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Antiques + Contemporary Technology = Steampunk

by Jeanne Schinto

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Steampunk. Never heard of it? Trust me. You'll encounter the term more often from now on. Briefly and somewhat simplistically, steampunkers play with the illusion that time periods can coexist. They imagine what things might have looked like if our technology had been available to the Victorians, and then they create those things. Those who make steampunk objects primarily modify Victorian antiques, but they also use antiques from other eras, recycled items, salvage, and plain old junk. And while often their creations qualify as art, they commonly also have a specific, practical purpose. There are ridable steampunk bicycles, playable steampunk guitars, steampunk clocks that tell time, and steampunk houses that people live in. Both an aesthetic and an interior-design solution, steampunk is also, for some, a philosophy of life.

Charlotte McFarland of Allston, Massachusetts, made this cotton spinning wheel generator. Not for sale. "I don't make a living as an artist," said the robotics engineer, "but I see the engineering and the art as two sides of the same coin. I can go directly from my job to the studio, and the stuff I learn in one place applies to the other. I just go back and forth, learning new things almost every day."

Gary Sullivan of Sharon, Massachusetts, and his Trans Foraminal Image Perambulator. Not for sale.

Mantel/wall clock by Roger Wood of Klockwerks, Hamilton, Ontario, Canada, $1500.

Like many labels, steampunk is one that is often imposed. *The Time Machine* by H.G. Wells, published in 1895, is considered a steampunk novel, although the term wasn't coined until more than 90 years later, by science-fiction writer K.W. Jeter (b. 1950), who first used it to describe some of his own work. The films that were made from the Wells book in 1960 and 2002 are steampunk. Ditto Jules Verne's *Twenty Thousand Leagues Under the Sea*. The 1985 film Brazil is steampunk too.

Technically speaking, then, steampunk has been around awhile but only lately started to enter the mainstream worldwide. The Museum of the History of Science at the University of Oxford hosted the world's first steampunk museum exhibition from October 13, 2009, to February 21, 2010. According to the museum's Web site (www.mhs.ox.ac.uk/exhibits/steampunk), the show drew over 70,000 visitors and was the most popular exhibition in the museum's history. Titled *Steampunk: Devices + Contraptions Extraordinaire*, it was curated by Art Donovan, an American whose steampunk art was featured at a gallery show at the Hamptons Antique Galleries, Bridgehampton, Long Island, New York, in the summer of 2008.

The first steampunk museum exhibition in the United States is on right now, at the Charles River Museum of Industry & Innovation in Waltham, Massachusetts. Featuring over 30 pieces, Steampunk, Form & Function opened on October 22, 2010, and will be up through May 10.

Not interested in hearing any more about something that may strike you as a little wacky? Fine, but if you are someone who is racking your brain, trying to figure out how to get new people interested in antiques, you shouldn't turn away. Without anybody forcing the issue, the growing steampunk community is embracing the material culture of the past. It is discovering antiques, antiques fairs and shows, and even, mirabile dictu, history. Just don't expect its members to be ponying up for weathervanes or highboys anytime soon, even if they have the means to buy them. Steampunkers don't care about original surface. They are very definitely doing it their own way.

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When I walked into opening night of the Charles River Museum exhibition, I couldn't immediately tell which things were part of the permanent displays and which had been brought in by the steampunk artists. When I told that to the museum's acting director, Elln Hagney, she smiled. "Now you know why this museum is such a paradise for steampunkers and why they feel, when they walk in the door, as if they're home. We're all about steam and industry and have a great steam-powered collection. It's a steampunker's dream. 'When do I move in?' That's what I keep hearing from them. Our volunteer base is made up of people in their sixties, seventies, and eighties. Suddenly there are all these young people who are interested in steam, machinery, and tinkering. I see them as a new volunteer base and as donors somewhere down the road."

