

Auction bug bites old-furniture lover hard

By ELAINE JUSTICE
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The man sitting in front of us holds up a numbered cardboard square. "Sold!" says the auctioneer as he pounds the gavel.

"Whazzat?" asks my friend John, a newcomer to auctions. "He says it's sold," I say, craning my neck to see the next item.

"I KNOW that, but for how much?" John asks. "Twenty. The vase sold for \$20," I say patiently.

The first time most people go to an auction, the speed with which things are bought and sold, carted in and carted out, excites the newcomer.

I delight in persuading friends to go to an auction with me because I never tire of their child-like wonder the first time they experience the anxiety and excitement of bidding for merchandise. I also like to watch other people spend money.

People get caught up in it. They commit themselves by raising numbered placards, and bang—they own something. They win by paying the highest price.

The objects range from granny's snuff box to someone's collection of Staffordshire bone china, from a Louis XVI dining set to an embossed Victorian album.

This is not the specialty auction where an art connoisseur adds to his collection or a farmer buys new livestock. This is an auction with ninth- or tenth-hand furniture. It's an auction with genuine antiques, with used furniture.

I like to come early to get a look at everything. Today John and I arrive an hour before the bidding so that we can feel inside the cubbyholes of the inlaid Hepplewhite secretary, open a Victorian wardrobe, sit on a Queen Anne chair.

"Is that what that is?" John asks, pointing to a chair. "No, that's Chippendale," I say, then peek at the tag to see if I'm right. I pretend to look for quality, even though I don't know much about antiques.

Some people think antiques are reserved for museums or discriminating collectors who buy old things as a good investment. I, on the other hand, look on antiques with the fondness I have for stray dogs. And there isn't anything wrong with a cracked vase or a broken chair that a little glue and ingenuity won't fix.

I like anything old. It's admiration; anything that gets to be that old has to be admired for its stamina.

As John and I wander up and down the antique mall looking for bargains, more and more people come in, sign their names at a table by the door and take numbered squares so that the auctioneer can tell who's bidding. The mall is an old furniture store partitioned to form 10 small shops, an auction gallery and a broad hallway. People mill around it until the sale begins.

Suddenly I find it—the most beautiful bed I've ever seen. Its rich dark wood is intricately inlaid; its delicately carved posts rise up the ceiling.

"That's it!" I cry, running towards it.

"What?" John follows, squinting as I caress the carved headboard. I think he's trying to figure out just what it is I see in this, this...

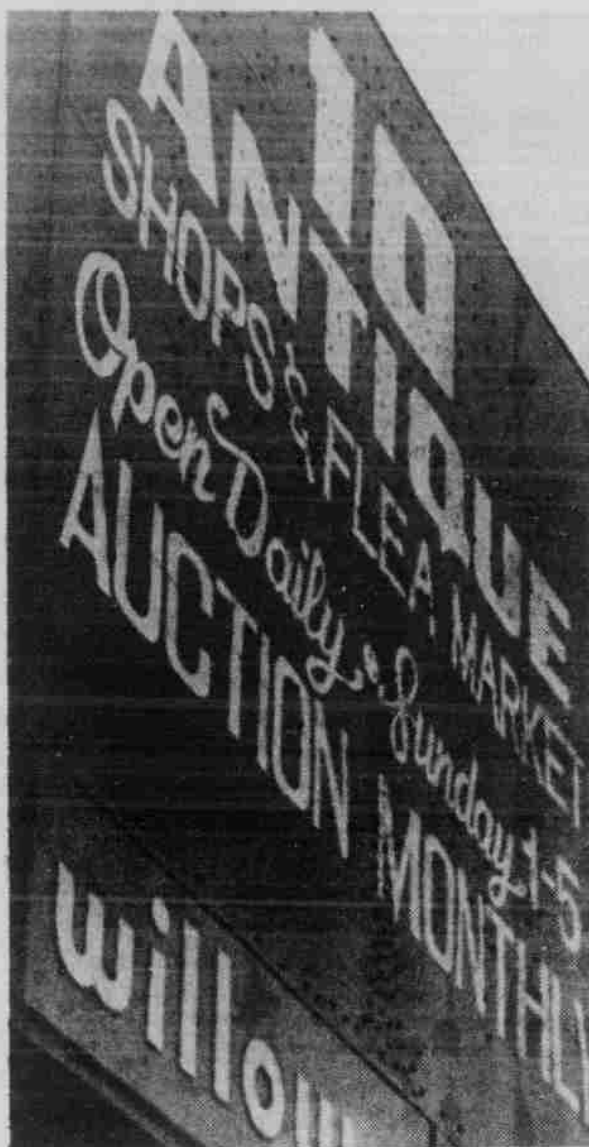
"Piece of junk."
"What?" I say, trying not to show my scorn for his obvious lack of good taste.

