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Chapter Thirty-Eight: Appraising Treasures (Part Three)

To be honest, asking Zhuang Rui to appraise antiques is like forcing a duck onto a shelf; it's a bit of a stretch.

Zhuang Rui had known Uncle De for a long time and knew that the antique business wasn't something you could just start doing after reading a few books and knowing some theoretical knowledge. It required a lot of accumulation and hands-on experience with real objects. But even then, you would still often be fooled.

As the saying goes, "Gold is valued in times of chaos, and antiques are valued in times of prosperity." Whenever antiques become popular, fakes and counterfeits also increase.

In modern China, the early years of the Republic of China were a golden age for antiques. At that time, warlords such as Sun Dianying and Zhang Zongchang looted the tombs of Emperors Kangxi, Qianlong, and Empress Dowager Cixi, unearthing a large number of precious cultural relics. In addition, Puyi and others also embezzled, and many rare treasures flowed out of the palace. For a time, private collecting flourished, and even many foreign speculators came to China to buy up cultural relics. Forgery and imitation of antiques also became popular at that time. The famous painter Zhang Daqian was a master forger who was good at imitation. His imitations of Shi Tao's paintings were so good that they were indistinguishable from the real ones, which can be called his masterpiece.

In the following decade or so, China was plagued by disasters and chaos. Although a very small number of people were still concerned about protecting some precious national treasures, people were struggling to even have enough to eat, so who would care about these things? During this period, a large number of precious cultural relics were lost overseas, which later caused great distress to some experts in China.

By the 1990s, the reform and opening-up policy swept across China, people's living standards improved, and their entertainment and cultural lives became increasingly rich. Meanwhile, the antique and art craze, which had faded from public view for nearly half a century, began to slowly rekindle. By the end of the century, the number of collectors had skyrocketed, with annual auction sales in China alone exceeding several billion yuan, not to mention that most of the finest pieces were sold overseas.

Marx once said, "With a 10 percent profit, capital begins to stir; with a 100 percent profit, capital becomes arrogant; and with a 300 percent profit, it is capable of anything, even hanging itself."

Seeing how popular the antique trade is, many criminals have also set their sights on it. Those tomb raiders who had been dormant for more than half a century have returned to their old ways. Some people with special skills have even started to fake antiques. As a result, all kinds of fake antiques have flooded the market. Moreover, the people who fake antiques are so skilled that they can almost pass for the real thing. Even some highly skilled experts often find themselves being fooled and losing money.

The renowned private collector, Mr. Ma Weidu, once said that in the early 1980s, the old furniture shops in Beijing were filled with sandalwood and rosewood tables and chairs. They were cheap then, only five yuan each, and you could pick and choose whatever you wanted, with delivery to your door. However, by the late 1980s and early 1990s, the antique market was flooded with fakes. Mr. Ma paid quite a few lessons in his life, which shows how sophisticated the counterfeiters were.

Zhuang Rui knew all this thanks to Yang Wei, whose father was an antique enthusiast. He was called an enthusiast rather than a collector because he had collected quite a lot of things over the past ten years, filling a whole room, and he had spent a lot of money on them, throwing in millions of dollars.

To be honest, Yang's father's professional appraisal skills were not very good, but he especially liked to go to the market to find bargains. Over time, he accumulated a considerable collection of items. However, when he invited a few experts to his home to appraise them, they found that none of the miscellaneous antiques in the room were genuine.

Whether it was because he didn't care about the money or because he had a good attitude, Yang's father didn't give up his hobby. However, he rarely appeared in the antique market after that, but he appeared at auction houses much more often. Nevertheless, he became famous in the antique world of Zhonghai. People who felt that they were good at aging the items in their hands would often visit the Yang family. And the old man would occasionally be involved in some anecdotes about being fooled.

As the saying goes, "He who walks by the river will eventually get his shoes wet." Even those who have been in this business for decades often make mistakes. Zhuang Rui naturally didn't think that he could distinguish the authenticity of the objects piled on the table just because he had read a few books on antique appraisal at home a few days ago. He still relied on his eyes. However, what he needed to do now was to find an object that his eyes could see through, and then judge whether it was genuine or fake by whether it contained spiritual energy.

The items that Boss Wang and Song Jun brought out were mostly bronze or jade, which Zhuang Rui's spiritual energy couldn't penetrate yet. So he moved to Manager Lü's side and examined them closely.

Shopkeeper Lü had only three items in front of him. When he saw Zhuang Rui approaching, he stood up and made room for Zhuang Rui to appraise them. Xu Wei, who was sitting next to Shopkeeper Lü, exaggeratedly moved his chair to the side and looked at Zhuang Rui with a playful expression. In his eyes, the young and inconspicuous Zhuang Rui dared to offend Miss Qin, and he was determined to take this opportunity to teach this young man a lesson.

Zhuang Rui paid no attention to Xu Wei's gaze. His attention was now drawn to the three objects in front of him. Zhuang Rui first picked up a wooden carving of a Guanyin statue about 20 centimeters tall and examined it. He couldn't tell what kind of wood it was made of, but the carving was very beautiful. The Guanyin's face was lifelike. The surface of the wood had a calm and quiet glow. Holding it in his hand, he felt smooth and pleasant. The patina was thick and revealed a warm, old-fashioned feel, giving people a sense of vicissitude.

In the past few days, Zhuang Rui had also read some books on antique appreciation. According to the books, based on the carving and patina of this wood carving, it should be an old object that is quite old. However, compared to his half-baked appreciation skills, Zhuang Rui was still willing to trust his eyes. He lowered his head slightly and released the spiritual energy in his eyes onto the wood carving.

"Depend on.....".

After withdrawing his spiritual energy, Zhuang Rui couldn't help but curse under his breath. The spiritual energy he could see could only penetrate wooden objects by less than a centimeter. However, as long as the object contained spiritual energy, he could still absorb it. But after the spiritual energy entered, the wooden carving did not react at all, which greatly disappointed Zhuang Rui, who had originally wanted to replenish his spiritual energy. Although Zhuang Rui could not be sure that an object without spiritual energy was definitely fake, he still chose to believe the spiritual energy in his eyes.

Looking up at the wooden carving in his hand, Zhuang Rui said, "This wooden Guanyin statue is finely carved and has a thick patina, like an old object..."

"Of course, from the carving to the patina, this Buddha statue is definitely genuine. I can tell without even holding it in my hand."

Before Zhuang Rui could finish speaking, Xu Wei interrupted him. Xu Wei had also been observing the wood carving and was convinced that it was genuine. Upon hearing Zhuang Rui's words, he couldn't help but mock Zhuang Rui for being lucky and getting a bargain.

Zhuang Rui glanced at Xu Wei indifferently, ignored him, and continued, "However, I personally think that this thing was artificially aged later. To put it bluntly, this item is a fake."

Upon hearing this, everyone except Manager Lü, who remained unmoved, was taken aback. Xu Wei, in particular, turned red in the face and looked at Manager Lü, hoping he would refute him.

"Xiao Zhuang, there are two more items over there, take a look..."

To everyone's surprise, Manager Lü didn't say much, but simply asked Zhuang Rui to comment on the remaining two items.