

Wilmington, Massachusetts

The Greater Boston Antiques Festival: Smooth Selling

by Jeanne Schinto

"I'm getting the impression that the show is established," Marvin Getman said, taking a step back to look at what he has wrought after seven years of promoting his semiannual antiques events at the Shriners Auditorium about 15 miles north of Boston. He was speaking on the morning following his latest Greater Boston Antiques Festival, on the weekend of January 21 and 22.

The previous January show results had suffered due to a Sunday blizzard, which had effectively turned it into a one-day affair. This time the weather gods were more than kind on both days, saving the snow for the following week. "So it's easy enough to report that the gate was up by eighty-two percent," said Getman. "It's more honest to compare Saturday to Saturday. In that case, there was a twelve percent increase."

Getman, a promoter universally praised by his dealers for his attention to every detail, continues to do market experiments to get new people coming in the door. "I rented a couple of mailing lists this time," he told us. "One was five hundred interior designers. The other was a thousand high-income collectors of antiques and art. And maybe you noticed the guy who was filming? I'm putting together a television commercial for next year."

We told him we had also noticed some high-profile shoppers, including Lorna Condon, archivist of Historic New England, and Colleen Fesko, head of Skinner's paintings department. Getman was pleased. "A lot of dealers decided to sit this one out," he said. "They'd had a bad November." (His last show in this same space was on November 19 and 20, 2005.) "Or else they'd had a bad year. I think some of those people will be disappointed they weren't here, because of the turnaround. We were up twenty-four percent over the November numbers."

Getman knows, of course, that a good gate does not automatically make a good show make. Money must change hands. We saw some evidence of that happening on Saturday during our visit. Getman, with the full weekend's perspective, could name specific dealers and their dollar figures. He is privy to some transactions because he provides a credit card service for those who don't have their own. He also asks dealers to list their top trades on a questionnaire, which was returned by 40% of the 160 dealers. Looking at both types of data, he said two dealers each had made "mid-four-figure sales" and seven others each had sold items in the \$1000 to \$3000 range.

Many dealers also sold more than a few items for prices under \$1000, we learned. Bill and Nancy Darcy of the History Gallery, Ashford, Connecticut, for example, sold an 1856 Western exploration print, a framed Teddy Roosevelt autograph, and a 1776 book that included the text of the Declaration of Independence,

along with other items, for prices ranging from \$50 to \$850.

Still unsold by the Darcs at show's end was their framed copy of *Classification of Clouds for Weather Observers*, 12 scenes, each one 5" x 4", issued by the U.S. Navy Hydrographic Office and published by the lithographer L. Prang & Co. in 1897. Their price for the clouds was \$1500.

As we roamed the big venue, some of it divided into walled-and-papered booths, some more of it arranged with tables and do-it-yourself shelving, we collected other prices and took our photos. The floor plan included the auditorium, the lobby, and a carpeted area called the Fez Room. We saw bins and bins of prints and maps, cases of bric-a-brac and jewelry, lots of ceramics, folk art, paintings, dolls, glass, curiosities, etc. If you had wanted to look at everything, it would have taken a week. Like any show of this size, it threatened to be overwhelming. But it was often a lot more fun than a strictly high-end exhibition, where everything has already been discovered and documented for you.

To give ourselves a thematic focus, we formulated this question to ask some of the dealers: What are you doing differently now that you didn't do five or ten years ago, when the market was different? Unless they were like the shopkeeper in the old cartoon from *The New Yorker*, whose storefront sign stated, "Going out of Business, Slowly," they were doing something proactive, to use a jargon word, to stay in the game.

Matt King of Middleboro, Massachusetts, summarized his simple strategy in the midst of selling to the early buyers who had surrounded him. "I price stuff reasonably," he said. "There are a lot of people who say they keep stuff reasonably priced, but they don't. I just sold a bookcase in two seconds because it was priced well. I keep moving." King added, "I keep active. Also, to every single show I try to bring new stuff, along with the 'old friends.'"

