a belief shared by her niece. Jeanette referred to the 'lucky' spoons: a friend who had always been considered to have 'good luck' had given them to her late husband, though she considered them 'tacky' and said that her children as youngsters would beg her to throw out the ugly items. She had collected spoons from around the country ever since her husband, previously unemployed, had obtained a well-paid position working for a large local company that she felt was due to the spoons' influence, as were other happy events in the family.

I now turn to examine the associations between the social construction of the family and the ritualised make-up of personal collections, some of which have been put together systematically while others have been passed down through generations. At odds with the 'traditional' museum display, which is based on the particular aesthetic qualities of an individual piece, in each personal collection the relation of ornaments to one another is seen as crucial in warding away misfortune and ritual is enacted again and again to bring about a desired state of affairs. Yet uncertainty always remains. Such anxiety among the women that I interviewed becomes apparent as collections are moved around and the individual objects mixed and matched in relation to one another's placement.

Ritual, family and collecting

How is an ordinary collection of household ornaments made extraordinary? In the first place, it should be mentioned that only rarely does a collection of whimsies comprise an entire set of intact members. The 'members' of a collection are, it appears, selected according to the owner's tastes. For example, although Joy has the whole of a set of whimsies, she does not attach particular value to its completeness. While she kept the collection as such in good condition,

it was only individual animals from it that she kept on 'open' display. Indeed, there were days when she did not so much as touch them because she felt that to disturb them would bring misfortune to her son and his family. So these china animals, themselves members of a complete series, form only part of Joy's personal collection, which includes other objects and bits and pieces that she considers lucky – an old horseshoe kept in a bureau; her husband's first suit; a small bowl made at school by her first grandchild.

Often a collection is made up, on the surface at least, of quite incommensurate and disparate parts. As I have said, Jackie attached significance to a Toby jug given to her by her grandmother. Yet, the rest of what she calls her lucky collection is made up not of other Toby jugs (although she does own more), as one would expect, but of old sweet jars which remind her of her grandmother's shop. Jean's passion was for all things Egyptian, and her collection is kept together in one place – otherwise, in her eyes, it would not be a proper collection – and is made up of Egyptian postcards, backgammon set, etc., and her father's war medals. Her collection is also formed by memories – of travelling to Egypt on holiday, of videotapes purchased over the years about the pyramids. Another woman had collected several ornaments and a number of small watercolours. Although the paintings were of little value, the scenes they depict allowed

her to position her collected series of ornamental domestic animals in their 'proper' context – the stately gardens of nineteenth-century English aristocrats which she often visited with her late father. During less happy times, her mind constantly returned to these scenes and she tried to imagine herself there in what she called her 'secret garden of Eden' when her sister was alive or her mother was in good-health. So each object of a collection appears to embody a relationship with another family member, even if that can be seen clearly only by their owner.

Each 'collection' also appears to have a sacred 'family' essence such that some women would savour their collections. Jean would look at her collection of all things Egyptian only on her late father's birthday. She looked forward to doing so and would prepare her favourite meal on this day. She considered it bad luck to touch many of the items she had collected at any other time. Another interviewee, Faye, owned a complete set of books bought by her beloved grandfather; she believed that the small glass cat, also a gift from him, watched over these books and other objects precious to her. On one occasion a water pipe had sprung a leak while she'd been out shopping, endangering the books, whereupon she claims to have sensed the cat crying out to her in warning and had hurried home in time to effect their rescue.

Many personal collections comprise items from other, discrete sets and consist of pieces that have no ties to each other, bar their 'lucky' associations. Alongside Jean's collection of Egyptian memorabilia relating to her father's time in Cairo, there was another 'collection of lucky objects' – the pen that she always used to do the pools, her lucky reading glasses, lucky slippers, lucky watch, lucky lottery numbers, her husband's lucky tie and a coin given to her by a gypsy which she dared not throw away in case it brought misfortune on her. Another woman kept a tin full of objects – knitting needles, photographs, thread and pennies, etc. Each individual item taken at face value was worth very little to her, but as a collection of things she treasured the family memories and good fortune associated with each. For example, she remembered getting the tin out to complete a task such as mending her children's school uniforms when they were young. Each of these memories she considered lucky in as far as she remembered thinking 'this button stayed on my son's jacket and he passed his O-levels;³ my daughter will pass her cycling examination now that I have darned her socks; my son won a scholarship to grammar school with this penny in his pocket' and so on. In other cases, while some distress can be occasioned by items being misplaced, collections of ornaments are not necessarily accorded great respect, because the ornaments have to prove their worth over time. On the one hand, such items are delicate, physically and symbolically, and if broken will signify for many women that their own lives might be shattered. On the other hand, in order to prove its lucky potency, an ornament has to have survived unscathed through upheaval and mishap – house moves, family rows, the hands of inquisitive small children, fire and flood: the inexpensive ornament survives intact. The lucky ornament captures an intangible dialectical quality.

