

Shopping for Antiques in England

Changing Times in the British Antiques Market

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Back in 1989 I was asked to contribute a guest editorial to the magazine *Antique Collecting* on the changing face of the antiques business. Two of the most obvious points noted then were the demise of the traditional antique shop and the corresponding rise in the number of antiques fairs, or shows as they are known in the U.S. At the time, I pondered what the next decade would hold, and now, nearly 20 years later, we see a very different picture.

Small collectables have become hugely popular. In the years following the Second World War, collecting was relatively new and concentrated on small antiques, but by the 1980s there had been a dramatic shift. Some post-war items were becoming popular, particularly toys, and it was not long before manufacturers latched on to the collectors' market. Thus we saw the emergence of the "limited edition," hyped up to attract the new collector with no real interest in antiques. We also saw the dramatic rise of "merchandising" with marketing men generating new subjects to interest potential collectors. A classic example is the *Star Wars* phenomenon, fanned by enthusiasm for the early Lucas films, but the theme continues today with branded goods promoted for virtually any new film or television craze.

Another aspect is the interest in modern ceramics. Great names such as Doulton, Wedgwood, Spode and Moorcroft all have healthy businesses selling their new wares to collectors. Beatrix Potter and Bunnykins figures, for example, are hugely popular and there



A sign of the times in Britain.

seems to be a ready market for quality in this field.

Shops, Centers and Fairs

What has this to do with antiques? There are, of course, still traditional antiques – larger items such as furniture and carpets and smaller pieces such as porcelain and silver – but the two markets co-exist and antiques markets, for example, would never survive if modern collectables were excluded. Shops specializing in the larger pieces, particularly furniture, and also high value pieces, such as great paintings, have managed to survive although some pruning of numbers has

been obvious. The quality dealers still have their shops and the more wealthy areas such as Kensington Church Street in London and Stow-on-the-Wold in the picturesque Cotswolds remain worth a visit. It is generally in the middle range and lower ends of the market that the shops have thinned out. A tour of antique shops has to be much better planned these days to avoid disappointment, and here effective use of one of the current guides to shops and markets can prove invaluable.

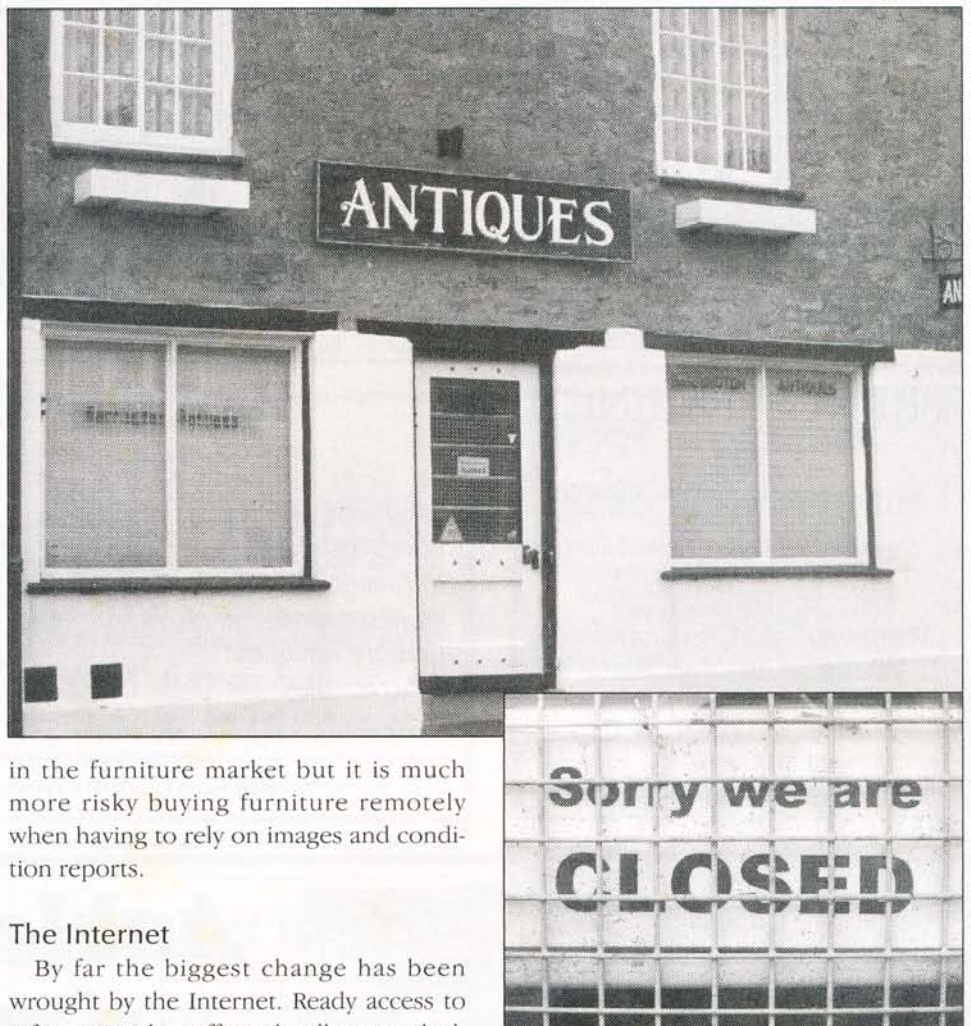
Collectors still need to find their prey and it is in the field of the smaller pieces that the biggest changes are seen. As I noted back in 1989, the antique shop,