What does he do with "old friends" now, when he decides that their time is up? "That's tough these days," he said. "It used to be that I would dump them into an auction because even if you lost on some, you could win on others and even it out. Now it's dangerous to do that, especially with older stuff, because there just aren't the buyers, unless it's very special. The margin of what people will buy is getting narrower and narrower. So what do you do? Once you recognize how it is, you buy only the good things, if you can, or else you buy really, really cheap."

Susan Mesick of Quirky Antiques, West Brookfield, Massachusetts, one of the smartest younger dealers we know, echoed King. "You've



Just across the aisle from Stone Block Antiques was this fish still life. Signed "J.S. Peterson," the oil on board was \$450 from Pat Reese and John Rice of Portsmouth, New Hampshire.



We'd never seen a trade sign advertising gowns before. Each of these signs was \$225 from Pat Reese and John Rice.



Here are 11 particularly good examples of strawberry-ferm emeries for sharpening pins and needles. If you were to put them into a bowl with a little pitcher of cream alongside, they could fool any number of hungry people. Pat Reese and John Rice were selling the lot for \$85.



A Fortnum & Mason Chicken & Ham tin was \$150 from Kurhaus Antiques.



Kurhaus Antiques, Hingham, Massachusetts, known for their silver and their antique canes, had a table piled with Victorian paisley shawls, 12' x 6', circa 1880. Jean Kurtz was showing us two current books on the subject, one by Ed Rossbach and the other by Chet Gadsby, when lo and behold, Gadsby walked into the booth. Gadsby of Belmont, Massachusetts, kindly posed for us and gave us this information. "The shawl industry was very competitive. Scottish and Irish makers robbed designs, which were actually Indian designs to begin with. They were machine-woven woolen. I date them by the size of the blocks. The most common color is black; second is red. More than color, though, condition determines price, and these are in great condition." Kurtz, who had them priced from \$500 to \$850, said, "A little old lady had them packed away."



John F. Kuenzig of Topsfield, Massachusetts, brought a physiological diagram signed by Boston maker William Fowle and dated 1850. "Fowle wrote forty or fifty books on all manner of things, including physiognomy," said Kuenzig, who deals in books as well as sci-tech antiques. Printed by Taylor & Adams, Boston, it was marked on the reverse with "Granite Co. Wire Twist Cotton" and an American eagle logo. The price was \$1200. "I sold a surprising amount of medical stuff here in November, so I thought I would bring more medical this time," Kuenzig said.

got to wholesale it these days," she said. "Everything's still selling as long as it's priced to sell," she said. "Once upon a time, when we had a Democrat in office, I could price things for more and sell them for more. Now, if it's something really unusual or something great, the old rule still applies. But the middle-of-the-road stuff has to be sold cheaply and bought cheaply."

We caught up with Mesick only after the show was over because we never could find her in her space. Leaving the selling to a helper, she shopped the show relentlessly, bargaining with the best of them. "I spent a lot of money on the floor," she acknowledged. What had she bought? "Everything." Rephrasing, hoping for a better insight, we asked what she was staying away from. "I'm buying anything but bisque. Bisque is deadlier than road kill."

What was her opinion of Victorian jewelry? Another dealer at this show had told us it was "dead in the water." Did Mesick agree? "Victorian jewelry is not dead, unless it's overpriced," she said.

When we asked Beverly Bernson of Altschuler/Bernson, Waban, Massachusetts, what she was doing differently now, she said, "The question is perfectly timed. My husband has just been saying to me, 'Maybe your business model isn't working.' There have been downs before," said Bernson, who at age 70 has been in the business since the 1960's. "Sometimes it was the gas prices—in the 1970's, remember? That was the beginning of group shops. This time, though, I don't think it really is the economy."

Her regular customers still have money, but have grown less acquisitive as they have aged, she said. "The people who were thirty or forty years old when I began have finished their collections and are downsizing. Ninety percent of the time, when I used to buy something, I used to know who I was buying it for. Biscuit tins, mercury glass, tartanware, Quimper pottery." She reminisced about her buying trips to England. "Now I'll sell one piece to someone new and never see them again. Or they come in and buy multiple things, but that's it—everything at once. It's not going to be a continuing relationship."

