

THE ART OF NEW YORK LIVING

Harm's Way

By Kenneth Jay Linsner

“The chicken or the egg?” I’ve been struggling with that question with regard to my comments for this month. Should I discuss the acquisition of ‘stuff’ or discuss the problems we encounter once we decide to take on the role of stewards?

I think it best to let you in on what to expect in the way of potential problems before you choose a category or categories of things to acquire. Whether you were born in New York City, as I was, or simply decided to make it your home (for any number of perfectly obvious reasons) you can’t help but hear the horror stories of what to anticipate once you decide to feather your nest. The things we enjoy most in our nests tend to be either highly breakable inorganic materials such as stone, glass and porcelains; metals that rust and degrade or organic materials such as wood, paper and canvas which are almost ephemeral in the face of disasters.

Living in a densely packed metropolis we tend to focus on two major hazards (to our minds at least)...the first is CRIME, and we can all recall warnings and incidents... the second is HEALTH related issues.... transmission of the flu, the common cold and worse. While both of these play a role in what I am about to discuss, neither poses a major threat to your ‘stuff.’

The average apartment, and certainly the above average dwelling, has little to fear from theft. Here I am referring to the outright plundering of the premises. While cash, jewelry and other small valuables are often taken it is rare to find your Chippendale breakfront missing or even hearing about a work on canvas or paper being purloined, though this does happen. Many of my clients question why they are having inventories made of their property when the building in which they live is ‘burglar proof’. I must,

unfortunately, inform them that the main threat to their ‘stuff’ comes from another source and one that is pervasive and one that we cannot live without... WATER.

We have little or no control over what others do in their homes and this includes the manner in which they use their baths, sinks and related appliances. (As an aside, in Geneva, Switzerland where I have an office and a home, it is illegal to take a shower or bath after 10:30 at night if you are an apartment dweller... though this has no apparent impact on water related damage, it does let neighbors slumber in the midst of noisy plumbing.)

In my thirty years of experience, the order of ‘disaster’ for New York apartment dwellers and their possessions is as follows: 1 - Water Damage, 2 - Smoke Damage, 3 – Fire. Damage and way down from these is 4 – Theft. Natural causes can also shorten the life of our things.

WATER

I submit a photo of an apartment, recently subject to the emptying of the water tank on the roof through a poorly installed washing machine in the apartment directly above. Water, which is often and correctly called “the universal solvent” can seriously and permanently damage every category of object with the exception of glass and porcelains.... although these can suffer as well. In this case, the apartment was reduced to an un-inhabitable state within twenty minutes. Mold grew on the ceilings and walls and the apartment was declared a health hazard by the City. Trapped within were the artworks, antiques, books and clothes of the owners. Broken pipes in the walls; a steam shower that refuses to shut off and radiators that burst are among the most common problems I have encountered.

SMOKE

You may think that a fire in an apartment in your building has little or no impact on your nest, but think again. The air that circulates through the structure will carry the smoke through heating and ventilation systems as well as leaks around doors and

windows. Smoke, composed of ‘volatiles’ from whatever is burning can bring everything from carbon to plastics in aerosol form into your dwelling. This material adheres to upholstery and even imbeds itself into wood. I have examined pieces of furniture at auction, which still smell of smoke. Because of its nature it can penetrate picture frames and darken porcelains. The photo below shows a porcelain bowl that was quite a distance away from a smoky fire.

FIRE

This is a category which requires little elaboration. Candles, electrical shorts and everything that bears or starts an open flame can cause a fire. Fire, like a magnet, attracts smoke and water. The great triad of disaster for an apartment dweller.

THEFT

Most major thefts of art and antiques are commissioned. It is rare for an apartment to loose art and related items through a random attack. This article is too short for the recounting of some stunning burglaries in whose aftermath I have been called in to ‘close the barn doors.’ This raises the major issue of the day.... security...both of the premises and of our personal information.

NATURAL DISASTER

By this I refer not to earthquake or flood...which are not out of the question, but to the slow and progressive deterioration of art, antiques and decorations by light, heat, humidity fluctuation and city grime. This category, thankfully, is substantially in our control.

I will address each of these problems in separate commentaries in the next few months hopefully giving some heartfelt advice about how to mitigate the problems in each case. Jean Paul Sartre once said that “dirt is other people”, and I think we may all agree with that on some level, but other people also represent the uncontrollable dangers I’ve mentioned so far.

Now that you have chosen to settle down in New York, which is nothing but 'other people' you have also chosen to put yourself and your possessions in harms way. I think New Yorkers pride themselves in this and in their ability to bounce back from anything life can fling at us and our stuff.. This, too, is a part of the art of New York living.