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For auctioneer and lay philosopher Robert Brunk, the innumerable antiques, collectibles, and occasional treasures that have passed in and out of his Asheville, North Carolina, auction house hold a significance that extends far beyond their monetary value. From the heaviest piano to the tiniest glass bead, they serve as tangible links to our collective past, reflecting societal values, technological advancements, and artistic trends of previous generations. Additionally, they carry personal stories and sentimental attachments, evoking memories of loved ones, special occasions, and moments frozen in time. Brunk's memoir, *A Question of Value: Stories from the Life of an Auctioneer*, empathetically explores these varied embodiments and connections in a collection of thirty-one richly textured essays highlighting experiences from his forty-year career as an auctioneer and appraiser, as well as the varied items his clients have collected, prized, or hidden away.

The short and self-contained chapter essays are arranged in rough chronological order, each beginning with a one-word title, such as “Rifle,” “Spoon,” and “Vase.” The essays are easy to read, are entertaining, and gently balance Brunk's respect for objects as well as his compassion for their owners. As Brunk recalls his wide-ranging experiences, he not only enlightens us about the historical and cultural significance of the items he has come across but also challenges us to contemplate what meanings we attach to objects and how we relate to the things we possess. For Brunk, who was raised Mennonite and spent time as a divinity student, social worker, teacher, farmer, and woodworker before turning to auctioneering, buying and selling rare and expensive objects was often at odds with his austere upbringing and early adulthood, which emphasized simplicity and functionality over aesthetics and ornamentation. In his reflections on that tension between his past and his present, Brunk presents objects as opportunit-
ies to explore deep-seated ideas about innate value and social inequities. He also sensitively explores the emotional toll that can arise when the time comes to say goodbye to cherished possessions.

From start to finish, Brunk recounts his experiences with a combination of excitement and curiosity. Just as archaeologist Howard Carter famously exclaimed “I see wonderful things” upon peering into the treasure-filled tomb of Egyptian pharaoh Tutankhamun, it is easy to imagine Brunk saying those same words while ascending into an unkempt and dusty attic filled with items from past generations. Regardless of whether he is crawling through a dilapidated barn or coordinating the sale of a stylish estate, his passion for discovery is obvious. Material culture scholars and casual readers will equally enjoy reading Brunk’s accounts of some of his more notable finds, including an ancient and exceptionally well-preserved Anatolian carpet, a unique table featuring a neoclassical micro-mosaic top paired with a wooden base designed by well-known English designer Thomas Hope, and the amazing tale of a rare Chinese imperial vase that sold for over one million dollars at Brunk’s auction house and later was resold at Sotheby’s for over seven million dollars. Although Brunk writes descriptively, the absence of illustrations for any of the profiled objects is a disappointing omission in this otherwise excellent contribution.

During his four-decade-long career, Brunk had the opportunity to meet a fascinating assortment of characters, from oddball collectors to heavy-hearted owners facing the impossible decision to part with a beloved family heirloom. Although running a for-profit business, Brunk repeatedly emphasized that at the center of his business are people and their deeply felt need to be seen, heard, and understood. For Brunk, being cognizant of the emotional connection that people have to their belongings was crucial when handling a sale. His approach focused on transparency in the auction process, and in multiple examples, he goes to great pains to explain how items are appraised, what goes into the pricing strategy, and how an auction is conducted. In doing so, Brunk hoped to manage expectations about the potential outcomes of an auction. While record-breaking sales are surely exciting events, they are relatively rare. More often, Brunk was faced with delivering disappointing news that a prized object had more sentimental than monetary value. When confronted with this situation, Brunk delivered the disappointing news with grace and sensitivity.

A Question of Value is a fun and enjoyable read that not only offers a behind-the-scenes look into second-hand sales and auctions but also earnestly revisits the many lessons Brunk learned from observing and dealing with personal accumulations and the ephemera of our daily lives. No matter whether you are an experienced collector or are just curious about how auctions work, Brunk’s anecdotes and perceptive reflections will leave you with a new appreciation for the objects we hold dear and the stories embedded within them.
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