

Grogan & Company, Dedham, Massachusetts

Importer/Dealer of French Décor Says, "Ça Suffit!"

by Jeanne Schinto

Photos courtesy Grogan

On Saturday, April 26, at Grogan & Company in Dedham, Massachusetts, an unreserved auction offered more than 700 lots of Continental, mostly French, furnishings and decorative arts. There were huge numbers of armoires, bureaux, commodes, desks, chandeliers, vitrines, mirrors, clocks, and much, much more in the styles of Louis XV, Louis XVI, Napoleon III, and other aristocracies from centuries ago. A pair of billiard cue stands, anybody? A marble-top *meuble d'ap-pui*? An upholstered canapé? It was the entire stock of A Room with a Vieux Antiques, founded by Jeff Diamond in 1987.

"My first shipment came to my condominium in [Boston's] Back Bay," Diamond recounted a few days before the sale. "I sold it out of there. After that, my then-wife and I opened up a small store in Brookline Village [a neighborhood in Greater Boston]. We got bigger and bigger and ended up with three stores there. And I kept on expand-

ing." He opened a second location on Charles Street, at the foot of Beacon Hill, consolidated the three Brookline Village stores into a single big one, and took space in the Boston Design Center. In addition, he started Restorers Without Borders, a repair and restoration workshop.

Toward the end of last year, however, Diamond said, he woke up one morning and told his partner, Ellen Nadler, "*Ça Suffit!*" Enough! He had decided he was getting out of the selling part of the business.

Although Restorers Without Borders, now nine full-time employees strong, was booming, the retail spaces were becoming less enjoyable to run. A Room with a Vieux Antiques: *C'est fini*.

Diamond is a Californian. He speaks French

with "a heavy-duty American accent, but I'm proud of it," he told me a few days before the auction. In the interest of full disclosure: I have known Diamond and Nadler for years, and my husband, a clock dealer and restorer, has done business with them. But I'd never asked Diamond to fill in the details of his life. Told that I'd need to know how he got "from birth to now," he began: "I was born and raised in Culver City. That's where the MGM Studios are and all the films were originally made. My parents weren't in the film business, but everybody we knew was."

In the 1970s, Diamond worked for a big corporate entity. During the Jimmy Carter administration, he was selected to take part in the President's Commission on Personnel Interchange. "I was loaned

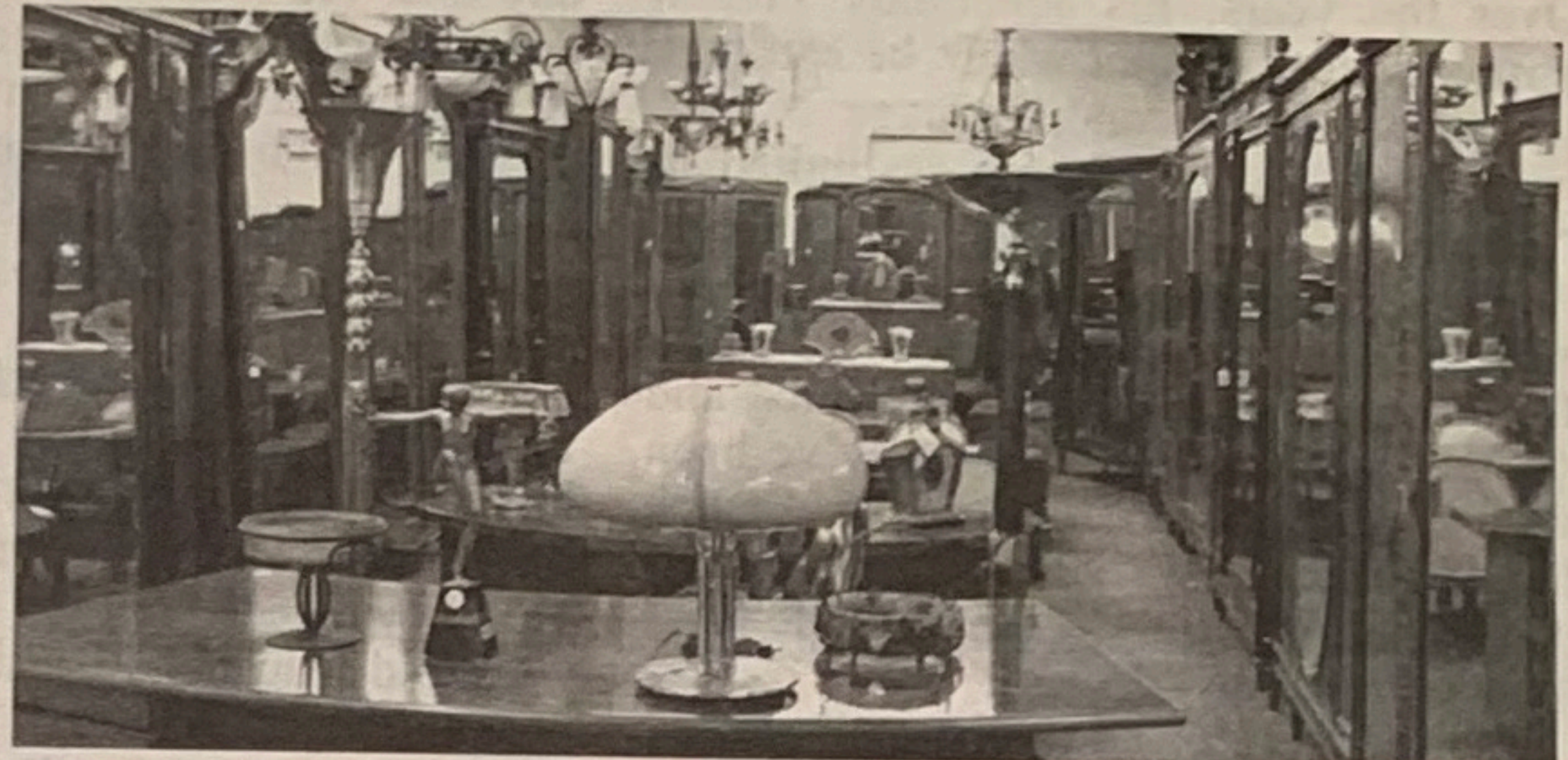
"Every trip has been an adventure," Diamond said. "You would never know what you'd find or fall into."

