

Peabody Essex Museum Supporters Make Good Customers

by Jeanne Schinto

The Peabody Essex Museum Antiques Show doesn't have a young collectors night. It doesn't need one. Like an heirloom, the show has been passed down to the next generation, which has embraced it. One remark was often made at the preview party for the 34th annual event, traditionally held over Thanksgiving weekend, which fell on November 24-26, 2006. It was that these committee people, their friends, and extended families seem actually to like the objects that the dealers have for sale. These 28 dealers didn't feel like a backdrop at the preview party, and they very often sold.

When we arrived at that Friday night event, a benefit for the museum's educational programs, the three exhibition rooms were already electrified by the crowd's energy. It had been revved by a one-hour first look and reception for corporate sponsors and the honorary committee. We saw at once that every detail was attended to. Towers of tiny, elegant canapés made grabbing little bites easy; no plates or utensils were required. Hands were freer to hold drink or else to take out one's wallet. Even the partygoers' attire seemed practical, ready for action; we noticed more party slacks than skirts, more sensible party shoes than tippy heels. No one actually danced, but they could have. Swing- BRAZIL, Beverly, Massachusetts, played jazz, bossa novas, and sambas throughout the evening.

Part of the space that the museum gives over to promoter Christine Crossman Vining is its magnificent East India Marine Hall, a high-ceilinged rectangle as big as large ballroom. Its walls are hung with China trade paintings and ship's figureheads. The booths that Vining configures in there and in two adjacent spaces seem to take their cue from maze designs of 18th-century England. One could get lost, happily.

Vining reminds us of the type of high school teacher who, scarily strict and glamorous at once, always got the best work out of everyone. She calls herself "a benevolent dictator." She has what it takes to make this show work as well as it does. The setup and breakdown, which demand the use of a freight elevator, could easily become nightmarish. Ironically, because of that looming prospect, every dealer takes special care to cooperate, and the opposite happens. One dealer noted, "It's in fact the easiest entry and exit of any of the shows I do."

Boston's North Shore, where most of the museum's supporters live, is not a citified place, but it has a sophisticated history and a tradition of a wide-angled view of the world. The men who developed 18th-century Salem and environs made their fortunes from seafaring and its attendant industries. It was said that many of them could speak of a voyage to Calcutta or Hong Kong as if it were not much more than a hop to Newport or Newfoundland. In 1889 Lucy Larcom wrote of Essex County, "It seemed as if our nearest neighbors lived over there across the water; we breathed the air of foreign countries, curiously interblended with our own."

Because so many North Shore people were travelers, they established collecting traditions that predate those of Elizabeth Stillinger's well-known book, *The Antiquers*, a survey that begins with 1850. Not too long after the American Revolution, sea captains, shipmasters, and supercargoes began bringing home the art objects and natural-world rarities they found in all parts of the globe. When their houses got too full, they established public collections— the forerunners of the Peabody Essex, where today visitors to the museum's permanent galleries can see some of those amazing treasures from China, Japan, and India, along with important collections of marine art, Asian export art, and Americana.

Aware of the museum's roots, the dealers who do this show logically offer a comparable, global mix, and the people who understand and support the museum naturally respond. Where else but here, asked Rick Russack of F. Russack Books, Danville, New Hampshire, would he have sold his rare book about Indian army uniforms or the one on the chemical arts of ancient China?

We had a chance to speak with Russack on Saturday afternoon, when we returned to the show. He already described his results as "very, very good." Many other dealers gave similar reports. One dealer said his sales were "spectacular." Jerry Arcari of Landry & Arcari Oriental Rugs & Carpeting, Salem and Boston, who had already made five sales with Sunday still to go, said it had been his "best Peabody Essex show ever." We encountered not a single glum dealer at this show.

Even more encouraging, on that second visit, we noticed several pieces of furniture, notoriously slow to move these days, were gone or bearing red sold tags. These items included a harvest table, capable of being extended to 11', offered by W.M. Schwind Jr., Yarmouth, Maine; a set of Windsor chairs and a chest of drawers, brought by Frederick Di Maio and Thomas Buto of East Dennis Antiques, East Dennis, Massachusetts; a large chest of drawers, exhibited by Jane McClafferty Antiques, New Canaan, Connecticut; and chairs and a table from the Mission period, one specialty of American Decorative Arts, New Canaan, New Hampshire.

We also saw multiple red dots in the booth of Barbara Fine Associates, Beverly, Massachusetts, and were told by Roger L. Haller of New York City's Silver Plus that he sold a Georgian meat platter, along with other Georgian items and his only Chinese piece, a swing-handle basket.

It's important to note that prices at this show, even at the top, were not strokeinducing. A hand-painted canvas folding screen, circa 1920, priced at \$1250, was sold by Steven J. Rowe of Newton, New Hampshire, along with a mirror, a cabinet, a marble-top table, and set of fireplace tools in the same price range.

Roy and Sheila Mennell of Bradford Trust Fine Art, Harwich Port, Massachusetts, sold the most expensive painting they brought to the show for \$18,500. It was a Provincetown scene painted by one of the Philadelphia Ten, Nancy Maybin Ferguson, and its buyer, a collector, also bought from them an \$8500 painting of a Bermuda cottage by another member of the Philadelphia Ten, Eleanor Abrams.

David Brooker Fine Art, Woodbury, Connecticut, sent out on approval for \$4950 a circa 1920 scene of French cows in a pasture. Akin Antiques & Lighting, formerly of Massachusetts, now of Raleigh, North Carolina, sold an English mahogany shelf, circa 1890, tagged \$2400.

These price points are engineered by Vining by dint of dealer selection. She knows that, although the committee members are aware of antiques values and come prepared to purchase them, they generally are not extravagant spenders. She also keeps in mind that the show is open to museum visitors whose \$13 admission ticket entitles them to entry. Some of them may be new to the idea of buying antiques.

Speaking of those museum attendees, we hereby once again urge the committee to make use of bigger, brighter, more raucous signage to lure them in. The breadcrumb trail should extend from the sidewalk all the way to the exhibition area on the second floor. Signs could even be posted in the adjacent garage, where free parking is available on weekends to all Salem visitors, no matter what their destination. In the museum atrium, a shiny red Porsche was parked, because Ira Porsche Danvers was the show's presenting sponsor. It got a lot of attention, but nowhere around it was a sign for the show.

These missed opportunities were also noticed by a collector friend, who said, "As I was approaching the building, I wondered if I had the wrong day, since I didn't see anything outside announcing the show. The glass doors coming in to the exhibition spaces were closed. They should be open. People who pay to enter the museum should be made aware that their money paid for a visit to an antiques show too."

By the end of the weekend, the winner of the raffle, whose grand prize was \$5000 to spend with the dealer of one's choice, had made her purchase. Julie Vinette, a 36-year-old artist who owns Foodie's Feast, a café and catering business in Marblehead, told us she bought "a fabulous sapphire ring" from Maxine Antiques, North Amherst, Massachusetts. Vinette was on the show's committee. "What a coincidence, huh?" she laughed. On the contrary, to us it seemed like poetic justice.

For more information, contact the museum by phone at (978) 745-9500 or via its Web site (www.pem.org).