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There's No Business Like Art Fair Business for Sanford Smith

Modern pieces, Outsider Art, Americana. You name it, he hunted it down, then he sold it and moved on.



By **Hilarie M. Sheets**

When Sanford Smith talks about working in “show business,” he’s not referring to Broadway or Hollywood. Over the last four decades he has produced some 130 fairs nationwide, bringing together dealers in art, design and antiques.

“At the high point of my career, I did 11 shows a year,” Mr. Smith, who recently turned 80, said at his home, an Upper West Side brownstone brimming with an eccentric personal collection. The examples of Americana and modern and contemporary art and design there reflect the fairs he has created over the years.

Art by early American modernists including John Marin, Charles Burchfield and George Bellows is mixed with contemporary pieces by Judy Pfaff and Michael Zelehoski and furniture designed by George Nakashima, Charlotte Perriand, Paul Evans and Ettore Sottsass. It’s the kind of eclecticism that Mr. Smith favors in his high-end show Salon Art + Design, now in its eighth edition and opening Nov. 14 at the Park Avenue Armory in New York.

In Mr. Smith’s house you’ll find more than two dozen antique weather vanes featuring sculpted animals, hundreds of miniature toy soldiers battling on the shelves and a cigar-store Indian. These were the kinds of objects sold in the All American Antiques Show that he started in 1980, the first fair devoted to such material.



American 19th-century deer and horse weather vanes; four watercolors by Thornton Dial; “The Trooper” a bronze statue by Harry Jackson; and a Brutalist metal coffee table, “Cityscape,” part of a series designed by Paul Evans.
Estate of Thornton Dial/Artists Rights Society (ARS), NY; Charlie Rubin for The New York Times



A large carved wooden goat by Mark Perry. Charlie Rubin for The New York Times

After noticing a niche within this show, he spun off the Outsider Art Fair in 1992, helping to establish a market for work by self-taught artists. Pointing to several Thornton Dial works on paper he bought at that first fair, he said: “I paid maybe 100 bucks for these originally. I just saw that Jane Fonda has consigned one of Dial’s big drawings to Sotheby’s for \$200,000.”
went to work in the office of his father’s funeral business.

“I was bored out of my mind,” he said. On his way home he would alleviate the tedium by perusing the antique shops that used to line University Place in Greenwich Village. The collecting fever snowballed with weekend trips to auctions in Connecticut, where he would fill his Country Squire station wagon with pictures, furniture and bric-a-brac. What he didn’t have room to keep, Mr. Smith and his first wife began reselling at the now extinct 26th Street flea market.

“In those days, the stalls were \$15,” he said. “The first time we did it, we made \$50 net. I said, ‘This is for me.’”

Following are edited excerpts from our conversation.

What was the first thing you collected as an adult?

Little Vienna bronzes, painted figures of animals and people that were made in the late 19th century into the early 20th century in Austria. They stopped being produced around 1935 because the materials were then used for armaments by Nazi Germany.

Did you know anything about them originally?

No, but like everything else that I ever bought, or dealt with, I got library books so I could learn. I liked them aesthetically. Some were vignettes. Pigs playing instruments. Acrobatic animals standing on each others’ shoulders. They were whimsical.



A stone head, far left, and horse, far right, by John Flanagan; silver circus figures by Tiffany Studios; a bronze Bali dancer by Alan Clarke; candle holders by Swid Powell; and a watercolor, "New York Harbor," by George Grosz.
Estate of George Grosz/Licensed by VAGA at Artists Rights Society (ARS), NY; Charlie Rubin for The New York Times

How have you typically found things?

I used to go to every antique store on Routes 5 and 10. I'd start out in Connecticut and work my way up into Massachusetts and back. This is before online. Now it's so much easier. All these shooting gallery targets and the soldiers came from eBay or somewhere else online. But I go through every show I do. I look through almost every place I go to see if there's something that interests me. I get every magazine published in the business.

Are you still acquiring as actively these days?

I'm not buying any more weather vanes because I have no place to put them. But I'm bidding on a lamp by Ettore Sottsass of the Memphis school. I can't help myself. I go through collecting binges. That entire collection of toy soldiers I picked up in about four months. I will build a collection, like of American pewter, and then I'll sell it all. The acquisition is the fun. I love the hunt.