to the federal government for a year to learn about it," he explained. "It was supposedly to train people to be in a presidential cabinet down the road. You had to sign a commitment saying you'd go back to your company when it was over. When I got back, they put me in marketing, because that's what I wanted to do."

He was sent to Richmond, then Memphis, then Boston, where he was put in charge of the Northeast. "But a couple of years into it, I decided that, although I was making a lot of money, I didn't like what I was doing. So I decided to start my life over. I went into antiques, and the rest is history."

The clever name that Diamond gave his business has always made me smile. The Merchant-Ivory film adaptation of E.M. Forster's 1908 novel *A Room with a View* had been released a couple of years before he started his business. I'd always assumed that was the inspiration for it.

He didn't mention the book or the film, though,



A partial view of what the Grogan staff nicknamed "Armoire Alley." Schinto photo.

when I asked about the name's source. "I wanted to come up with something Frenchy that people could remember," he said. "I liked cherubs; I liked angels. Originally I thought the name would be *Les Anges des Antiquités*—The Angels of Antiques. But then I asked my first ex-wife what she thought of it." As Diamond described her, she was "a brain child from L.A. That's where we met and got married. She was a marketing and public relations genius. When I told her the name I had thought of, she said, 'It stinks. Nobody will ever remember it. You need something that's easy on the tongue. A play on words, like A Room with a Vieux.' And I said, 'That's it!'"

Diamond did not grow up with antiques. "As much as I love

antiques, that's as much as my family hated them. And when I left the corporate world my parents were so upset you could have died from it. When I was working in Boston and my name was on a plaque, my parents were so proud. When I told them I was leaving to peddle used furniture, they just about disowned me."

The success he made of his business didn't assuage them. "I don't think they ever accepted the idea. When they'd come to the house to visit—which, of course, it's full of antiques—all they'd say is, 'Gee, this is really uncomfortable.' I took them to France once to show them what we did. They lasted ten minutes before they said, 'We don't like this. Let's go see the sights of Paris.'"

