

RINKER ON COLLECTIBLES -- Column #1270

Copyright © Rinker Enterprises, Inc. 2011

A Study in Contrasts or Old vs. New

Linda's and my move to Kentwood, Michigan provided the incentive and opportunity to explore the flea market, antiques mall, and antiques show scene in the Northwest Territory. I have been in the field more in the last four months than I was in the previous twelve. It has been an eye-opening experience.

On February 27, the Lake Odessa (IL) Antique Mall Cabin Fever Sale enticed Linda and me to make the trek. Besides finding a few treasures for our new home, I chatted for a few minutes with my friend Barbara Stevens Jersey. We visited the Blue Star Antique Pavilion in Douglas on Saturday, March 26, and the Barry Expo Center Antique Show on Sunday, March 27. While accompanying Linda to Chicago for an April 8-11 educational conference, Al and Susan Klein Bagdade hosted a visit to the April 10 Grayslake Antique Market. The day before Linda and I visited Bindy Bitterman's Eureka Antiques and Collectibles in Evanston and Chicago's Broadway Antiques Mall, on my Top 10 antiques mall list. Lenore Dailey, a friend and dealer who specializes in Victorian jewelry, asked me to check out the Ann Arbor Antiques Market, which Linda and I did on Saturday, May 14. Linda and I arrived an hour and one-half before my 10:00 AM Saturday, May 28 appearance at the Randolph Street Market in Chicago so I could scout it out.

Before contrasting my impressions of the Ann Arbor Antiques Market versus the Randolph Street Market, I want to share a few general impressions. First, the antiques and collectibles market is stronger than I expected. Mall and show booths are filled, although it is evident promoters did assign larger than normal booths to a few select dealers to create this

impression. Attendance is up, and customers are buying. I was pleased to see a steady stream of individuals carrying purchases to their cars. The Ann Arbor Antiques Market was the exception.

Second, merchandise is priced to sell. Prices are the lowest I have seen in 10 years. In a few instances, price points have returned to those of the early to mid-1980s. Affordability has returned to large segments of the antiques and collectibles market.

Third, the majority of purchases were for reuse and decorating purposes. The importance of the collector as a primary buyer continues to diminish. This trend is a major concern, but I see no signs of it reversing in the immediate future.

Fourth, the Country Look is dominant outside major metropolitan areas. The Look is rustic and primitive as opposed to formal country touted in the Country decorating magazines. After living in the East where Colonial and Country were seen as synonymous, it is refreshing to find an appreciation for pioneer/rural late 19th and early 20th century material.

The Rustic/Camp (cabin) Look, as evidenced by the large amount of fishing and hunting collectibles, is strong. It is not clear whether this applies solely to the upper tier of the Midwest states or reaches down into the Heartland states as well. Trips to Indiana and downstate Illinois are in my late summer/fall travel plans.

Fifth, traditional antiques, those that dominated the 1990s and early 2000s mall and show circuit, continue to disappear. The percentage of post-1945 material grows. Much of this merchandise falls outside categories appearing in antiques and collectibles price guides. Nostalgic and decorative focused material is king.

When I moved to Kentwood, I created a wish list of places I wanted to visit. The Allegan (IL) Antiques Market, The Antique Market of Michigan City, and Shippshewana remain. Gordon Addington, Al Bagdade, and Don Friedman insist the Elkhorn (WI) Flea market is a must. I have added it.

A “Top 25”/“Top 30” flea market list appeared in the editions of *Price Guide to Flea Market Treasures*, published by Krause Publications, and *The Official Guide to Flea Market Prices*, published by House of Collectibles, that I edited. The Ann Arbor Antiques Market was a staple, even though its management and others insisted that it was an antiques show held outdoors and not a “true” flea market. The last edition of *The Official Guide to Flea Market Prices* appeared in 2004. A great deal can happen in seven years. It most certainly did in the case of the Ann Arbor Antiques Market.

The Ann Arbor Antiques Market made my “Top” list based upon its reputation. I had never visited it. Hence, I placed it first on my Michigan “to visit” list. The Ann Arbor Antiques Market is a two and one-half hour drive from Kentwood. A prior commitment meant a late start on Saturday, May 14. As a result, Linda and I arrived shortly after 2:30 PM. The two-day market, the first of the 2011 season, started at 8:00 AM. When we arrived, there were less than 20 cars in the parking lot. The grounds looked deserted. Having made the effort to drive this far, Linda and I decided to pay the admission and look around. We should have saved our money.

In its glory days, the Ann Arbor Antiques Market contained seven Quonset hut structures and as many as eight large outside tents. The show we attended filled 3 ½ Quonset huts and one outdoor tent. Building A housed the traditional antiques dealers. For a brief moment, I felt as though I was attending Vermont’s August antique week. The average dealer age was well over 55, possibly even 60. The merchandise was priced at a level that suggested the sellers were more enamored with displaying it than selling it. The material in Buildings B, C, and D was on par with what I saw at the Barry Expo Center Antiques Show, although much reduced in volume. The material in the outside tent made Shabby Chic look high-class.

The show was not what I expected. Either the show was having an off day or it was a shadow of its former self. Not wishing to ask the dealers (one third of whom had deserted their booths by 3:00 PM), I talked with the concessionaires. They confirmed my suspicions. The

show has been declining for years. Dealers have disappeared, the result of aging, death, or failure to cover costs. As dealer count lessened, so did attendance. May is the strongest show month with dealer count declining over the summer.

I checked the Ann Arbor Antiques show off my list permanently. I recommend to Lenore that she look elsewhere for shows to do. When an established show is in free fall, reversing the situation is difficult. What I have written will not help show promoter Doug Supinger. But, the truth will out.

What a difference two weeks makes. After attending Chicago's Randolph Street Market, I left feeling the future of the antiques and collectibles business is in good hands. The show was filled with young people, couples, and families. It has been over 10 years since I experienced this level of buzz at a show. Where has a show like this been? How did I miss hearing about it?

The show has something for everyone and everyone's pocket. Although Modernism, outsider art, and crafts dominate, the antiques sector is well represented. My first impression from walking the show was how affordable everything is priced. The dealers come to sell and sell they do.

I have been preaching for years that today's dealers need to give buyers what they want and not what they think they want. The Randolph Street Market does this. Sellers have material that matches current hot decorator looks and fashion styles. Vintage clothing and accessory dealers provide plenty of brand name merchandise.

This is a show with social amenities. There is valet parking, although Linda and I had no problems finding a parking spot on a nearby street. The show management refunds the admission fee if a customer makes a purchase—what a novel idea. The food is wholesome, inexpensive, and varied. Shipping service is available as are a group of gentlemen ready to carry purchases to a customer's car, truck, or van.

The Randolph Street Market is a show for the MTV and computer generation. It is hip and trendy. Do not dismiss it because of its urban setting. This show could play in Peoria.

One issue remains. How do you bottle this vitality and excitement and transport it throughout the country? There has to be a way.

Rinker Enterprises and Harry L. Rinker are on the Internet. Check out

www.harryrinker.com.

You can listen and participate in *WHATCHA GOT?*, Harry's antiques and collectibles radio call-in show, on Sunday mornings between 8:00 AM and 10:00 AM Eastern Time. If you cannot find it on a station in your area, *WHATCHA GOT?* streams live and is archived on the Internet at www.gcnlive.com

***SELL, KEEP OR TOSS? HOW TO DOWNSIZE A HOME, SETTLE AN ESTATE, AND APPRAISE PERSONAL PROPERTY* (House of Collectibles, an imprint of the Random House Information Group, \$16.95) is available at your favorite bookstore and via www.harryrinker.com.**