

ANTIQUES

Antiques Dealers on TV (Casting Calls Posted)

By Eve M. Kahn

March 24, 2011

Cable networks are now showing practically nonstop footage of antiques dealers crawling around attics and warehouses and giving high appraisal values to stunned owners. During the last year at least 11 new reality series have documented the business.

Most of the shows so far cater to male audiences. On “American Pickers” (History Channel), Mike Wolfe and Frank Fritz paw through the moldering contents of garages and barns for the likes of “a must-have German leather pilot’s helmet and a rare ship’s compass.” On Spike TV’s “Auction Hunters,” Allen Haff and Clinton Jones buy abandoned storage units and find “1920s Prohibition whiskey likely smuggled by Al Capone” and “century-old Masonic swords.”

But in the last few weeks, female casts have emerged. Three women running a Chicago-area antiques store named the Perfect Thing appraise miscellany on TLC’s “What the Sell?!” The Michigan dealer Cari Cucksey keeps sellers calm at tag sales and restores ruined furniture on HGTV’s “Cash & Cari.”

There have already been failures. TLC’s “Auctioneer\$,” filmed at an Arizona auction house, died after a few episodes, as did National Geographic’s “Auction Packed,” about a Pennsylvania family of auctioneers.

In addition to the risk of cancellation, dealers on camera now face greater public scrutiny of their wares. Last month, The Art Newspaper reported, government officials seized an antique bronze Chinese sword at Gallery 63, an Atlanta auction house filmed for “Auction Kings” (Discovery Channel). The auctioneer, Paul Brown, said in a recent phone interview that, according to the consignor, the American military had looted the weapon from one of Saddam Hussein’s offices. Days after the lot appeared online, Mr. Brown said, federal agents “were down here with the badges and the subpoenas.”

In early March Don Presley Auctions in Orange County, Calif., was widely publicizing a sale of Chinese rhino horn pendants and cups that had turned up in an abandoned storage unit on A&E’s “Storage Wars.” But a few days before the auction, government agents took away

the collection “for inspection to make sure it is legal to sell,” according to the Presley Web site (donpresleyauction.com).

“Storage Wars” still filmed the auction, without the rhino horn. Appearing on cable “is a help for my business, no doubt about it,” Don Presley, the company’s owner, said. He added, “I made new customers out of the TV crew,” who bid at the sale.

At least a half-dozen more antiques programs are in progress. The Canadian dealers Charles and Peter Green are developing one due in late 2011. A pilot is being readied for “Antique Warriors,” starring Manhattan and Massachusetts antiques pickers who drive a vintage bus powered by corn oil. “The mission is to find the coolest stuff on the planet,” Douglas Kirkpatrick, a producer of the show, wrote in an e-mail.

Other proposed series with similar titles, like “Great American Auction” and “Great American Pick Off,” have put out casting calls for dealers and aspiring actors. One ad for an as-yet-unnamed show announced: “We’re looking for anything that may be extremely rare, holds great historical value or is a one-of-a-kind item with great family history.”

AMERICAN INDIAN ARTISANS

Victorian buyers of American Indian artifacts took few notes about the artisans’ names and intentions. For researchers now piecing together the back stories, “there’s sometimes zero information in the archives,” said Aaron Glass, an anthropologist at the Bard Graduate Center: Decorative Arts, Design History, Material Culture in Manhattan.

For an exhibition titled “Objects of Exchange: Social and Material Transformation on the Late Nineteenth-Century Northwest Coast,” Mr. Glass and a group of Bard students set out to clear up a few mysteries about tribal artifacts.

The team studied 37 objects lent by the American Museum of Natural History. They consulted with tribe members and pored through the museum’s “enigmatic assortment of anthropological ephemera,” Catherine Brooke Penaloza, a Bard Graduate Center student, wrote in the catalog, from Yale University Press.

An early-1900s sketch of a male dancer surrounded by eagles and ravens has now been attributed to Ned Harris, a member of a Vancouver Island tribe. On a late-19th-century apron strung with mollusk shells and puffin beaks, the lettering printed on flour-sack fragments has been deciphered; it spells out ads for Vancouver Island real estate.

“It occupied my time” during some long plane flights, said Rebecca Klassen, the Bard Center researcher who patiently fitted together scans of the letter slices.

The curators remain puzzled, however, by a wooden Haida mermaid. It might depict a goddess known as Sea Foam Woman or a figurehead on a merchant's ship. Or the Haida may have acquired it from an American whittler. What's certain is that a Vancouver Island curio dealer sold it to the natural history museum.

Mr. Glass plans to develop a Web site for posting research discoveries and maps showing where objects were bought and sold.

The Winterthur Museum in Wilmington, Del., has brought out about 20 newly identified pieces in "Made for the Trade: Native American Objects in the Winterthur Collection." The museum's founder, Henry Francis du Pont, had scattered them unlabeled in period rooms.

Laura E. Johnson, the show's curator, said that when she told colleagues how many unsung American Indian objects lay in plain sight, the typical reaction was "shock and disbelief."

The exhibition wall labels explain that American Indians molded tree bark and wood splints into boxes for white customers' dainty handkerchiefs and bonnets. They also sneaked some gallows humor into the designs. Painted diamond and circle motifs, called stockades, represented the tribes' increasingly cramped living quarters. Around 1915 Tomah Joseph, a Passamaquoddy chief in Maine, etched a birch picnic basket with a scene of two angry deer trapping a hunter in a tree.

COFFEE, TEA OR PUCCI?

Vintage uniforms for flight attendants rarely survive, given the hardships of jet-lagged workdays. Mid-20th-century outfits that TWA and Braniff stewardesses kept as souvenirs will be offered on Wednesday in an Augusta Auctions sale at the Church of St. Paul the Apostle in Manhattan.

Braniff uniforms and accessories in turquoise and periwinkle, mainly designed by Pucci, have estimates from \$100 to \$800 each. Crinkly paper outfits (\$400 to \$800 each) were required on TWA's Foreign Accent theme flights in 1968. Different styles of the disposable uniforms matched the flights' food: black Roman togas for lasagna, Parisian couture gold mini-skirts for éclairs, tavern wench ruffled dresses for shepherd's pie, and Manhattan hostess pajamas for steak. The unworn Augusta lots have original warning labels: "highly flammable if washed."

Last month 90 pieces of Braniff clothing were displayed on mannequins at the Riviera hotel in Palm Springs, Calif. Chelsea Marketeers, a Palm Springs distributor, is asking \$250,000 for the collection, including green-and-orange boots, clear-plastic bubble hats and metallic aprons.