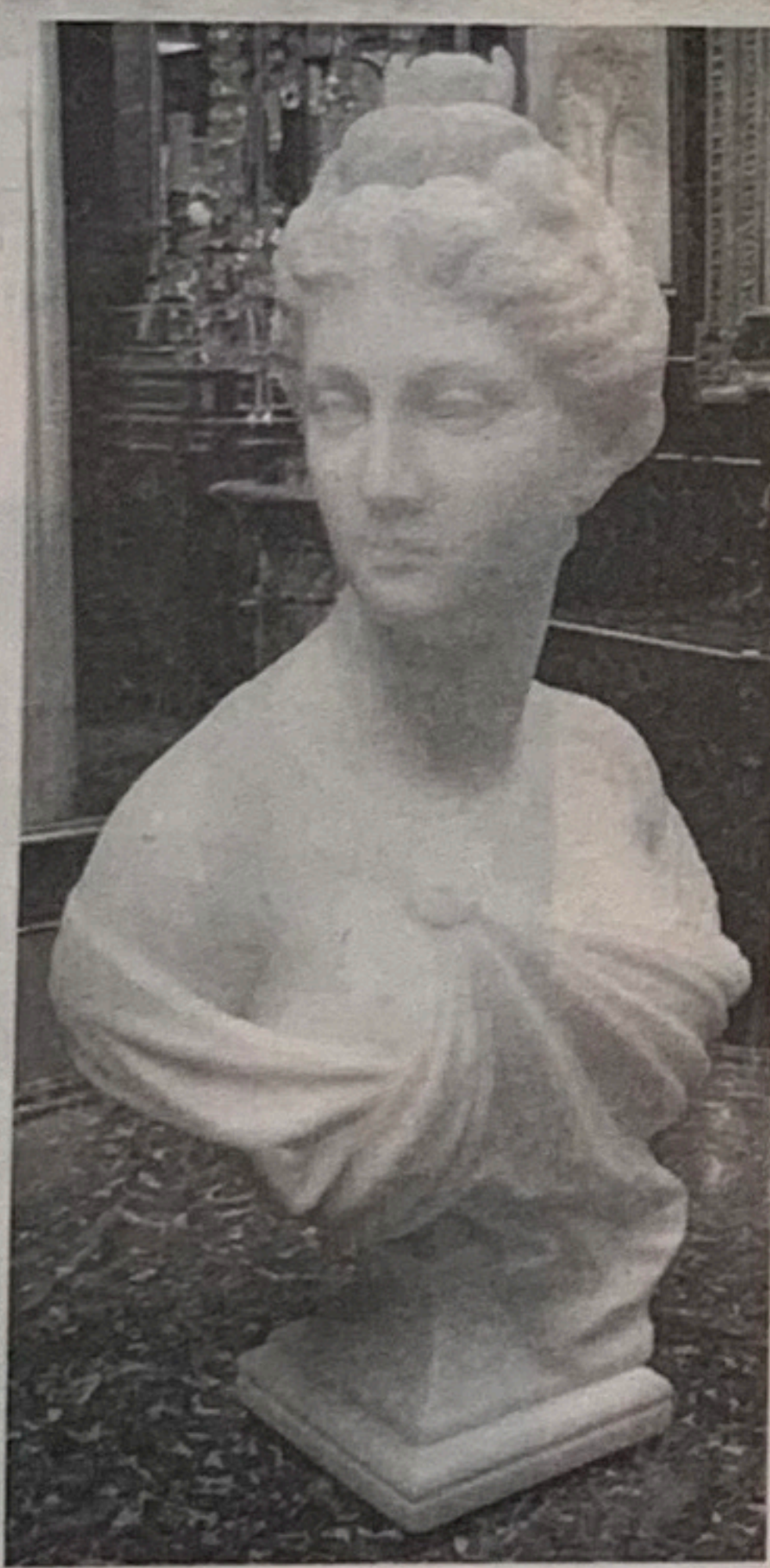
Diamond went to France every eight to ten weeks in the heydays. Eventually, he bought an apartment in Paris. When he began the business, he'd go with his first business partner, his second wife, Annette Bashensky, who sold Biedermeier furniture after their divorce. (She now sells real estate in her home state of Virginia.) When he partnered with Nadler, she became his traveling companion.

"Every trip has been an adventure," Diamond said. "You would never know what you'd find or fall into. We'd buy out of people's homes, in villages, in restaurants. Wherever we were, we'd ask the price. That's why I tell my friends that I don't like going to museums, because if you see something you like, you can't buy it."

Diamond bought at the flea markets of Paris too, but not when the general public was there. "The flea markets are officially open Saturday,



There were a several Art Nouveau porcelain cast-iron stoves with enamel tiles. This one sold for \$1020 (est. \$600/800). Schinto photo.



An absentee, who left a bid via the Internet, won this Italian carved white marble bust of Diana for \$3360 (est. \$500/1000). Schinto photo.



This 20th-century French bronze grouping of three putti sold for \$660 (est. \$500/1000). Schinto photo.



This French 16 1/2" high gilt-bronze figure of musical cherubs on a marble base was one of a pair that sold for \$1440 (est. \$1500/2500). Schinto photo.



Asseyez-vous. Schinto photo.



This Louis XV-style carved fruitwood chaise fetched \$1140 (est. \$300/500). Jeff Diamond's parents complained that the French antiques their son sold were uncomfortable. They should have tried out this. I noticed good prices for the comfy upholstered fauteuils too. Schinto photo.