while not dead, is largely a thing of the past for small collectables. There can be few more disappointing feelings than traveling hopefully to a favorite shop, only to find it closed, or these days more probably closed down. Quite simply the turnover in smaller value items is incapable of supporting the large and ever-rising overheads incurred by fixed premises.

Thus we saw the rise of antiques centers, with dealers joining forces to share the overheads, and antiques and collectors' fairs, with sellers gathering to display their wares. These both had the side effect of encouraging a new breed of dealer, no longer professionals earning a living, but part-timers and enthusiasts enjoying trading in the things that interested them without the need to make significant profits. Unfortunately, competition for stock drove prices up, in turn proving a further nail in the coffin for the old style antiques shop, whose margins were squeezed to uneconomic levels.

Antiques centers and fairs themselves, however, have not been immune to difficult times and many have suffered, with some centers closing down, and clear signs of saturation in the fair circuit. Some of the popular fairs, thriving a decade ago, are now struggling to survive. The larger fairs, notably at Newark, Swinderby, Olympia and the National Exhibition Centre (the NEC) remain successful but have all seen changes. Others have gone altogether and efforts to start new ones have often failed. We have clearly gone through a recession in the antiques business, despite interest still being fanned by the large number of television programs such as the *Antiques Roadshow*, *Bargain Hunt* and *Cash in the Attic*.

So where else can collectors go to buy? Traditional auction houses have devoted much effort encouraging private buyers, where in the past their main market was "the trade." Unfortunately, this works for higher value pieces but does not make economic sense for smaller collectables. While several auctioneers stage collectors' sales, some of which are very successful, small items inevitably have to be offered in lots, often excluding the enthusiastic private collector interested in only one item. They are still important players



in the furniture market but it is much more risky buying furniture remotely when having to rely on images and condition reports.

The Internet

By far the biggest change has been wrought by the Internet. Ready access to information has affected collectors, dealers and auctioneers alike. The ease with which a buyer can search for items he wants means that he is as likely to find an auction lot in Ashby-de-la-Zouche as in Boston. The same is true for the dealer, of course, although he or she is likely to face much more competition when buying at auction. The converse is the ability to sell via the Web and many dealers now run successful Websites.

Which, almost inevitably, brings us to eBay. This auction site has definitely had a marked effect on the antiques trade, although my own belief is that the scare stories are exaggerated. It gives buyers a new source for treasures while at the same time offering an effective way to sell unwanted pieces. This is not the place to look at eBay's problems or merits, but it has affected the antique trade and we all have to adapt.

Modern day collectors of antiques have

unprecedented opportunities to assemble a great collection. Yes, you must work hard and search diligently. Visit Britain and use the information resources provided by the Internet to find the good shops and antiques centers. Plan a visit to coincide with the better fairs – they can be inspiring places. Search auction catalogues; seek out dealers' websites; and make good use of eBay. We may have been through a bit of a depression but the enthusiastic collector can make great purchases in poor times. Britain is still a haven for the antique collector. Why not treat yourself this year?

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