

Conversation-Piece Buys, Maybe. Intriguing Histories, Definitely.

No antiques dealer would confide fears of slow sales to a reporter touring the fairs in Manhattan this week, despite the new American president's predictions that

ART REVIEW

EVE M. KAHN

the struggle back to prosperity will be long and uphill. Advice to shoppers during this potentially sluggish market: Even if you're not buying, browse and learn about objects that you have never heard of before.

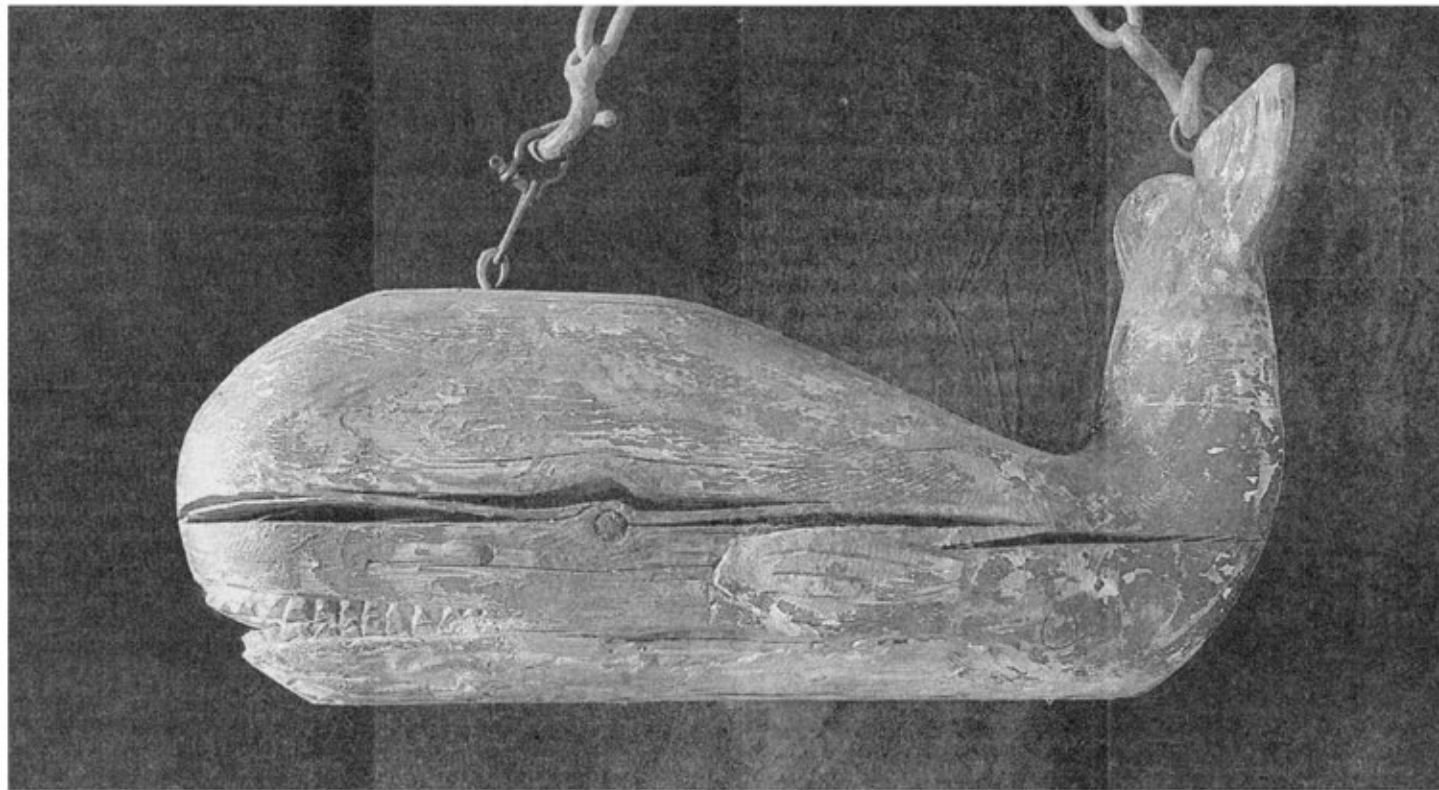
Dealers can be educational resources comparable to excitable, deeply informed, eloquent museum docents. Picking up a piece at a booth could set off a mini-lecture about the historical forces and peculiar personalities that shaped the original design, the enduring mysteries surrounding its production and survival, and maybe why its price is so reasonable.