This Napoleon III-style mahogany marquetry-inlaid and ormolu-mounted bed went to a phone bidder for \$6900 (est. \$1500/2500).

Sunday, Monday. We'd go on the other days, especially Friday morning. We'd get there at three a.m., as the trucks were arriving. We'd buy from the trucks in the dark with flashlights."

Many people he dealt with, especially in the countryside, did not speak English. Over the years, his schoolboy French improved to the point where he can now tell jokes in his second language. Nadler, however, said, her French is limited to "I'm tired," "I'm hungry," and "How much?" "I can whine in French," she said with a laugh. The trouble is, their many friends in France are well educated and speak fluent English. "And they've been very kind to me. People say the French have an attitude. We've never ever experienced that. I've only gotten attitude from an occasional taxi driver."

When sales slowed in his retail spaces, Diamond, like many dealers, set up a Web site. It didn't work for him. "Everyone said the Internet was the marketing tool of now and of the future. I had two guys photograph every single piece of our inventory. Ellen worked with them, and we developed a great site, but people have to touch this stuff before they buy it. We did sell a \$15,000 figural to a guy in Egypt, and we sold to people in other parts of the world. But for the money I

spent on developing the thing, as far as I'm concerned, it was a bust."

Once Diamond made the decision to go to auction, choosing Grogan & Company was easy. "Michael and I have known each other for almost as long as I've been in business," he said. "I liked him from day one. He reeks of honesty. He's just got a lot of integrity. And we have been on somewhat similar paths," he added, alluding to Grogan's years in New York in the corporate world of Sotheby's before the auctioneer decided to go into business for himself.

Grogan said, "I told Jeff the success of the auction would hinge on the reserves he set." He was delighted to hear that Diamond would set none, except on a very, very few pieces.

"I told Michael, 'I just want it to disappear,'" said Diamond. Over the course of the day-long sale, that's exactly what Grogan did.

During previews, Nancy Grogan said the staff had taken to referring to one section of the gallery as "Armoire Alley." There were 38 armoires in the sale. One was the highest-priced lot. The French Empire style carved walnut piece was 114" tall, including its domed top with carved bird and putti cartouche, and sold for \$27,000 (including buyer's premium).

More commonly, the armoires sold for prices that ranged from a few thousand dollars to a few hundred. There was applause after Michael and Nancy Grogan's daughter Lucy got through selling a long run of a dozen.

For the first few hours of the auction, practically every chair was filled. It was so crowded, the seating felt as cramped as it does on a plane. That air-travel feeling was reinforced when a Grogan staff member went up and down the aisle passing out packaged snacks, then returned a little while later with a bag for collecting trash.

Bidders included a heavy retail component, including local collector Jon Delli Priscoli and his wife, Jennifer; Malcolm Rogers, outgoing director of the Museum of Fine Arts, Boston, shopping for himself; and a man who had just bought a large house and needed to furnish it. Also present were some dealers, who bought in bulk. Several of Diamond's clients, some of whom had never been to an auction, were there too, and at the start, with the neophytes in mind, Grogan had explained bidding procedures extra carefully.

Undeniably, A Room with a Vieux Antiques sold to people who liked formal decor. It's not a popular preference these days. What never seems to go out of style, though, is mirrors. In an era that

spawned the "selfie," some of the day's highest prices were achieved by the sale's 64 mirrors.

I also counted exactly 64 beds in the catalog. A Louis XV-style rococo carved walnut example brought \$13,200 (est. \$1000/3000). Cataloged as a king, the bed was tagged with a note at the sale saying it was actually a full. Apparently, the high bidder didn't get the memo. For that reason, the bed sale did not go through. In any case, as with the \$27,000 armoire, that price was an exceptional result. Few lots exceeded \$5000 hammer.