"What could you possibly want with this thing?" he asks. "It's narrow; I'll bet it's uncomfortable and look at the dirt on it."

While John raves about why I cannot possibly want the bed, I resolve that it will be mine.

We sign our names at the table, take a number and enter the auction gallery, a room crammed with folding chairs and furniture to be auctioned. We squeeze in, mainly because I'd do anything to get a crack at that bed.

"Ladies and gentlemen," the auctioneer bellows and begins explaining the terms of sale. No returns. Cash or checks only. No credit. All sales final. Once the hammer's down, no more



bidding. Porcelains, silver and crystal come first, then furniture, then back to the porcelains again.

I ask the woman next to me why they alternate between furniture and glassware. "They say it's to give the kids carrying the furniture a break," she says. "I think it's to keep people here as long as they can." She's an antique dealer looking for glassware.

"I come to these auctions when I can," she says. "You'd be amazed at the low prices some of these things go for."

I hope I'll be so lucky. I can't afford the bed. I can't afford anything. But there it is. The men bring it in through double doors. People rise from their seats to get a better look.

Evelyn Rhue, the buyer for the auction, stands in front of the auctioneer's podium and describes each piece as "lovely," "nice," or "charming." She told me earlier that describing over 300 items for the monthly auctions is hard work. "I run out of things to say," she says. I forgive her for calling my bed "nice."

"Five dollar-whol-makeitfivedollar-tendollar-doiheartendollar," the auctioneer asks in his fast-talk routine. My heart pounds. I try to follow the bidding, but it's no use. I raise my hand.

"Twentydollar-twentydollarwho'll-bidfivetwentyfive," the auctioneer says pointing to me. Twenty? I bid twenty?

"How much did you bid?" John finally pokes me hard enough to get my attention.

"I think I bid twenty," I say, "but I'm not really sure."

"Thirtydollar-who'llgivefive-thirtyfive," the auctioneer cries, and hands go up. They're bidding too fast, but I don't want to lose that bed.

"Are you going to bid more?" John asks, pointing to the front.

"What do you think?" I ask, desperate for encouragement.

"If you want it, buy it," he says, folding his arms. I think he's fed up.

"I want it," I say, "but I don't know if—"

"Going, going," the auctioneer bellows. My arm shoots up.

"Gone for ninety-five to number 17," the auctioneer says and pounds the hammer on the podium.

"Me?" My voice sounds funny when I feel sick.

"Yes m'am, number 17, you got it," he says, and I try to smile as I rise from my seat to claim my prize. Ninety-five dollars? I feel numb.

"Wow, I can't believe it," John says. "You got this great bed and nowhere to put it."

I wish I could say "I'll find room," like my mother always says when she goes to these sales. But my dorm room is already packed with old furniture.

After struggling to get the headboard and posts into John's car, I write out the check. Then I turn to John.

"Got a dime?"

"Sure. What for?"

"To call home," I say. "Maybe Mom'll have room for another bed."



Old furniture — chests, tables, chairs, beds and more — are prevalent items in auctions.