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## An "Off" Year at the Peabody Essex Museum

by Jeanne Schinto



### Salem, Massachusetts

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The longer the label description and the higher the price, the less likely it was going to sell at the 38th annual Antiques Show at the Peabody Essex Museum (PEM) in Salem, Massachusetts, on Thanksgiving weekend, November 26-28, 2010. Gala party-goers and show attendees did not snap up the best items brought by the show's 28 dealers. They shopped for smalls, bargains, and lesser-priced items, occasionally asking dealers not only for discounts but for layaway.

"People were shopping carefully," said Mary Keeler Rowe of Cornish, New Hampshire, who, with her husband, Steven J. Rowe, still had "a very good show." The Rowes sold a card table, an overmantel mirror, iron bookends of football players, a sculpture, and paintings, all for prices under \$2000, sometimes well under. (The bookends were tagged \$385.)

A Boston couple looked at one of the Rowes' pictures, a 1918 gouache of a luminescent landscape, priced at \$1000. They liked it very much but went home on Saturday without it. They had to think, they said. They called Sunday morning to ask if it was still there before making a second trip from Boston to buy it.

Roy and Sheila Mennell of Bradford Trust Fine Art, Harwich Port, Massachusetts, sold paintings by A.A. Lawrence, C.D. Cahoon, C.H. Gifford, William Small, and a painted tray by E. Melbye. "I had a good show selling mid- to late nineteenth-century material," said Roy Mennell, but, like the Rowes, he described buyers as "careful."

The woman who bought one of the Mennells' paintings, marked \$3000, had to be convinced by a generous discount, assurance that the Mennells would buy it back for cash in a year if she tired of it, and an arrangement to pay in increments. In addition, the Mennells are having the painting cleaned for her. "When they want it, and you see that they want it, I like to help them get it," said Mennell.

Dealers who do this show like to play off the museum's themes, e.g., Asian art and artifacts that members of the East India Marine Society, founded in 1799, brought back to this seaport town from their travels to the world's trading centers. This time, Carl L. Crossman of Wellington, Florida, created a cabinet of curiosities, harking back to those origins of the institution.

He stocked his cabinet-actually a series of peach crates, originally from Maine but bought in Florida-with fish skeletons; pieces of coral; silver-mounted coconuts; a coroner's stamp from Singapore; a Hawaiian poi pounder; an animal's hair ball ("because the East India Marine Society had in its collection a hair ball found in Madagascar and also one found on Salem Common," said Crossman); a Tang Dynasty two-headed tomb figure; a porcelain bird from the 1751 shipwreck of the Geldermalsen; cowrie shells carved with the Lord's Prayer, possibly from the Caribbean; and so on. Prices ranged from \$35 (for the coral) to \$4500 (for the bird). Crossman said people enjoyed making choices all weekend but more often than not at the lower end.

Crossman also sold two black-lacquer shelves and all the blanc de chine porcelain on them as well as an oil painting on canvas of an unusual subject, the port of Adan, Yemen in 1846.

Richard Vandall of American Decorative Arts, Canaan, New Hampshire, sold at fire-sale prices a very good Shaker basket, two chairs, a settee and chair combination, a ship's model diorama, two small tables, one by Stickley, a stool, and numerous Stevengraphs (silk pictures).

Hanes & Ruskin, Old Lyme, Connecticut, sold a French prisoner-of-war picture and two pairs of andirons, one of them a rare Philadelphia example with diamond-and-flame tops. The dealers also sold a plate with the name "Delano" on it to a descendant of the Delano family. How could she pass it up? That's the good news. The bad? People seemed to be buying only what they absolutely had to have.

Part of the space that show manager/dealer Christine Crossman Vining is customarily given to use is the museum's magnificent East India Marine Hall, a rectangle as big as a large ballroom, decked with magnificent ships' figureheads. Besides the hall, there are spaces for dealers in adjacent galleries that have been emptied of their temporary exhibits. There's no question that it's a gorgeous setting for an antiques show.

After the traditional preview party gala on Friday night, the show also has a built-in audience for Saturday and Sunday. An admission ticket to the museum is all one needs to enter. (Conversely, collectors can come to the show and then see the museum exhibits-world-class collections of American furniture and decorative arts, Asian art, and maritime art.) For this show, according to Cecily E. Pollard, the museum's development events coordinator, there were 2110 visitors to the museum on Saturday and 1406 on Sunday. No one counts how many people enter the show area, but some dealers feel the museum doesn't make enough of an effort to get more of the museum's gate funneled into it.

As usual, signage was small, discreet, and said only "Antiques Show" not "Antiques Show & Sale." The result was that, again as usual, more than a few members of the public who did wander in seemed confused about the exhibitions' purpose. Bigger, brighter, and more commercially bold signage is necessary.

