

# Style Plus

## At Estate Sales, The Sad Good Buys

By LAURIE McCLELLAN  
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“Estate sale” is the euphemism. Those are the words you look for, scanning the posters taped to telephone poles on sunny Saturday mornings. That’s the heading you search for in the newspaper on Friday nights, if you’re trying to decide whether it’s worth getting up early the next morning.

But what estate sale really means is someone has died and all the stuff she ever accumulated is now up for sale. Not just the really big things, the grand pianos and Oriental rugs and mahogany dining room sets. The little things at estate sales far outnumber the big-ticket items. There are books. Hats. Sheet music. Cards of buttons, Christmas wrapping paper, pruning shears, salad forks. I’ve been told there’s a song about estate sales called “Picking Through Dead People’s Things.” It’s a title that runs through my head, reproachfully, whenever I shop at one.

One second I’m greedily rooting through a heap of vintage tablecloths. Then my hands freeze as I realize that the person who picked them out is never going to enjoy another meal. I feel like a ghoul—a sort of cut-rate, can’t-afford-to-shop-at-Crate-&-Barrel ghoul.

I remember the scene in “A Christmas Carol” where Scrooge foresees the nightmarish aftermath of his own death. His housekeeper, washerwoman and undertaker accidentally meet at a pawnbroker’s where they’ve come to sell the things they stole from Scrooge as he lay dying, including his bed curtains and underwear.

Maybe you can’t take it with you, but

does that mean it’s okay for other people to rummage through your scarves, your gardening tools, and the junk at the bottom of the kitchen drawer that you’d been meaning to tidy up? Would the woman who carefully filled 20 videotapes with “Little House on the Prairie” episodes be embarrassed that I’m seeing them now?

The problem is that, at a good estate sale, the human being who (until very recently) owned all these things begins to take shape as you wander from room to room, looking over his knickknacks, pillowcases, framed prints and dinner plates. His taste, then his personality and finally his very life can be read in the things he left behind.

Usually, the most revealing items are found in the basement, among the flotsam and jetsam of daily living. I once came across a poster that someone had made of a woman’s travels around the world. Snapshots from every continent were carefully glued in rows, and captions were written underneath in loopy black handwriting. In every picture, the woman was riding a different animal. Here she is, carefree and beautiful, smiling at the photographer from the back of a donkey on a dirt road in Greece. A few wrinkles later, and she’s wearing lime-green Bermuda shorts, perched atop an elephant in India. In Egypt, her white hair is neatly coiffed as she straddles an annoyed-looking camel. I can’t imagine now why I didn’t buy the poster. I guess it seemed too intimate at the time. Surely, I thought, her children will want to keep this. Over the years, the memory of this homemade souvenir whispers to me whenever I plan a trip, saying: Go farther, stay longer, you never know how long you’ve got.

The best estate sale I ever went to was in a comfortable old brick house in Northwest



BY ROBERT MEGANCK FOR THE WASHINGTON POST

Washington. The woman who’d passed away had style. I bought a weasel stole, a type that used to be popular in the 1940s. You open the weasel’s jaws by pressing on a clip, drape the animal around your shoulders, and then fasten its mouth to its tail to keep the whole thing from sliding off. I had no place to wear it, but for \$2 it was irresistibly glamorous.

My friend Susan snatched up a vintage pair of purple suede pumps. But for me, the highlight of the sale was the aprons. This woman didn’t just buy great clothes, she knew how to make them, too. In the attic, I found a Singer sewing machine enshrined among boxes and boxes of homemade aprons. She had a different apron for every holiday, occasion and season. She had ma-

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chine-applied a brown-and-orange turkey to a flirty half-apron decorated around the edges with red rickrack. Her St. Patrick’s Day apron tied at the neck and featured leering leprechauns kicking up their heels around toadstools. I like to think that she wore the aprons when she cooked for her dinner parties. In boxes nearby were handwritten index cards, listing her favorite menus and recipes—oysters Rockefeller, chicken croquettes, walnut fudge.

Susan also found a game in the attic, a like-new one for just \$3. It was the deluxe edition of Scrabble, complete with a plastic board that rotates to face each player. The Styrofoam inserts were still in the box. Except that when we finally unpacked it to play a game, we realized the set had been used before—exactly once. At the bottom of the box lay a scorecard, written on a piece of hospital stationery. There had been two players, and they were both pretty good. But the scoring stopped abruptly in the middle of the page, the game never finished.

Ten years after we made off with the stylish woman’s weasel stole, Scrabble set and purple suede heels, Susan and I were invited to a friend’s wedding, along with Susan’s ex-boyfriend, who’d dumped her unceremoniously just months before. The estate sale pumps became the centerpiece of Susan’s wedding outfit. I watched her waltz around the dance floor in a dead woman’s shoes, smiling up at a tuxedoed man with champagne-induced abandon. Three different people told her she was wearing the most beautiful clothes of anyone there, including the bride. The ex-boyfriend gasped when he spotted her.

I think the woman who picked those high heels off a department store shelf 40 years ago would have liked that.