The prices seem relatively sensible, and the dealers especially scholarly, at the New York Ceramics Fair and the American Antiques Show. Trolling the aisles asking about the newest highlights, any rarities fresh to market, you hear just a few figures over \$10,000, and there are plenty of conversation pieces available for just a few hundred dollars.

The Ceramics Fair, with 36 dealers, mostly from the United

The New York Ceramics Fair continues through Sunday at the National Academy Museum, 1083 Fifth Avenue, near 90th Street, open 11 a.m. to 7 p.m. through Saturday; Sunday, 12 to 5 p.m.; admission, \$20; caskeyles.com, (212) 289-0496.

The American Antiques Show continues through Sunday at the Metropolitan Pavilion, 125 West 18th Street, Manhattan; open 11 a.m. to 8 p.m. except Sunday, 11 to 5; admission, \$18; theamericanantiquesshow.org, (212) 977-7170, Ext. 319.



An early-19th-century whale-oil trade sign from New Bedford, Mass., available at the American Antiques Show.

States and focused on American, Asian and British artifacts, has taken up its usual strangely shaped quarters: parts of the second and fourth floors at the National Academy Museum on Fifth Avenue near 90th Street. Vitrines form shallow booths along the snaking corridors; there are no drywall partitions to limit transparency; and the dealers typically mingle with the crowds rather than sequester themselves behind the displays. You're walking around a giant china shop, sure, but you may feel surprisingly at ease.

The labels can make for entertaining reading outright, with an almost geeky level of detail. At the second-floor booth of Vintage Interiors II, a store in Alexandria, Va., a caption by two 1740s Meissen plates (\$27,500 for the pair)

New York Ceramics Fair National Academy Museum

American Antiques Show Metropolitan Pavilion

notes that they belonged to Saxon royals and have a pattern often mislabeled as a crouching lion but "in reality a tiger prowling amongst prunus." And at a fourth-floor booth for the Stradlings, dealers in New York, a 1760s British teapot (\$11,500) has a rare animal shape on its hexagonal lid; the label speculates that its "ermine finial may be unrecorded."

If you ask for back stories to these squibs, you could bring out long accounts about how pottery relates to the sweep of politics: how anti-Prussian majolica makers in 1880s France would attach figurines of rats beside a Prussian helmet on an inkwell (\$7,875 at Charles L. Washburne Antiques), or how British potters in Liverpool treasonously inscribed pro-American slogans on 1810s pitchers for the lucrative export trade (\$2,000 to \$6,000 at William R. and Teresa F. Kurau). Or stop by Sylvia Powell Decorative Arts for the co-proprietors' engaging biography of the hypochondriacal British ceramist William De Morgan, who spent winters in Florence for his health while gradually bankrupting his business back home producing iridescent mythological scenes on tiles, vases and plates.

The Powell booth has one wall full of Morgan wares (priced at up to \$80,000). "It's probably one of the largest groupings on the market now in the world; we've spent the better part of the year putting it together," said Marc Murray, the co-owner.

Other dealers have taken that maximalist, by-the-dozens approach with American glass pa-

perweights containing realistic flowers and reptiles (mostly around \$1,500 at Leo Kaplan), striped or checkerboard vases and bowls by the Belgian crystal factory Val St. Lambert (mostly between \$800 and \$6,000, at Mark J. West), and ancient Greek, Roman and Islamic jugs and flasks (ranging from \$800 to \$2,000 at Christopher Sheppard), their sheens caused by spending centuries underground.

But the fair's most obsessive booth belongs to Bruce Block, who has clustered about 120 gourd-shaped tiny vases (\$350 to \$6,000) by the 94-year-old ceramist Rose Cabat. She streaks clay in shades of teal, cobalt, gold, lilac, green or chocolate, and never knows before the kiln opens how their markings will turn out. Mr. Block explained the firing techniques and satin-matte glaze formulas, but not before taking out one vase and stroking its cool, creamy body down the reporter's cheek.