One departure from the past was the lack of a show-related display in the museum's atrium. A few years ago it was a bright red Porsche, courtesy of a former sponsor, Ira Porsche Danvers car dealership. Another time it was weavers from perennial sponsor Landry & Arcari Oriental Rugs and Carpeting of Salem and Boston.

We noticed other elements missing this time too. People were missing from the gala, a benefit for the museum's education and public program initiatives. In 2009 the museum reported about 300 in attendance. This time, according to Pollard, the number of tickets sold was 243. In 2009 we saw some major collectors that evening, including Ned and Lillie Johnson. This time we didn't. Other years there have been speeches made at the gala by museum executive director Dan L. Monroe and others. This time there were none, and although I'm not usually one to wish for speeches at parties, I think they would have made the evening feel more cohesive.

Moving dealers in and out of a museum is always a challenge, considering the tight security and, in this case, an elevator ride. Show manager Vining enlists the porters who usually work Ronald Bourgeault's Northeast Auctions. This time, for unexplained reasons, there were fewer of them, resulting in frustrating delays.

On Sunday, for the second year in a row, there was a jazz brunch, sponsored by Landry & Arcari. In 2009 it was sold out with 60 people in attendance and others turned away. This time the price was raised from \$25 to \$45, and yet attendance remained fairly stable at 57. That's something to ponder. One thing about the jazz brunch that did change was the setting. In 2009 it was down the street from the museum. This time it took place inside a museum gallery, i.e., closer to the antiques exhibitors.

Andrew Spindler of Essex, Massachusetts, was showing for the second time at PEM. He brought his signature look, mixing the best of various periods and styles—e.g., an 18th-century French os de mouton (mutton bone) walnut sofa, \$18,000; an early 19th-century American one-drawer architect's table with mid-19th-century decoupage decoration, \$5600; an 18th-century English provincial oak Welsh dresser, \$11,700; and a circa 1928 double-sided drawing attributed to Le Corbusier, \$14,000. The drawing's images are the designer's LC4 chair on one side and a reclining figure on the other. Shown to the light, the image becomes double-exposed, and a figure appears to be lying on the chaise.

Spindler did not sell any of these items at the show; instead, his buyers chose a 1940's cast-iron cowboy lamp with felt "hat" shade; a 19th-century giltwood Neoclassical Italian sofa; a 1930's bronze American eagle and flag shield architectural ornament; and various smalls, including white ironstone pitchers and a Grand Tour bronze tazza.

"I would agree with the consensus that it was an 'off' year," Spindler wrote in an e-mail. "From the preview party through the weekend, people did not seem to be buying much, and, generally, it seemed that the less expensive, the better. All shows these days seem to be a gamble." He did have a hopeful observation to make. "I have noticed an uptick in my shop and on-line recently, and I hear the same from my colleagues and also clients in the design trade; so this show may not be the best snapshot for the state of the business right now."

For more information, phone (978) 745-9500 or see the museum Web site ([www.pem.org](http://www.pem.org)).



**Thomas Schwenke Inc., Woodbury, Connecticut, asked \$12,500 for the 1810-15 Sheraton carved and figured mahogany swell-front chest with figured mahogany top, turned and reeded legs, and with floral and punchwork carving. The attribution was school of Samuel McIntire, Salem. The circa 1855 oil on canvas portrait above it is rare for being a double. The subjects are Samuel P. Moody (1832-1894) and Adelaide Victoria (née Hixon) Moody (1840-1929). In its original pine gilded frame, the painting was \$5500. The**

**pair of Hepplewhite inlaid mahogany serpentine-front knife boxes with original engraved hardware, England, circa 1800, was \$5800. The Rose Medallion punch bowl, China, circa 1860, was \$3900.**



**Thomas Schwenke offered an oil on canvas of an Asian priest overlooking the Mongolian plains from a rooftop that attracted much interest. Signed by Marguerite Delgobe-Deniker (French, 1888-1974), the 49" x 78½" painting in its original frame was \$6800. The Sheraton carved and inlaid mahogany lolling chair, Boston, 1810-15, was \$14,500. The 1795-1800 cherrywood tall clock, inscribed Silas W. Howell, New Brunswick, New Jersey, with original 30-hour brass movement was \$9500. The Hepplewhite inlaid mahogany drop-leaf Pembroke breakfast table, Baltimore, circa 1795, attributed to the Levin Tarr group of cabinetmakers, was \$18,000. The diminutive George III figured mahogany four-drawer bachelor chest, England, 1780-85, was \$4800. The Federal coin silver three-piece tea service, probably New York, 1820-25, was \$3800. The textile draped over the lolling chair, possibly 18th-century Chinese, made of silk-velvet woven with metal thread in rose and gold, double-bed size, was \$4000.**

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