

Antiques on Cambridge Street to Close; Dealers Disperse, Regroup

by Jeanne Schinto

Antiques on Cambridge Street, widely considered one of the most successful group shops in the Boston area, if not in New England, has been scheduled to close after a nearly ten-year run. It opened in a 12,000-square-foot building in Cambridge, Massachusetts, on April 1, 1997, an inauspicious April Fool's Day that brought 26 unseasonable inches of snow. Bert Rosengarten and Rob Werner, co-owners of the business (though not of the real estate), have not yet chosen the last day for shoppers to make a purchase there. Initially they were scheduled to hand their keys back to the landlord on January 1, 2007, but now say they will remain open a little into the new year before singing their swan song.

"The lease was up," said Rosengarten, giving the short reason why he and Werner, dealers themselves, decided to vacate the place where, at its peak, they and 100 of their fellow dealers rented booths and showcases, stocking them with high-quality, mid-level furniture, jewelry, and collectibles. "The building is going to be torn down. We had no option. A family owns it. They had a business there many years ago and kept the building—it was wise for them to have done so—and now they're going to develop it."

Nevertheless, even if the two men hadn't come to the end of their occupancy, they probably would have dissolved the partnership anyway, Rosengarten said. "I feel I have to change with the trade. It's not the same. On the one hand, it's sad to see the place disappear, but on the other, change is good, and that's how you have to look at it. Everyone has to grow, go on with their lives, keep it fresh."

If the building had been theirs, the situation would be different, he conjectured. "My advice to everybody, although I failed to do it myself, is buy property. Every dealer I know has based their retirement only somewhat on the inventory; mostly, it was based on the property they owned."

Advice is cheap, but real estate isn't. "We could have bought this building at one time," said Rob Werner, "but we couldn't swing it. Now, of course, it would be prohibitively expensive."

Werner linked real estate prices with the increasing difficulty of selling mid-level antiques, particularly in an urban setting. "There was an article in the newspaper recently, about five cities, Boston being one of them, and how there's a dwindling middle class in these cities. It's a serious problem for the country, not just the antique business," he said. "You had to be an idiot not to make money in the year 2000. Now, in a nutshell, it's harder to find stuff and harder to find people who want to buy it."

Rosengarten, a third-generation antiques dealer, sells furniture and decorative arts. Werner, who got into the business about 15 years ago, is a self-described "furniture guy."

"That's because I understand it," Werner said. "You know, it has a use. You sit on it, you sleep on it, you eat at it, whatever." As to his future plans, Werner was undecided. "I might take a little breather for a few months. I might go into other group shops. I haven't explored it yet."

He may be surprised when he does make that exploration. The closing of Antiques on Cambridge Street has left many dealers bereft and not hopeful about finding a comparable rental. Max Levi of Auntie Macassar Antiques, Rockport, Massachusetts, said, "I was there for the whole ten years. I've been in other group shops and dropped out of all but Bert and Rob's. Theirs was the best one going. They had a steady flow of customers. They promoted well." (Indeed, Rosengarten calculated that during the decade of business, they spent \$250,000 on *Boston Globe* advertisements alone.)

"The help was great," Levi continued. "Bert and Rob made sure they had quality dealers in there. It was a wonderful situation, and I did extremely well. Now I'm looking for something else, preferably in the Boston area. I've tried New Hampshire. I've tried the Cape. I was in Maine. It was all too far and only for the summer. What do we replace this one with? I'm coming up with nothing."

Greg French of Early Photography, Jamaica Plain, Massachusetts, who rented two booths for four years, said much the same as Levi. "To be honest, this was the most successful group shop I've ever been in. Down on the Cape, I was frustrated. It was very seasonal. This was the most effective place in terms of year-round traffic. I'd sell things every month. What I especially liked about Antiques on Cambridge Street was that, finally, here was a chance to show some of the better stuff. Through them, I met a high-end Civil War collector who happens to be a surgeon. Cambridge was a good venue. It was an educated audience."

It's nice to sell to beginners, French quickly added, and not all of his sales in Cambridge were high end by any measure, but on the Cape, most customers were likely to be tourists opening their wallets on impulse, and only a whale picture might move them to do so. "It was also a pain in the neck driving an hour and a half to fill my booth down there," he said.

Benjamin Campbell of Benjamin D. Campbell Antiques and Decorative Arts, who at 41 is young for this business, rented space in the building for seven years. A dozen years ago he started out selling Americana at Antique Associates at West Townsend, West Townsend, Massachusetts, and at some group shops in New Hampshire. He has since switched to "anything that I think is going to catch a decorator's eye."