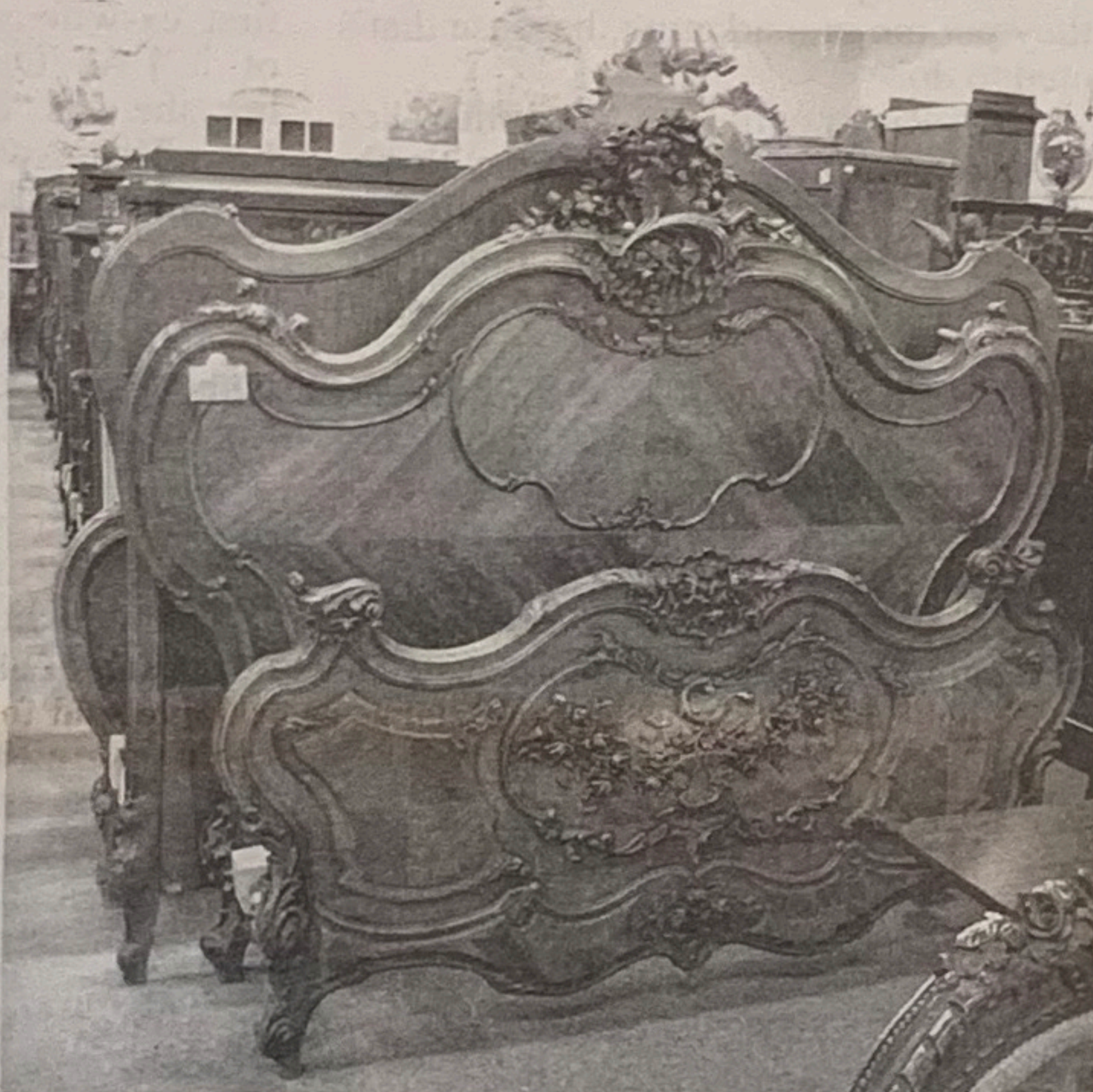
Nadler took a few of their clients to the previews. "They said, 'I feel so sad,'" she reported. Diamond said, "Customers are calling me and saying the same thing. I tell them, 'I feel good.' I thought I would be more upset, but the only sadness I feel is when I look at the empty space. It's empty in a lot of different ways. The business was such a big part of my life for all those years."

Being able to let it all go is one thing. Watching it get auctioned is another. Diamond and Nadler made the decision not to be there. Instead, they were enjoying April in Paris.

For more information, phone Grogan at (781) 461-9500 or see the Web site (www.groganco.com).



A man in the room bought this Louis XVI style fruitwood marquetry-inlaid and ormolu-mounted marble-top cylinder desk for \$5100 (est. \$2000/4000). Schinto photo.



This Louis XV-style rococo carved walnut full-size bed achieved \$13,200 (est. \$1000/3000). It was the top bed price of the sale. The transaction was not completed, however, because the bidder failed to notice the addendum on its size, which was mistakenly described in the printed catalog as a king. Schinto photo.



This Quimper partial dinner service, including this covered tureen, sold for \$1080 (est. \$600/800). Schinto photo.



This 94" x 44" x 18" French provincial carved fruitwood two-door cupboard made \$480 (est. \$500/1000). Schinto photo.

This bronze metal sculpture of a reclining angel on a marble base measures 9" high x 19" wide. It sold in the room for \$660 (est. \$500/1000). Schinto photo.