Then there are the new people, young ones with babies, who are "horrified by the prices," she said. Bernson herself raised three children. "Still, my collecting was a passion, a priority. And we met loads of wonderful people who had also made it a priority." She doesn't meet many people like that anymore. Rather, there is this scenario: "When I go to an expensive restaurant, I'm the oldest person there, and I'm surrounded by young people spending money on food and wine."

Bernson's observations about the cultural shift aren't novel. What is new and refreshing is that, even at her age (if she doesn't mind our saying so), she is

willing to entertain the idea of adopting new business strategies. "How do you get new people to find the passion? I used to teach a course at a community college. 'The Business and Romance of Antiques,' with a heavy emphasis on the romance, but that was in the seventies and eighties."

Bernson, like King and Mesick, is someone willing to admit that some items have become too expensive for what they are, and there's just no bump left. There's no place left to go with those prices except downward. "Doorstops. I have always loved them. But twelve hundred dollars? They were mass produced, as opposed to things that were handmade, hand painted, handwrought. There comes a point when you have to ask yourself, 'What is the value?'"

Actually, Stephen and Mary Daniell of Alley Antiques & Collectibles, Pelham, New Hampshire, were selling an iron doorstop in the form of a rabbit wearing a top hat for \$145. The Daniells, who have been doing these shows in Wilmington since the beginning, also offered a painted wooden top, \$38; a box decorated in pyrography, \$55; a Frederic Remington print, dated 1910, \$550; and a barrister bookcase, \$650. Small and small prices were helping them have a good show.

Lin Stebbins of Lin's Quilt Source, Bristol, Connecticut, shared with us her marketing innovation, another simple one that makes a lot of sense. "A few years ago, I started offering a layaway plan," she said. "We did it when we found out that a woman had saved for two years to buy one of our quilts, only to discover that we had sold it two weeks earlier."

Stebbins also takes credit cards, but sometimes even that can't accommodate a shopper. "If someone comes to the show and doesn't expect to buy a quilt in our upper price range, they can walk away very disappointed if you don't have something like the layaway plan to offer." There's no liability on her part. "They make a down payment, we keep the quilt, and then they start paying monthly. It helps on months when our show fees are down." Non-payments haven't been a problem, said Stebbins. "And when they finish paying, we either mail it or bring it to them at the next show."

At this show, Stebbins did well, selling five quilts. "Four were top-end quilts," she said, "the best one being an 1850's basket-floral appliqué with a berry-vine border that came out of a private collection in upstate New York." Its price, said Stebbins, was "about three thousand dollars."

The Shriners Auditorium is easy to reach from the highway, with plenty of parking once you get there. Dealers like the wide aisles, the huge roll-up garage doors that make for easy pack-in and pack-out, and the ambiance that Getman creates with his hard-work ethic and good humor. There is even live music, generated by an electric piano played by Lou



Detail of a 17" x 27" lithograph, printed in color, finished by hand, from Resser-Thorner Antiques, Manchester, New Hampshire, showing the famous Hinkley locomotive, designed by Hinkley & Williams. The artist who produced the image was S.S. Frizell; the New England Lithograph Co. of Boston, which reproduced it, was in business only from 1870 to 1872. The price was \$750. Ann and Richard Thorne also offered *An Island Garden* by Celia Thaxter, signed and fully inscribed to Rose Lamb in 1894, the year Thaxter died, for \$1850; an 1819 map of Dover, New Hampshire, for \$8500; and an 1869 map of Nantucket for \$1800.



A pair of Victorian candleabra in gilded metal (one shown) was \$1450 from Resser-Thorner. The pair of 19th-century bronze bookends in the form of Medici lions, Grand Tour souvenirs, was \$1950.



