

The 46th Annual Ellis Antiques Show: Letter from "Mesopotamia"

by Jeanne Schinto

"I try to avoid 'average,'" said marine antiques specialist Alan Granby. Moments earlier, we had arrived for the preview party at the Ellis show at The Castle at the Boston Park Plaza Hotel & Towers and stepped into the booth of the Hyannis Port, Massachusetts-based dealer, amazed. High up on the wall was a matching pair of figureheads, one meant for either side of a bow, each the color of bleached driftwood. On a table we saw two mammoth 18th-century hurricane lamps, labeled George III, circa 1810, and clear as frozen spring water. In another spot there was an extremely rare type of E. Howard ship's clock, engraved with the name of Donald McKay, one of the greatest clipper-ship builders of the 19th century. On an outside wall hung a painting of the steamship Boston by James Bard, 17 men in black coats and top hats standing on the polished deck. Granby turned over his one-hour sandglass, a brand-new acquisition, not yet priced. "I'll see how long it takes me to sell it all," he said.

Spirits were running high at the start of this yearly event, where we spent a total of seven and a half hours divided between two visits over the course of the show's run from its November 2, 2005, preview to the November 6 show's end. It was no hardship.

Granby was not the only dealer who had brought extraordinary wares to this city with a reputation for not being New York. In 1999 William Vareika of Newport, Rhode Island, broke the \$1 million price point here in the land where the American antiques trade began when he exhibited a seven-figure Martin Johnson Heade. This time, he brought to the industry's Mesopotamia a \$2.5 million John Singer Sargent. A Boston *Globe* reporter happened to be in the exhibit space as Vareika and his wife, Alison, were hanging it. A photo appeared in the *Globe* the next morning.

Vareika did not sell the Heade here and had not sold the Sargent by Saturday (although seven other paintings of his had found buyers by then). It doesn't matter. What does matter is that these dealers understand how to create excitement around antiques and art. They know how to talk to Bostonians and to the press, which in turn communicates to potential customers for them.

"Someone who saw the Sargent in the *Globe* called me. He might buy it," Vareika said. Imagine! The caller was prompted not by a glossy ad in *The Magazine Antiques* but by the daily rag that costs 50¢ on the street corner. Vareika's smile was bemused. Dealers must be ready for business that comes from any quarter for any reason, his expression implied.

Granby and Vareika were two of 35 dealers at the show this year (despite the floor plan, which shows a booth number 36, but no number 22). Last year's total was 37. We think 35 is all that the space can handle. You may recall that the square footage has shrunk due to renovations by Smith & Wollensky, which serves steaks in another part of The Castle.

In 2004 Vose Galleries of Boston, Inc. was given space to hang only seven paintings. The venerable dealers from Newbury Street did not complain, at least not publicly. (And one of the seven, by Eastman Johnson, tagged \$85,000, was sold.) But this year they were obviously reveling in their roomy digs adjacent to one of the bars that was set for the party. They brought two dozen or more of their best pre-1900 works.

We worried a little as we watched glasses of red wine being raised and hot hors d'oeuvres being passed within inches of their William Bradford scene of rosy icebergs (\$198,000), their Heade still life of fruit (\$375,000), their early view of Medfield by George Inness (\$97,000), their portrait of a spaniel by America's earliest genre painter, Alvan Fisher (\$55,000), and their stunning view of the Presidential Range's Mount Washington by Edward Nichols (\$115,000).

We needn't have. The crowd was large and happy but never wild, and when we made our return visit on Saturday, the Bradford had been sold. The 20½" x 30" oil on canvas, *Bark "Panther" and Icebergs off the Coast of Newfoundland*, was going to a new marine museum in Wisconsin, said Abbot W. "Bill" Vose, adding that the closer of the sale was his daughter, Beth, who represents the sixth generation of art-dealing Voses.

The show is a benefit; it has supported the Ellis Memorial & Eldredge House, Inc. for nearly 50 years. It also raises money for the Boston Health Care for the Homeless Program at Massachusetts General Hospital. On the night before the party, committee members who champion these causes gathered at an invitation-only event. It is traditional, and traditionally closed to the press, but being press, we were nonetheless curious about it, so we asked show promoter Joscelyn "Josh" Wainwright what it was like.

"It is a smaller, more intimate affair than the preview party," he said. It takes place right in the exhibition space. It used to be a sit-down dinner but isn't any longer. Selling isn't its overt purpose, although selling "occasionally" takes place. Rather, it's "an opportunity for dealers and committee members to get to know each other."

The list of those a dealer may meet there is as impressive as any list of its kind. We made several matches between it and the lists that appear annually in the pages of *Forbes*. On the 2005 billionaires' list alone were these three: Amos B. Hostetter Jr. (\$2.2 billion, net worth); Peter M. Nicholas (\$3.5 billion); and Edward C. "Ned" Johnson III (\$6 billion).

Any dealer would relish the chance to make a connection with the likes of them. Less obvious is how a dealer gets chosen for the Ellis-or-eliminated, for that matter. Is it solely Wainwright's decision, or is it one that he makes in concert with committee members?