The museum's first step into steampunk was a steampunk festival held at the museum in May 2010. "It was suggested to us by two Victorian dancers that we have a Victorian ball, but the audience wasn't there," Hagney recalled. "We need a hundred or two hundred to have an event here, not forty. So the dancers said, 'Well, maybe we can get the steampunk community involved.' I said, 'What's steampunk?' That's how the festival started. We featured over forty-five vendors, three stages of live entertainment, and a fashion show, and attracted over a thousand steampunkers in full costume"—i.e., Victorian dress, accented with today's technology. Think laboratory goggles, worn with a corset and choker or a top hat and tails.

Many people were in costume at the exhibition's opening too, but there were also "civilian" friends of the museum, friends of the artists, and ordinary curiosity seekers out on a Friday night. "That's a nice mix and exactly what you want-people new to the museum along with your regular base of supporters," said Hagney. "Steampunk is a door opener. A few people say 'Look what they've done to that perfectly good Chelsea clock,' but many, many more appreciate the artistry."

One of the biggest surprises of the evening was that Gary R. Sullivan of Sharon, Massachusetts, was an exhibitor. Yes, the antiques dealer who specializes in clocks and whose *Harbor & Home: Furniture of Southeastern Massachusetts, 1710-1850*, coauthored with Brock Jobe and Jack O'Brien, won the 2010 Book Prize from Historic New England. There he was standing beside his Trans Foraminal Image Perambulator, which featured a slideshow of digital pictures on a computer screen mounted to a very steampunked stand.

Sullivan was a professional woodworker before he became an antiques dealer; he knows how to make and build things. He has also long constructed things from found materials for fun. But only recently did he learn about steampunk. "The name steampunk covers a wide range of things, some of which border on the goth lifestyle, which doesn't interest me," Sullivan said. "But steampunk art does. I almost need to have a different name for the kind of art that I'm interested in making, but we haven't come up with it yet."

Sullivan continued, "I've created some smaller things, and I've got lots of materials that will soon be made into other things. The Image Perambulator is the one major thing I've done." Those who visit Sullivan's booth at The American Antiques Show in New York City on January 20-23 will be able to see it.

"Two years ago we showed additional pictures of clocks scrolling through on an ordinary computer screen, and so I thought, 'Why don't I decorate that frame and make it interesting for all the folk-art people who come to the show?' So I started building and expanding it into this. It's the kind of thing you either love or think is totally ridiculous. I've had this in my shop for some months. Most people walk right past it. But once in a while, you get somebody who stops and stands in front of it for ten minutes, trying to figure out what all the things are."

The basic structure consists of an old table leaf mounted to a Victorian easel, but as usual God is in the details. Being a clock specialist, Sullivan has incorporated a lot of clock-related items into the design. But there are also old brass musical instrument parts, a piece of a Boy Scout flashlight, the eyepieces of a Victorian set of binoculars, a remnant of an early 20th-century steam-powered toy, a piece of an old apple peeler, a gear from a motorcycle, an arm of a gas lamp, an old wrench, part of a strainer, an oiler, an old whisk, parts from a child's cast-iron stove, a full-size stove part, a spark plug, a pocket watch part, a brass plaque from an old machine, a burner from a kerosene lamp, a brass drop handle from a Victorian bureau, an on-off switch for a gas fixture, and early automotive parts.

The pictures scrolling through at the exhibition weren't images of clocks; they showed steampunk bands. What do they sound like? "Ironically, we are having trouble with the modern side of the technology," Sullivan said. "All of the Victorian elements are functioning just as they are supposed to, but the electronics are failing us, so the sound is not working tonight."

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Sullivan said he was introduced to steampunk by his neighbor in Sharon, Bruce Rosenbaum, who lives in a steampunk house with his wife, Melanie. The exhibition was sponsored by two of Rosenbaum's companies, SteamPuffin and ModVic. The first sells items such as steampunk-inspired architectural salvage and modernized Victorian appliances; the second offers steampunk home design and Victorian home restoration and renovation. A third sponsor was Brute Force Studios ("purveyors of quality corsetry for all occasions").