With the closing of Antiques on Cambridge Street, Campbell said, "I feel a loss. It worked very well for me. They started renting space there when real estate was still affordable, so the square footage charge was reasonable. It's really the only thing like that in the Boston area, so it has had a captive audience, to some degree."

Location, location, location is not only a real estate agent's mantra. "There's money in the Boston area, as you well know," said Campbell. "They're used to spending a lot of money on furniture, whether it's at Crate and Barrel or anywhere. You put something nice in front of their eyes that's a hundred years old...They were very good buyers."

The customers weren't only locals. Some serious collectors came from out of town. Texans and Floridians regularly found Antiques on Cambridge Street, said Rosengarten, as did "Europeans, South Americans, people from Dubai and Japan."

The place also had its share of celebrity clientele. Whoopi Goldberg came through, looking for Black memorabilia, said French, who is an expert in early photographic images of African-Americans. Iggy Pop was spotted, and one day in walked Graham Nash, who, when asked if he had a resale number, reportedly said, in his British accent, "Honey, I'm not a dealer. I'm a rock 'n' roller."

Outside of the photography world, it's a little known fact that Nash has been a photographer longer than he has been a musician. He is also a collector of daguerreotypes. He bought some at Antiques on Cambridge Street, and on the day after his visit there, he went to see French's collection at home in Jamaica Plain, bringing Neil Young's tour manager with him.

Rosengarten's plans for the future are only a little more gelled than Werner's. "I've got to reinvent myself," he said. "I'll probably combine retail sales and auctioning in the same building, where you have the best, choice stuff for retail and the rest put up for auction." He predicted that he will have landed somewhere by spring. "Finding a place—that's the problem. It probably won't be in the city. The big issue is parking and floor space, and it has to be ground level. There's plenty of space if you want to work with an elevator, but I refuse to do that. So it's tough. I may end up around Route 128."

That 58-mile half-circle of highway dividing the city proper from its outlying suburbs is also where Angela Einstein of Upper Level Antiques, Cambridge, Massachusetts, may be looking to rent space. Einstein rented a booth at Antiques on Cambridge Street and rented an office space upstairs in order to do business as a broker and eBay Trading Assistant, specializing in art and antiques (see [upperlevelantiques](#) on eBay and her Web site (www.upperlevelantiques.com)).

"I'm totally bummed out that it's closing," Einstein said, but she remains "in full gear," planning to open up another eBay drop-off location, "so people can find me easily, park, walk in, and say, 'Hey, would you sell my Tiffany cuff links?'"

By late summer, Campbell too had already regrouped. He found an outlet for some of his material by renting space "from two guys who sell to the local decorating trade," i.e., Jerry Freeman and Dan McAuliffe of The Barn at 17 and The Barn on Mystic Avenue; both shops are in Somerville, Massachusetts, right over the Cambridge line.

Jack Delmond of Yesterday's Treasures, Provincetown, Massachusetts, sells mid-20th-century furniture and decorative arts and deals in costume jewelry and sterling silver jewelry. "I sold a humongous amount of it at Cambridge Street," he said. "There really isn't any place else that fills the market." He has started to rent space at Downstairs at Felton Antiques, Waltham, Massachusetts. It's a group shop, founded some years ago, that changed hands in June 2005, but it's on a much smaller scale, 4000 square feet, than the Cambridge Street enterprise. "Bert and Rob were great, and the staff was too—very friendly, very helpful; they became my friends," said Delmond.

Those staffers numbered eight, and on the day we visited, a Saturday in September, they were indeed very engaging, eager, and busily serving customers who seemed completely unaware that a wrecker's ball could well be swinging in a few months' time. We saw Werner and one staffer carrying out a set of sold Arts and Crafts furniture. We saw another ringing up the painting purchase of a prominent Boston interior designer whose firm's address is on Beacon Hill.

"We had a good reputation," Rosengarten said, speaking in the past tense reflexively. "I can walk away feeling that people will remember it positively." It's time to be as creative as successful antiques dealers have always needed to be. "That's the thing about the business. The people who are mature and have integrity—people who understand that it's hard work and respect others who work hard—are going to survive."

For more information, contact [Antiques on Cambridge Street](#) at (617) 234-0001; Web site (www.antiques-on-cambridge.com).