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A while back, I wrote a column comparing show dogs and antique furniture.

It's not such a nutsy parallel, except for the glaring disparity in animation.

Like dogs, furniture's form follows its function. In both, pretty is as pretty does, as anyone who has ever seated a generously proportioned guest on a Victorian balloon chair has learned, with a thud.

In every furniture era, there are regional differences that are glaring to a connoisseur - a soaring, stylized Chippendale highboy carved in Philadelphia in 1787 is worlds away from its sober, cobbler counterpart made in London. And so, too, our dogs look different from British ones because our aesthetic is so different: If you have seen the Manhattan skyline, you understand the almost congenital American imperative for verticality and elegance.

As I later did with show dogs, in furniture I sought mentors. Like most accomplished dog men and women, these antique dealers were slow to warm up, quick to take offense, and generous with their knowledge to those they eventually deemed worthy. Their success came not so much from connections, but from an almost supernatural ability to scan a room full of mediocrity and instantly spot the treasure.

In workrooms that smelled of boiled linseed oil and sawdust, those dealers showed

me how to run my fingertips across the underside of a drawer to see if the wood was hand-hewn or machine milled. They told me where to get museum-quality refinishing at outer-borough prices, and how to use an ultraviolet light to spot cunning repairs on old porcelain.

But what they could not give me was what I needed most, and what they had already developed: an eye for quality.

For that, there was no shortcut, and only one long avenue: a steady, unrelenting diet of the best. Fortunately, living a scant 30 miles from Manhattan, I had the ultimate buffets at my disposal: the American wing of the Metropolitan Museum of Art, and Sotheby's and Christie's auction houses, where I could not only look at a \$200,000 Queen Anne piecrust table, but was allowed - even encouraged - to touch it. The shell-carved knee-hole desks of John Goddard, the fluted-edged classical sofas of Duncan Phyfe, the zanily rococo Victorian parlor sets of John Henry Belter - these were the templates of quality that I carried in my mind's eye, against which I contrasted all comers.

Unfortunately, there is no American wing at the Met for purebred dogs. All we have is the show ring, and its curators are hardly on par. For our templates, we need to differentiate great dogs from great winners, and then hold them in our consciousness as we go forward, breeding toward that ideal.

Where do we find a roadmap to those great quality dogs? With the people who are knowledgeable enough to know quality themselves, including accomplished breeders inside and outside the breed and

well-respected judges. It's this constant quest for knowledge from varied and deep sources that eventually leads to an organic understanding of that elusive trio - conformation, type and balance.

My antiquing days left me with this cautionary tale about what happens when you take short cuts and parrot another's definition of quality instead of undertaking the long, arduous journey of learning to identify it for yourself:

A particularly crafty dealer had his antiques shop near a sanitation-department depot. After their rounds, some of the more enterprising garbage men would come to him with their "finds."

If the piece was common and non-descript, the dealer gushed over it, gave them a handsome amount of cash, made them promise to bring him any more similar to it, and then promptly tossed it out after they left.

If it was an extraordinary piece, he grudgingly peeled off a few fives, and did them a "favor" by taking it.

There was a cunning rationale behind this reverse reward system.

"When they decide to get smart and take the junky piece that they think is so valuable to another dealer, he won't give them anywhere near what I will, so they always come back," he said conspiratorially.

"And because they think junk is gold, and vice versa, they never figure out for themselves what quality is."

Webster Knows Best:

quality. (noun), 1 a: peculiar and essential character, b: an inherent feature, 2 a: degree of excellence, b: superiority in kind, 3 a: social status: rank, b: aristocracy, 4 a: distinguishing attribute, 5: the character in a logical proposition of being affirmative or negative, 6: vividness of hue, 7: the attribute of an elementary sensation that makes it fundamentally unlike any other sensation.

