



Tamar Myers

Nightmare in Shining Armor
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My Favorite Find

When my husband and I got married, we were so poor we lived in a fourth floor walkup and shared a bathroom with a one-legged man who peed in the sink. I kid you not. But that's another story. Needless to say, registering for silverware patterns and fine china was simply beyond our ken.

Many years later, when we had accumulated a little pocket change, we went birthday shopping for me in an antique store. I was expecting to spend under fifty dollars and had my eye on a Russian stacking doll that once belonged to the Oscar-winning Hollywood costume designer, Edith Head. It was being offered at \$49.99 and I just knew I could talk the antiques dealer down a little — especially if I batted my heavily mascaraed lashes at him. Fortunately, I got distracted and never had the chance.

Trying to look disinterested, I strolled casually by a display of attractive gold and white china. On a whim I picked up one of the plates and turned it over. They were Limoges, and there was the following description in French: "Made for the reception of Her Majesty Queen Elizabeth on the occasion of her visit to France, April 1957." The shopkeeper didn't have any details to add, except that he believed the dishes had been commissioned by the president of France and that they had most recently been owned by the Ecuadorian Ambassador to that country. He sold me the entire service for eight for a song — and I'm a lousy singer.

A little sleuthing on my part revealed that indeed French President Coty had commissioned the service for a special luncheon honoring Queen Elizabeth II in the Hall of Mirrors at Versailles. The occasion was a state banquet to heal the rift that had developed between France and England during the Suez Canal War. The pattern on each piece featured a phoenix, symbolizing the renewed relationship between these world powers. The dignitaries in attendance had been given the opportunity to purchase their place settings, but not all were willing or able, and the Ecuadorian ambassador purchased seven sets besides his own.

A hunt through flea markets turned up a Life magazine with pictures of Her Majesty lurching off this china, and a description of the menu. Shortly after my find, I contacted Mary Frank Gaston, one of the world's experts on Limoges. She was so interested in the porcelain that she asked to have them included in the third edition of her encyclopedia on the subject. She estimates that EACH place setting is worth \$1,500, even more to collectors of royal memorabilia. It is nice knowing that my birthday present is now worth almost five times what I paid for it, but I still wish I'd bought the Edith Head stacking dolls as well.

I suppose that I get the same sort of thrill, while prowling through antique shops and flea markets, that a deer-hunter gets stalking through the woods. But instead of shooting a buck, I get to spend a few. And sometimes, like in the above case, I even make a few bucks.