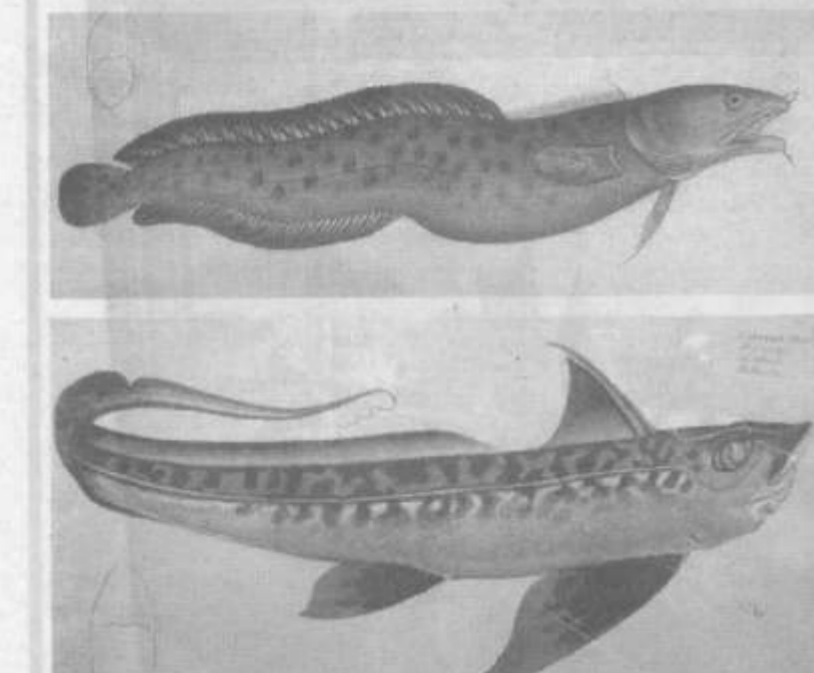
Howard Graff of The Colt Barn Antiques, Townshend, Vermont, offered at \$2500 a comb-back Windsor chair. The style was rare, but the black paint was not original, he said.



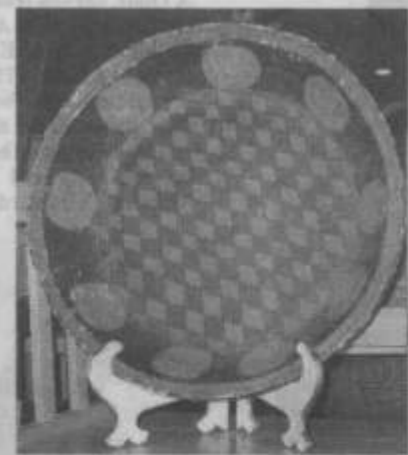
One of a pair of andirons made by Bradley & Hubbard, which were marked inside "B & H," as well as "right" and "left," because they were slightly and precisely angled. Likely made after the turn of the 20th century in this pinwheel Art Deco style, they were \$365 for the two from The Colt Barn Antiques.



Marvin Getman is pictured not at the show, but three days later in Wellesley, Massachusetts, on the grounds of the Massachusetts Horticultural Society, where he was giving potential dealers an opportunity to visit the site of his brand-new summer show, Antiques at Elm Bank Estate, scheduled for July 29 and 30. Schinto photo.



A hand-colored engraving of *Gadus tricirratus* from a 1760 edition of *Ichthyologie, ou Histoire naturelle des Poissons*, published in Berlin, was \$350 from Greg Hamilton of Stone Block Antiques, Vergennes, Vermont. Hamilton's *Chimera monstrosa* from the same book was the same price. Hamilton has done Getman's October show in Vermont, the Champlain Valley Antiques Festival in Essex Junction, so he decided to try this one. "If he can get seven thousand people to a show in Vermont, he's doing something right," he said. "I've never seen seven thousand people at anything in Vermont before." As early buying began, guys were already checking out Hamilton's vintage rods and reels. Afterward, he said by phone, "It was a good show. I almost sold one reel at the show, which I was showing for the first time. If I had, it would have been a really good show. As it was, I sold the reel immediately when I got home"—not to a showgoer. Another post-show deal to a showgoer, however, did seem to be in the offing.



Alley Antiques and Collectibles, Pelham, New Hampshire, brought a 20th-century Halloween-themed papier-mâché bowl for \$225.



Way back in the farthest corner of the show we found this Baird advertising clock, described as transitional because it was made during the time that Baird moved from Montreal to Plattsburgh, New York, circa 1889. Greg Lambert of Manchester, New Hampshire, was set up with just a few other clocks and some barometers, sharing a booth with fellow dealer Paul Algiers of A & K Jewellers, Stoneham, Massachusetts. Lambert's price for the Baird was \$1995.