While particular ornaments are considered to ensure good fortune within the home, all of the women interviewed readily admitted to engaging in ritualistic actions involving ornaments to prevent misfortune involving family members. Like the ornament which is positioned

symmetrically relative to its lucky twin and never moved, emphasis is on the iteration of social rituals directed against a disembodied metaphysical force. Faye always positioned her glass cat next to her collection of books to protect her grandchildren, and so on. At the heart of these rituals was the conviction that the outside world had changed since their youth and become an anxious place, while the household was a safe haven. For Faye, the harmony established by a lucky ornament within a home and family could be taken away at a moment's notice by forces outside. Hence, the most fastidious rituals were directed more at the avoidance of misfortune than at enabling good fortune. Here the ornament, a remnant from a previous and more comforting period, even if received during wartime, often needed additional help, since it was felt that there was a tendency for misfortune to prevail. A significant shift had occurred in this respect: whereas once, during their parents' time, troubles could be largely avoided by 'keeping your head down', my interviewees saw the world as having become an increasingly risky and complex place where extra protection is needed to evade the pitfalls of life.

Such ritual is deep-rooted and based on an intimate knowledge of, and concern for, the setting out of one's home. Each ornament has its place and is not to be moved without courting misfortune. Paradoxically, this is the case whether an ornament is regarded as lucky or not! Many women laughed about being so careful over the position of each ornament in relation to others. One woman recalled returning from a short trip to find that, during her absence, her daughter had repositioned her collection of whimsies on her bedside table, and the bad weather she had suffered on her holiday was blamed on this! Another, Janet, recalled moving her china cats from one end of the cupboard in the spare room to the other, just for a change, only for her daughter's kitchen to catch fire, persuading her to replace the ornaments in their previous position. In order to accommodate new family photographs, Judy had moved her genie-in-a-bottle from one windowsill to another. Her heating system stopped working during this time, a breakdown she blamed on the movement of the genie. She immediately restored it to its former position and the heating has been working fine ever since.

As well as making sure that a lucky ornament is appropriately positioned, each of the women interviewed attempted to augment the power of the ornament by indulging superstitions tied specifically to the piece in question. There are numerous reasons for this practice, ranging from 'keeping bad luck outside', 'feeling well in my own home', 'reducing anxiety' and 'keeping the devil away'. Thus, each woman would become increasingly superstitious if she had moved her collection that day, taking care to avoid, for instance, passing a family member on the stairs or opening an umbrella indoors. During thunderstorms, a collection is never touched, and windows, one at the back and one at the front of the house, are left open so that the lightning might pass through and not set fire to the house. Faye's children appeared to consider her a silly old woman on account of her superstitions, and they would endeavour to reassure her that no misfortune was about to befall the household.

The display of ornaments

Each of the women interviewed possessed a personal collection of varied ornaments, some items of which are permanently on display throughout the house, the kitchen excepted, because it is a working space that is considered inappropriate for ornamentation (fig. 2).

Ornaments are dusted regularly and annually spring cleaned. Ornaments considered very lucky would be arrayed in upstairs rooms, but rarely displayed in the lounge or in rooms used for family get-togethers – the women, conscious of their whimsies' tacky and cheap appearance, had no desire to encourage the mockery of their visitors. Some women felt that, although precious to them, the outward appearance of the ornament had not stood the test of time and now clashed with their new soft furnishings. Two of the women did not display their lucky ornaments because they considered these particular ornaments as something private and for their eyes only, and tended to keep them well away from younger family members. Those special ornaments kept upstairs were often associated with a relative whose death was still mourned. For example, Margaret kept a collection of china dogs in her back room because several of them had belonged to her mother, who had died in that room. Their sentimental value to her was such that she felt it inappropriate for them to be displayed downstairs: they were to be contemplated only on special occasions. In any case, were they to be displayed downstairs



Fig. 2. A lucky collection of figurines

they would serve as constant reminders of her mother's death. Other women interviewed acted from similar motives.