This Louis XV-style carved walnut three-piece chaise longue set (a pair of bergères and an ottoman) sold on the Internet for \$3690 (est. \$1000/2000).



This French carved walnut demilune velvet-upholstered reception banquette brought \$1320 (est. \$800/1200). Schinto photo.



Flanking the gallery entry, this pair of carved stone putti-form garden fountains brought \$540 (est. \$800/1200). Each measures 36" x 16". Schinto photo.

- AUCTION -



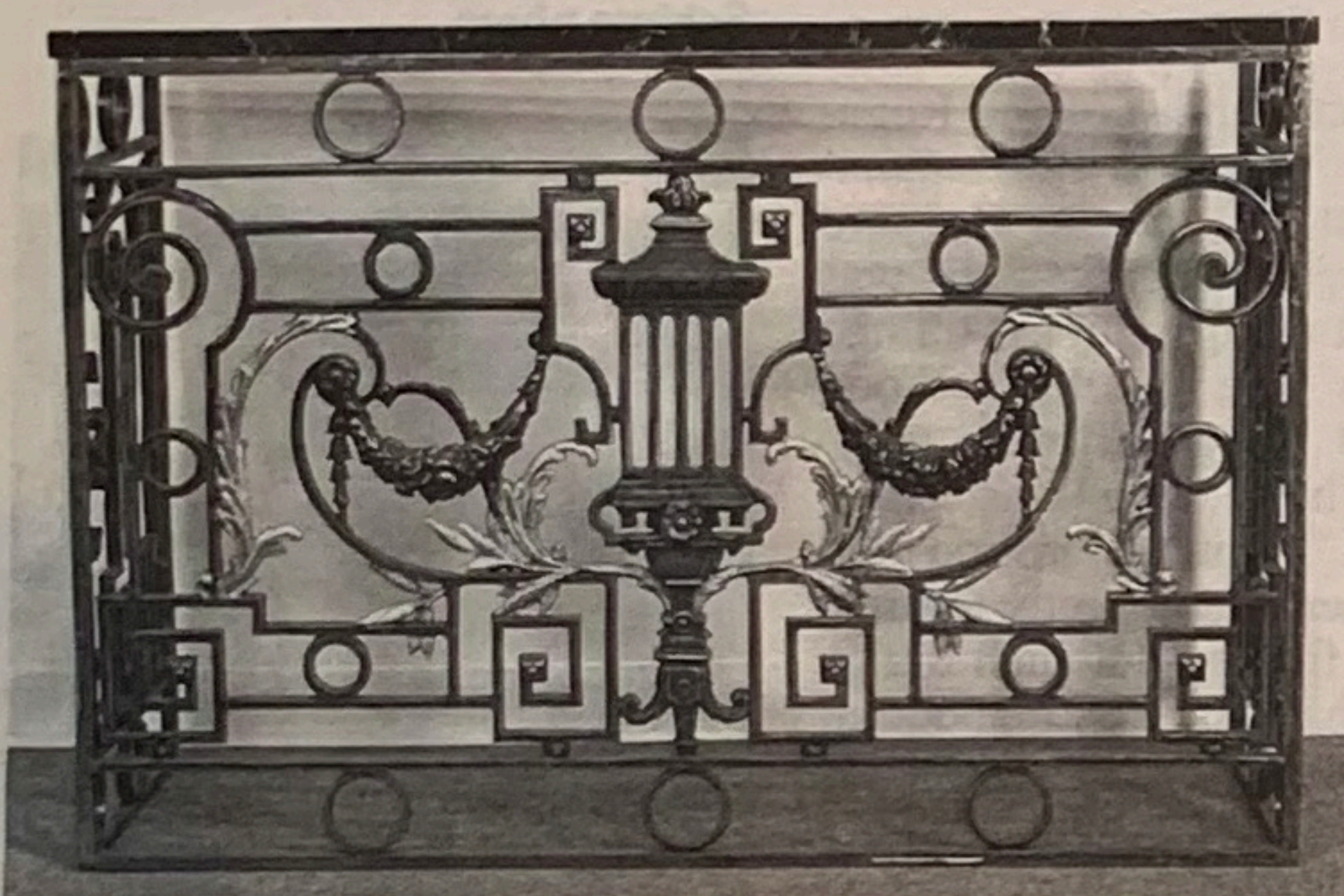
This 10" x 13½" x 7½" Napoleon III style gilt-bronze and alabaster inkwell fetched \$1080 (est. \$800/1200). Schinto photo.



A set of six (four shown) wrought-iron lyre-back metal garden chairs brought \$2040 (est. \$300/500). Schinto photo.



