Antiques and the Old Idea of the Fetish

To the informed viewer, local antiques embody a social history -- a tradition -- whether familial or learned. They often reference a deep past linked to totemic ancestors such as colonial founders, indigenous ghosts, or enslaved craftsmen. The past matters, one is reminded over and over again while negotiating the store fronts, private interiors, and littered streets of “old” cities like New Orleans. Artifacts – ‘signs of what was’ – are tools of the social present at the same time that the social stratigraphy they reference is not entirely invented. And archaeology shows that they have been doing this sort of work since at least the Spanish colonial period. People in New Orleans have been collecting and displaying antiques and curios since the late 18th century. Understanding the efficaciousness of antiques requires taking the old anthropological idea of fetishism seriously as a meaningful and powerful displacement of social forces, rather than as a pathology or mis-identification. I argue that in secular capitalist societies the enchanting of objects is essential for the possibility of social belonging.

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