In another case, however, the woman kept on display three ornaments that she hated, which had been bought for her by her late husband: she believed that it would offend him were she to remove them, although she thought them the most hideous figurines she had ever seen. In other cases, it was the considerable time for which an item had occupied its position that persuaded the women that to move it would bring bad luck. None of the interviewees would, however, keep an auspicious ornament in the loft – that would be to tempt luck to desert the household altogether.

There is little doubt that the nature of the ornaments displayed in the home has changed. The older of the women interviewed saw their ornaments as highly personal items, to be treated almost as friends, whereas they thought it likely that their own children would select a vase or an abstract piece, for which it would be difficult to develop an intense personal attachment. All of these women had noticed a decline in the popularity of the figurines of their own day, especially of animal collections, and they were unsure why this should be the case. Jean thought that this was because people were less well acquainted with wildlife than were their forebears, and were more inclined to visit the local shopping centre than take a walk in the countryside. Her own grandchildren were happier playing computer games than finding out about wildlife. Judy thought that tastes in ceramics had simply moved away from miniature animals towards more abstract items, which were too expensive to build into collections. Her youngest child, now in her mid-thirties, enjoyed ornaments, but those she purchased were purely decorative and were selected for the congruence of their colour and shape with room décor rather than for more personal reasons.

Items were rarely purchased with a view to building a collection, as in Judy's younger days. People nowadays prefer their display ornaments to be distinctive, so that they did not match – this, in her view, was the new fashion. Judy would not buy her daughter an item similar

to one of her own because she was uncertain about her daughter's taste. She did not like the retail outlets frequented by her daughter (IKEA and Debenhams) because she became confused by the variety of ornaments on offer – vases, abstract pieces, plates and the like – and considered them expensive. Animals and figurines, she thought to be out of fashion and were not to be found in today's most fashionable stores, certainly not in sets or packaged series. Judy thought that if her children did buy pieces for the home, the deciding factor would be whether they matched the colour of the carpet, the walls or the three-piece suite. She felt that young people tended to opt for a more minimalist style than was to her generation's liking, and if they occasionally purchased an ornament, it was more as an investment than for any other reason. Likewise, if her daughters are obsessive about the position an ornament occupies it is not because of any anxiety that, should it be moved, misfortune would result or a run of good fortune would be interrupted. It is rather appearance and effect that govern an ornament's location, so that it brings out the best in a room or catches the light well. Despite their relatively high cost, these pieces are easily discarded and little significance is attached to their loss because they have not become 'members of the family' in the same way that, for example, kitsch porcelain is savoured.

Conclusion

The reconciliation of uncertainty and faith is one of the defining features of the collections of ornaments described above. Objects have become inscribed with intangibly mysterious and lucky qualities and mediate family relationships for the women in this paper. Each private collection is something that they use to compare women of their generation and differentiate themselves from younger people. At the same time, a collection provides a sense of continuity, of family ties, but is also a reminder of familial misfortune and danger. An individual ornament in a collection is a source of comfort and security, but also captures in a moment the downside of life and a raft of anxieties and fears. For this reason a lucky ornament, although it may appear in bad taste, is not to be thrown away and treated as rubbish as many such worthless tacky objects are, but treated with a healthy respect and lovingly preserved. Lucky objects, although garish in appearance, have become an inherent part of family and everyday life and indeed, in some cases, important family members! They have survived all that life has thrown at them.

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Notes

- 1 The names of all interlocutors have been changed so, at their request, they remain anonymous. Likewise, at their request, I have tried to disguise the identity of the town in which fieldwork took place.
- 2 Whimsies are inexpensive, fanciful objects depicting of various animals. Such was their small size that the packaging of whimsies in the 1970s was that of a matchbox.
- 3 Secondary school leaving certificates.

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