The museum contacted Rosenbaum to help organize the exhibition, rather than the other way around, Rosenbaum said, but it was he who suggested there be a design competition component. The rules laid out the steampunk concept: take a Victorian object and modernize it; make it somehow functional in modern-day life and decorate it in the steampunk aesthetic.

The 48-year-old Rosenbaum, whose main business is direct marketing, is himself relatively new to steampunk. "Like a lot of people, we were found by steampunk, rather than us finding it," he said. "I started ModVic, which stands for Modern Victorian, in 2007. Our first project outside of our own home was a beautiful Victorian Italianate restoration in North Attleboro [Massachusetts]. We bought our house in 2000 and started work on it a year later. We did our kitchen in ModVic in 2006. Someone touring our house went into the kitchen and said, 'Hey, you guys are steampunking.' We had no idea what it was. I looked it up on line and found out there was a whole group of people, a movement, and a culture that espouses this exact type of aesthetic."

Actually, steampunkers combine past and present in two different ways. While some take antiques and modernize them, others take contemporary items and "Victorianize" them. The steampunk guitars of Steve Brook, who lives in Ferndale, Michigan, are an example of the latter.

Brook has lent a half-dozen of his guitars to the exhibition. They are decorated with all manner of old watch parts and other gizmos from our industrial past. "They are not art pieces," said Brook, who played some of his instruments on the exhibition's opening night. "I don't make them to be art; I make them to be played. If someone wants to buy one just to put on a wall, that would be a disservice to my work. That's a very steampunk principle. The function is as important as the visual imagery."

Todd Douglas Cahill of Waltham, Massachusetts, who contributed two of the most ingenious objects to the exhibition—one a steam-powered kitchen mixer, the other an optical entertainment device he calls a Hypnodisk—sounded a bit uneasy with the steampunk label.

"There are a lot of people calling me steampunk, but I've never actually given myself or my work that name. I've been doing this a long time somewhat under the radar by choice," said Cahill, who is in his 40's. "And I also know a lot of people who have been doing it for longer than I have. So there's a lineage, a heritage here, that long precedes this current infatuation."

Cahill also makes model steam engines as collectible artworks, priced from $4000 to $14,000. "I'm kind of schizophrenic in that I do these fanciful, playful pieces, but I also do the involved, meticulous engines too," he said. "In the nineteenth century, engineering students used to have to design, make patterns for, and cast pieces, then machine the pieces and put them together," he said. "They would have to make a working model steam engine, like the ones I make today. So that would be representative of their skills, part of their graduating requirements. That was when steam was king."

Cahill has not shown much in gallery situations. "Coming out of art school [with a degree from Boston's Massachusetts College of Art and Design], I sort of rejected the gallery idea. What I do involves fire and water. It's not really conducive to an uptight art gallery. You can get away with that and more at antique machinery shows," which have been his venue of choice for the last few years.

There is a market for antique model engines like the kind Cahill builds. "But I know people would never think to run them," he said. "Because I've built mine and because I know how to take care of them and how to repair them when something inevitably goes wrong or breaks, it makes me fearless about running them. It's part of the process. Whether that's my downfall or not, I don't know."

David Erickson of Littleton, Massachusetts, has been a modernizer of antique stoves for three decades. He's the guy you've inevitably seen at Brimfield, where he has set up as part of May's Antique Market for the last 29 years. One of his stoves is in the exhibition.

When did he decide he was a steampunker? "I still haven't totally," said Erickson by phone as he drove to a big Victorian home in the Hudson Valley to make a delivery of a 1926 Gold Medal Glenwood combination kitchen range. "Certainly it was Bruce [Rosenbaum] who led me into it." Erickson has done both a double-oven conversion and a Buck parlor stove for the Rosenbaums. "But I guess I have been a steampunker all these years without knowing it, doing conversions of antique stoves, both electric and gas, or just restoring them back to their original functions, both heating and cooking."