Malcolm Rogers, outgoing director of the Museum of Fine Arts, Boston, is standing against the wall, in front of the gilt mirror. The museum announced in February that he will step down when his successor is found. Michael Grogan joked from the podium that they had a job opening for him. Schinto photo.



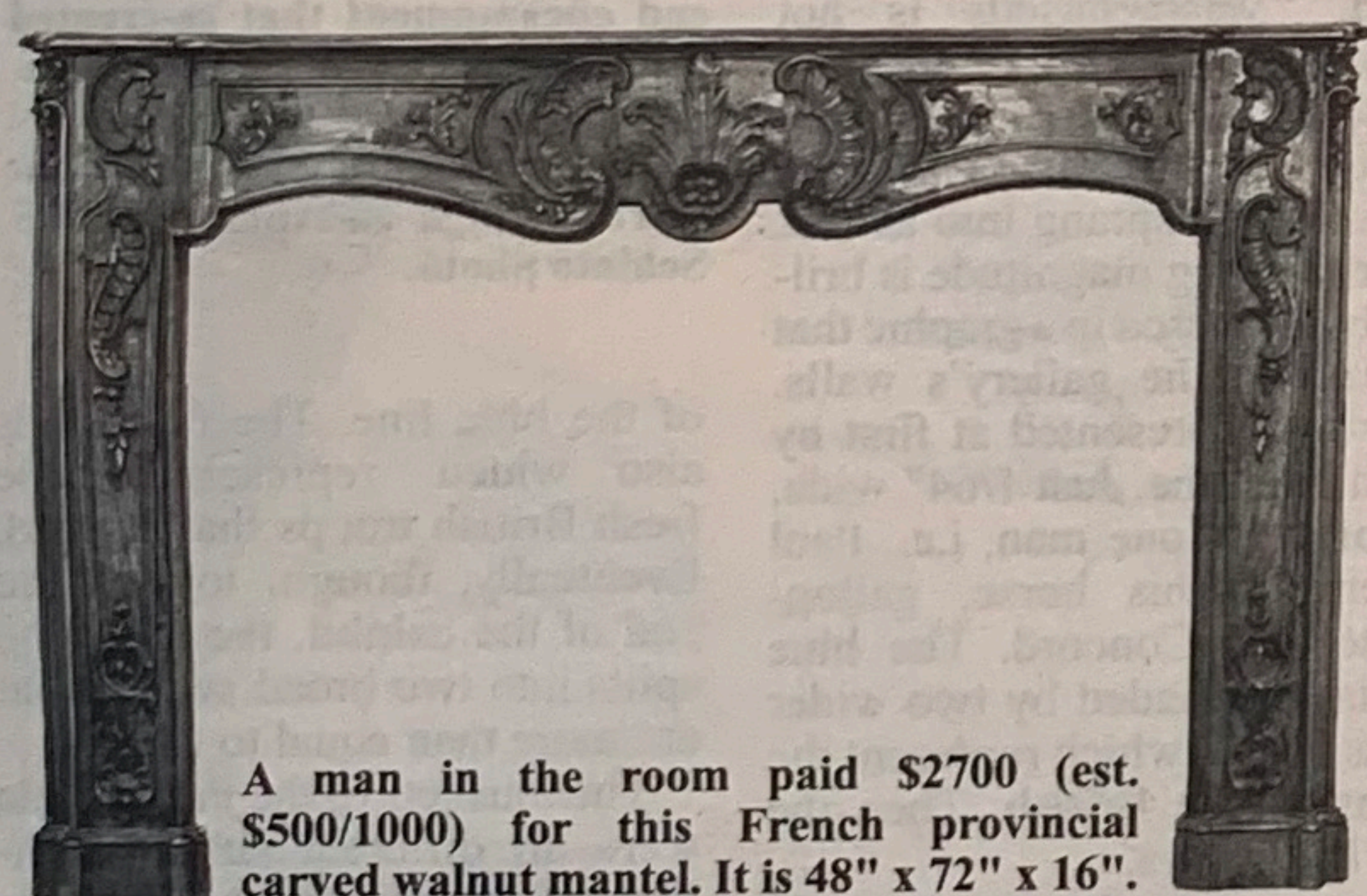
A phone bidder paid \$1920 (est. \$1000/1500) for this Neoclassical gilt-decorated marble-top iron console table. It measures 37" x 53" x 17".



There were a dozen or more chandeliers in the sale. This Napoleon III-style bronze and alabaster example sold for \$2700 (est. \$500/1000). Five less grand ones sold separately to Internet bidders for \$420 to \$1560.