This trick often clinches sales, he said: "It's part of the seduction. These are the most Zen pots you'll ever know. They're called 'feelies.'"

The textures are equally irresistible and accessible at the American Antiques Show, which is timed to coincide with Americana auctions this week at Sotheby's and Christie's (and on Thursday, Bonhams's New York branch joined the fray). The annual Americana fest is meant to help collectors slough off the post-holiday torpor and sense of indulgence, and pore through unfrivolous, astringent, functional American design.

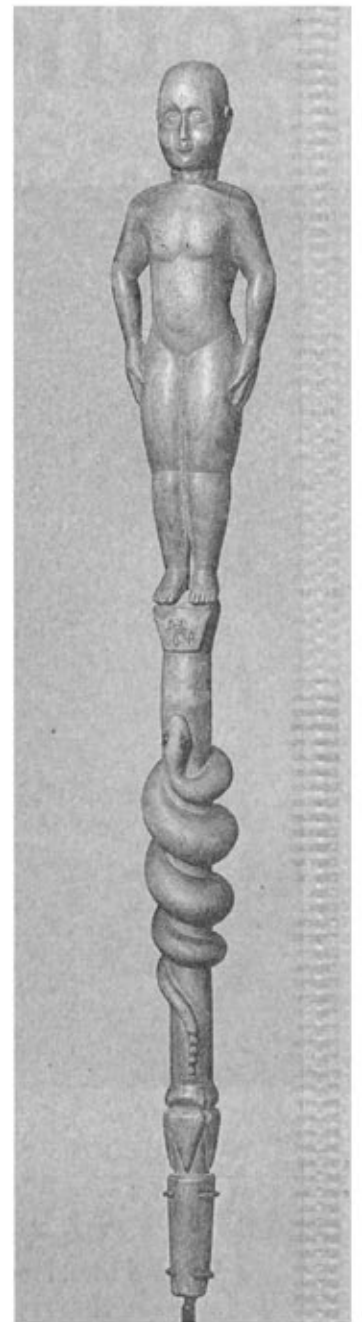
The main attractions at this year's show at the cavernous Metropolitan Pavilion, though, are largely ornamental and would be hard to adapt to any actual purpose at home. Sure, you might find use for the fair's handsome but less exciting goods, like hooked rugs, tall-case clocks,

ONLINE: AT THE FAIRS

Antiques dealers discuss objects from the Winter Antiques Show, the American Antiques Show and the New York Ceramics Fair: nytimes.com/design

metal candlesticks and inlaid bureaus. And for a few hundred dollars, you could take home colored-glass tiles molded with flowers and swans (at M. Finkel & Daughter) or balls wrapped with bright yarn or patchwork cloth in diamond patterns (the Herrs and Raccoon Creek Antiques).

For sheer visual wallop, however, you will likely be more drawn to weathered architectural salvage, such as a pair of 1880s limestone downspouts shaped like open-mouthed lions (\$11,000 at Otto and Susan Hart Antiques), a dozen carved-wooden heads of scowling men (\$7,800 at Judith and James Milne), or a 1920s pair of terra-cotta heads of Lady Liberty on the half shell (\$12,000 at Finnegan Gallery). Painted wooden signs are only a slightly more fragile way to fill your walls, advertising a Pennsylvania flour mill (\$29,500 at RJG Antiques), an upstate New York manufacturer



A cane features a figure atop a rattlesnake in black walnut, also at the antiques show.

of blade sharpeners (\$3,500 at American Primitive), a whale-oil shop in Massachusetts (\$36,000 at Just Folk) or an unknown bank that commissioned a plank reading simply BANK in squiggly, uneven letters.

"Isn't this the most nervous-looking bank sign you've ever seen?" said the seller, Stephen Score, who has priced the piece at \$15,000. "The A, N and K seem to be literally running away from the B."



SYLVIA POWELL DECORATIVE ARTS

A 1901 plate by the British ceramist William De Morgan at Sylvia Powell Decorative Arts, at the New York Ceramics Fair.