

## A Book Show Reinvents Itself: The 13th Annual Boston Antiquarian Book & Print Fair

by Jeanne Schinto

It was a sunny Saturday in Boston, and two thirtysomething guys—a well-groomed South End couple—had been lured to the entrance of the show by the "Book Sale" sign outside, but they didn't buy tickets to go inside. "It's *antique* books," one said to the other.

Had they been more adventuresome and given it a go, they would have found much more than antiquarian volumes on display. The organization that sponsors this fair, the Massachusetts and Rhode Island Antiquarian Booksellers, Inc., made a big change this year. For the first time, M.A.R.I.A.B. (pronounced "marry ab") invited print dealers to join them.

About 20 of the 65 exhibitors at the show on March 18 and 19 exhibited artworks exclusively. Traditionally, there is crossover between book buyers and print buyers, and this was a collective effort by dealers "to try to cross-pollinate," in the words of new exhibitor Conrad R. Graeber, a print dealer from Riderwood, Maryland.

The book dealers' booths looked different too. Show promoters Jerry Oliver and Michael Gannon had sent a letter suggesting that the booksellers bring art-related materials in addition to their usual stock. "Booksellers," they wrote, "if you have artist-produced prints, catalogues raisonnés, artist monographs, exhibition catalogs, pamphlets relating to fine prints or graphic arts, please make an effort to include them in your inventory for the fair." As a result, it was a reinvented and redecorated show with lots of visually rich book jackets prominent on the dealers' shelves. Lots of modern firsts, i.e., recent first editions, were evident too. Some old-school rare book dealers scorn them, but they can be steady sellers.

The point is, would-be walk-ins, afraid of antiques, would have found many of the materials accessible and affordable, and the venue possessed more of a gallery opening's ambiance than a library's. Even without them and like-minded others, the show was well attended, with attendance up 30% over last year, according to the promoters.

We asked the promoters whose idea it was to open the show to print dealers. They credited Thomas J. Clemens, owner of Boston's Gargoyle Gallery, and Edward T. Pollack, whose eponymous business is in Mashpee, Massachusetts. "Ed Pollack and Tom Clemens have done this fair all along and done very well," said Oliver. "They also do the Tony Fusco show in this same space." (The Boston International Fine Art Show in November.) "And they said, 'Gee, why don't we expand M.A.R.I.A.B.?'"

Oliver and Gannon took the suggestion to M.A.R.I.A.B.'s board. "They thought it was a good idea, and that gave us free rein."

Oliver was asked if the introduction of the print dealers was precipitated at all by a lack of book exhibitors signing up. "It was not precipitated by that specifically," he said. "We're finding that there's a trend away from book dealers bailing out of shows and using the Internet instead. In my estimation that trend seems to have peaked. We're flooded with calls for the Albany Book Fair," which Oliver & Gannon Partnership also promotes. Another of its clients, the Westchester Antiquarian Book & Ephemera Fair, has picked up in number of dealers and attendance, he added. "I'm reading those things as a trend the other way."

Margaret F. O'Connell, who is completing a two-year term as president of M.A.R.I.A.B., confirmed that there were more book dealers wanting to exhibit than could be accommodated. "We had a waiting list of people wanting to come in," she said.

During our visit to the show, we decided to forego asking dealers the usual questions about how sales were going (although some of them volunteered the information). Instead, we asked them to speak generally about their own attempts at reinvention in the face of new forces, especially the Internet, in today's changing market.

Bob Ritchie, owner of Dogtown Book Shop, Gloucester, Massachusetts, described his business as "a three-legged stool," the three legs being shows, shop time, and on-line sales. "You need to cover all your bases," he said, switching metaphors.

Margaret O'Connell expressed the same idea differently: "Shows are only one aspect of the market. Most people feel that they can't have just one venue anymore." A single venue is carrying very few of the dealers, she said.

For more information about M.A.R.I.A.B., see the Web site ([www.mariab.org](http://www.mariab.org)). For more information about M.A.R.I.A.B.'s next book fair, contact Oliver & Gannon Partnership at (518) 861-5478 or see the Web site ([www.ShowsFairsFestivals.com](http://www.ShowsFairsFestivals.com)).