This Continental carved giltwood and etched-glass mirror sold in the room for \$7800 (est. \$2000/3000).



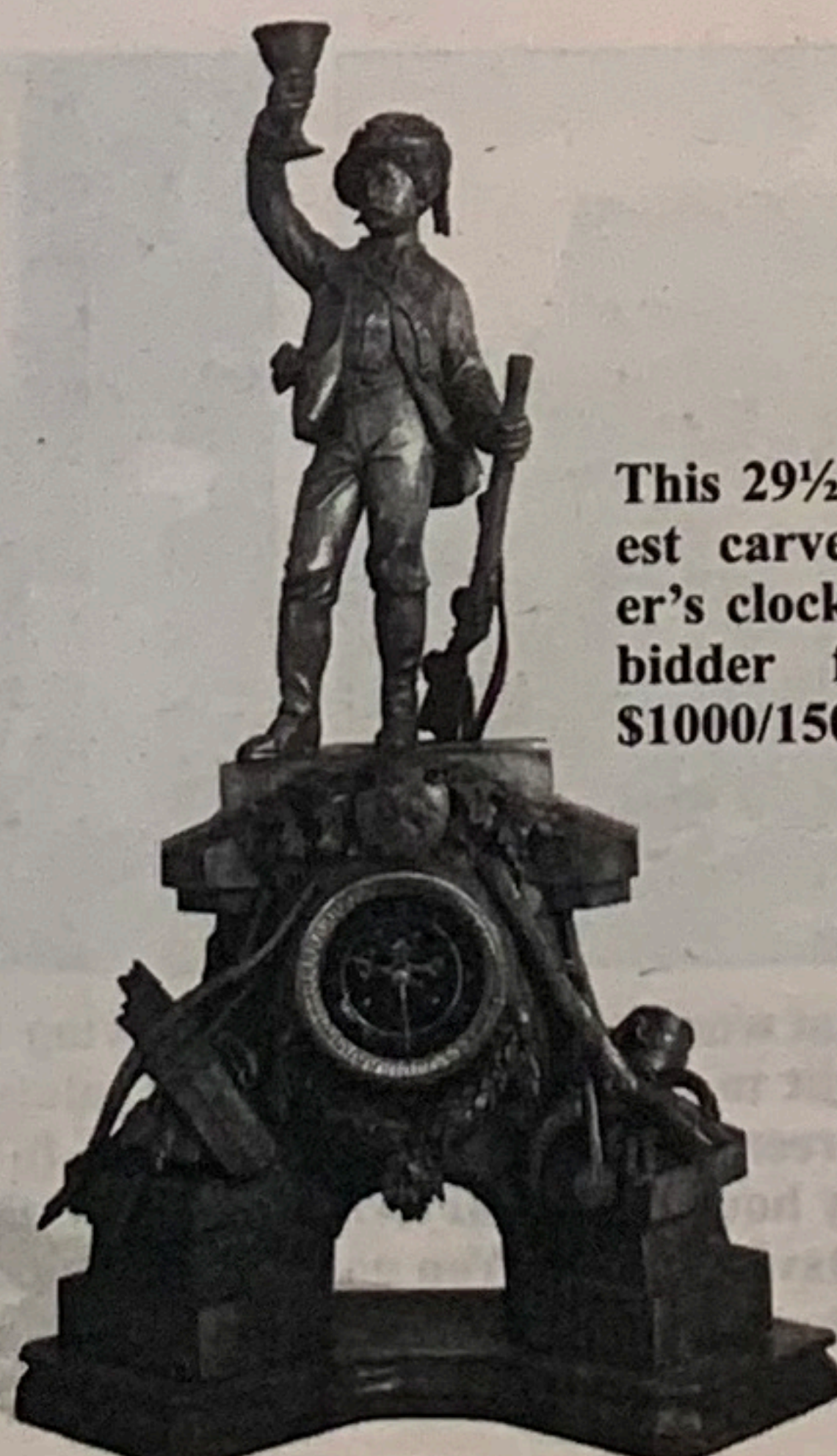
A man in the room paid \$2700 (est. \$500/1000) for this French provincial carved walnut mantel. It is 48" x 72" x 16".



This pair of French cast-iron urns on pedestals, 63" tall, brought \$6600 (est. \$5000/7000).



This Regency-style mahogany-inlaid games cabinet with faux book doors went to the phone for \$3000 (est. \$500/700).



This 29½" tall Black Forest carved walnut hunter's clock sold to a phone bidder for \$3600 (est. \$1000/1500).



This French Empire-style carved walnut armoire, 114" tall, achieved the top price of the sale, \$27,000 (est. \$10,000/20,000).