Until his work became part of the exhibition, Erickson hadn't seen much steampunk outside of what Rosenbaum has at his house. "When I saw other exhibitors' stuff, I thought, 'Oh, my God, what am I doing here? This stuff just blows me right out of the water.' I'm certainly the most conservative. In restoring things to as much of their original form as possible, just adding the necessary, modern features, I'm honoring the original design of the piece and the people before me who did the beautiful artwork. I'm just making their statement over again. I'm not making my own statement in terms of design, although I guess my statement is the craftsmanship and mechanical wizardry."

Twenty-five-year-old Charlotte McFarland of Allston, Massachusetts, was the youngest exhibitor I met at the opening. She brought a single piece, her cotton spinning wheel generator, which produces enough energy on human power (an exercise bike) to light a light bulb. A robotics engineer/production overseer at a company that makes mosaics for residential and commercial construction, she told me how she happened to become a steampunk artist.

An art major in high school, McFarland was also interested in math and science, so while she decided to go into engineering at Tufts University, she was able to take art classes too, at the School of the Museum of Fine Arts, Boston. Early in 2010, she made a couple of guitar sculptures that could be classified as steampunk—"although I wasn't really aware of steampunk when I made them," she said. She brought one to the steampunk festival at the museum back in May. "People commented on it and encouraged me to make more of them, including ones that actually worked, and Bruce suggested I join the competition."

McFarland recalled her reaction. "I thought, 'Wow! This is so awesome.' I've always wanted to get into antiques and learn about history, because history was the one subject I didn't really apply myself to in school." She went to antiques shows and shops looking for inspiration. "I noticed spinning wheels as one of the coolest things." She personally knew people who had made pedal-powered generators, one of which was for a band that wanted to perform outdoors. "So I thought this was a chance to make a generator of my own, learn a lot about the physics behind it, enter this contest, and have a chance to be exhibited with other steampunk artists at the same time."

The spinning wheel came from antiques collectors who were downsizing; they advertised it on Craigslist. McFarland found the 1978 exercise bike on Craigslist too. She added "random gears, worn out and useless as mechanical devices, but as aesthetic items they're still perfectly useful." When the bike is pedaled, it turns the spinning wheel, which is attached to a motor, and the electricity generated by the motor lights the bulb. "You have to be turning fast enough to get the required voltage." The light it makes, however, is only one of its intended purposes. "I'd like to see it be traveled around and be flashy and create awareness in steampunk, alternative energy, and get people interested in antiques."

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The winner of the exhibition competition, announced on opening night, was the "Create Life" pinball machine by Robert Kieronski (b. 1941) of Newport, Rhode Island. Kieronski, an electrical engineer, has produced a number of artworks over the years, mostly involving "interactive and kinetic genres," not necessarily steampunk. The pinball machine is described by Kieronski as "a kinetic/interactive computer controlled sculpture" that runs the famous "Urey-Miller experiment through a pinball-like control interface." To the uninformed it was just a wonderful display of flashing neon lights and bubbling beakers.

"All this laboratory apparatus came from a Cornell University laboratory that was getting dismantled," Kieronski said. "[Chemists] tend not to use this large, chemical equipment anymore in favor of microchemistry. This display uses the original concept of neon before LEDs were invented. All of this is vintage pinball. Some got shipped from California, some from Florida."

It was hard to get more than a few moments to speak with Kieronski, as he was continually surrounded by cameras and would-be pinball wizards trying out the machine. It was the same with Tom Sepe of Berkeley, California, whose exhibition contribution is his Whirlygig steam-electric-hybrid motorcycle. (It was not entered into the competition; Sepe was a judge, as were Gary Sullivan and Jamie Robertson [www.robertsonics.com].)

Electricity powers the wheels of Sepe's scooter. Steam powers its two-tone whistle. Steam is also channeled to an opening in the front of the bike, which emits a cloud of steam, like a James Bond smokescreen, when Sepe triggers its mechanism.