"It's made in concert," Wainwright told us. "One of our philosophical aims is to have as broad a spectrum as possible. It makes the show more exciting. We have found that introducing a new area of collecting brings in new people, and that increases the possibility of sales for all. One dealer did not return this time because of health; another had a conflict. So there are those reasons. It's also a question of how well the dealer is perceived in terms of presentation and quality."

No conclusions should be drawn from the next paragraph, but, for the record, missing from the exhibitor lineup this time were premier sampler-purveyors Stephen and Carol Huber of Old Saybrook, Connecticut; along with Taylor Williams of Chicago; Gary E. Young of Centreville, Maryland; Edith Weber of New York City; Birdie Fortescue of London; Good & Hutchinson, Sheffield, Massachusetts; New England Garden Ornaments Inc., North Brookfield, Massachusetts; and G. Sergeant, Woodbury, Connecticut.

Additions to the roster were Dillingham & Co., New York City; Arthur Guy Kaplan of Baltimore; Robert Lloyd Inc., Roslyn Heights, New York; Raccoon Creek Antiques at Oley Forge, Oley, Pennsylvania; and Peter H. Eaton and Joan R. Brownstein of Newbury, Massachusetts, who shared a space.

Eaton has exhibited his New England furniture previously at the Ellis-for five years in the 1980's and for another five in the 1990's. "You just go where it's hot," he said to explain his zigzag.

The Young Collectors' Evening has a committee too, its couples' names distinguishable at least in one way from those on other lists, in that few call themselves "Mr. and Mrs." In our travels around the show, we asked several dealers what they would recommend that a young collector buy. They are, after all, the show's future.

Virtually all dealers had the same advice as Charles Washburne of Chappaqua, New York. "I would suggest that they save up and buy one good thing instead of half a dozen mediocre things." There are no mediocre pieces at this show anyway. Nor may there be a need for some of these young collectors to "save up." What they may lack isn't money but the knowledge that would enable them to avoid mediocrity no matter where they shop.

Or they may have no direction. Which style? Which period? Which category? Charles Hollingsworth of Kyser-Hollingsworth, Washington, D.C., had a specific suggestion for young collectors trying to sort it all out. "If I were a young collector, I would try to buy a card table," he said. Never mind that he had two card tables at the show (one of which sold); the suggestion made good sense.

"There are lots on the market in many different styles and in a range of prices. Traditionally, card tables were a wedding gift. Young couples often lived with one or the other set of parents. The table would be considered a practical and much welcomed gift. They come in all grades, from simple to elaborate. You could buy a good quality card table for two thousand dollars," Hollingsworth said. Having spent the money, it could become a young collector's impetus to study. "And card tables are very well-mannered," he added. "They can fit in anywhere."

New York City dealers Carswell Rush Berlin said of young collectors' nights in general: "I think it's the smartest thing we do, though it's important to fill the room. Good parties need a critical mass." His specialty is a category that the young collectors' parents do not necessarily favor: Classical pieces from the first 40 years of the 19th century. "Not as many people focus on it because they don't really know what this stuff is," he said. "Only since 1993 have there been many important museum exhibitions."

Berlin was speaking to us just steps outside his booth, which looked like a period stage set. It was the lighting as much as the pieces that created the effect. In addition to a luxurious Boston-made sleigh bed, he had brought a Boston sofa, a Boston marble-top commode, and a rare Boston Restoration carved mahogany cheval mirror.

"Conceivably, these could all have been in the same Boston home," he said. "It's a fictional tableau, but a probable one that makes sense when the pieces are seen together."

It's easier to "tell the story" when the pieces relate to each other, Berlin went on. It's a story being heard by some people for the first time. "I'm in a different stage than people who sell eighteenth-century furniture. We have to start the education at the 'grade-school' level instead of 'high school.'" Using another metaphor, he said, "People don't always understand that they're seeing 'pears' instead of 'apples.' They may complain that the 'apples' don't taste like 'pears' instead of appreciating the 'pears' for what they are."

Last year around the time of the Ellis show, Berlin sold to the Museum of Fine Arts, Boston, a major Classical piece, a Philadelphia secretary-bookcase. That's progress, but Berlin knows that he and we all need more. "This isn't just about the Ellis show," he said. "We're all basically mom-and-pop people, so it's hard for any one of us to effect a change in the market on our own. The only way we can do it is collectively, at an antiques show like this one. Shows are the only chance we have to act in concert."

"There have been structural changes in the market today. As a result, dealers and show organizers are going to have to work more closely than we have in the past and become more sophisticated and creative about what we do. We need to do what modern corporations do. We're talking about confronting cultural trends. We need a more scientific approach. That's going to be difficult, but I think it can be done."

Could there be a better place to work on that goal than in Boston, where over 100 years ago the successful marketing of antiques in America began?

For more information, contact the Ellis office at (617) 248-8571 or see the Web site (www.ellisantiques.com).