I asked Sepe (b. 1971) why he chose the word whirlygig for his motorcycle's name. "I associate the word with whirlwind," he said. "I like the way it comes out of my mouth. It just has this fun feeling about it. The actual thing-a whirlygig-spins around in the wind, so it seemed appropriate. Steam is like wind. Wind is another alternative energy. This was not going to run on petroleum products."

Although the bike is ridable, Sepe doesn't ride it very often. "It's really kind of precious to me. It's like your fine china. I take it out only for special occasions."

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One of things that attracts steampunkers to the Victorian age is the seemingly endless fixability of its technology. "I have a customer who bought a Dell [computer], and one month later the entire hard drive crashed," said 23-year-old Chris Moore of Stoughton, Massachusetts, a steampunk artist and college student who works part time in information technology. "It didn't get a virus. It just died and needed to be replaced. It was garbage. Victorian items can always be fixed."

I met Moore when he contacted my husband, who repairs antique clocks, looking for old parts for his artworks. "I'll give you fifty dollars if you go around your shop and make up a box of your junk for me," he e-mailed every clock-repair shop in the Boston area. That was my introduction to steampunk. (My husband loaded Moore up with three boxfuls, for free.)

"I do other kinds of art, but I definitely fall into the steampunk category," Moore told me recently. "A lot of the rest of it could be classified as cyberpunk, which is the exact opposite of steampunk, because it looks at the future instead of the past, and because it integrates the human body and the human mind into technology."

With little springs, gears, and other stuff he got from the clock guys, Moore has been making steampunk flash drives. "I take a half-inch piece of copper tube and squish it, add clock parts, lights, and make these incredible pieces of art," he said. "You pull the cap off, plug it into your computer, and you've got Star Trek season one on it."

That's one small step for steampunk; others are taking larger steps. Bruce Rosenbaum, for example, has organized several more steampunk events. On November 13 and 14, 2010, at the Pier Antiques Show in New York City, he featured some of the museum exhibition's artists, as well as a few others, in an exhibit called *The Steampunk House*. An upcoming project of Rosenbaum's is *Nemo's Steampunk Art & Invention Gallery* at Patriot Place's *20,000 Leagues* entertainment exhibit in Foxborough, Massachusetts. Opening night is February 5, from 5 p.m. to midnight. For more information, see its Web site (www.steampuffin.com/Home/NemosSteampunkGallery.aspx).

On March 5 and 6, Rosenbaum's ModVic will put on its first Back Home to the Future show at the Greater Philadelphia Expo Center. It will be an exhibition of artists, builders, designers, and others who offer steampunk art, appliances, architectural adaptations, and "altered antiques." For more information, see the Web site (www.backhometothefutureshow.com).

The Charles River Museum is also making plans for more steampunk events. On April 30 and May 1, it will host the second annual New England Steampunk Festival. See the museum Web site (www.crmi.org) for details. See the same site for more information about the current exhibition, which is open through May 10, Thursday through Saturday, 10 a.m. to 5 p.m. Or contact the museum by phone at (781) 893-5410.

At least one other American museum so far is heeding the steampunk call. In September, the National Watch & Clock Museum in Columbia, Pennsylvania, will host the Steampunk Horologia Festival, devoted to a steampunk subgenre, clockpunk. For more information, see the Web site (www.nawcc.org).

Finally, on October 14-16, Steamcon III will take place in Bellevue, Washington. (The first Steamcon was in October 2009.) According to the Web site (www.steamcon.org), Steamcon II highlighted "the Weird Weird West or American steampunk, if you will. Imagine the age of steam on the wild frontier. You are invited to explore with us the world of rough-riders on mechanical horses, mad inventors, mystical Indian shamans, and mighty steam locomotives. Picture airships instead of stagecoaches, and the precision of robotic sharp shooters." Internet postings suggest that Steamcon III will evoke Captain Nemo and others from the Jules Verne classic.

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