



Clockwise from above left: 19th-century rocking horses at Cupboards & Roses Antiques; a 1760 English Delft charger at Bruce Sikora Antiques; an 1857 whaling scene by Frederick Stiles Jewett at Bruce Sikora Antiques; a toy lion at Cupboards & Roses, and silver and Venetian glass goblets at Elise Abrams Antiques.

Berkshires' Treasure

Dealers in Association Are Known for Quality, Integrity

Text and Photos by KATHRYN BOUGHTON

The Southern Berkshires is an area steeped in history. The Dutch brought the first European influence to the region in the 17th century, but were followed almost immediately by English explorers and settlers. Many of the homes in the region reflect these deep historical roots, so perhaps it is not surprising that antiques shops are among the major tourist attractions, with outlets dotting the landscape between Salisbury, Conn., in the southern foothills and Pittsfield, Mass.

Antiques shops have existed in the region for many years, but since 1973 the Berkshire County Antiques and Art Dealers Association (BCAADA) has worked to establish common standards for these businesses in the region to ensure that the shopping experience is a happy one for visitors.

"We were one of the first antiques associations," said BCAADA president Edith Gilson, owner of Cupboards & Roses Antiques on Route 7 in Sheffield. "The original purpose was to really give buyers a place to go where they could ask for information. All our members are vetted before they can join the

association and they have to agree to label everything properly. All items must be at least 80 percent original and we have to report what was done to each item [in the past]. If we don't know, [that] is what we say."

Ms. Gilson said that the BCAADA and its membership are exceptional in the world of antiques. "What makes this area so special," she said, "are the number of big shops right in this area—Susan Silver, Le Trianon, Corner House Antiques and so many others—that specialize in one area and know all about that area."

Indeed, many of the shops in the BCAADA are highly specialized. Ms. Gilson, for instance, has only items from 18th- and 19th-century Scandinavia and Europe. Producing the depth of inventory that her store possesses is particularly challenging for the marketing-researcher-turned-antiques-dealer. She noted that Sweden places restrictions on international sale of antiques deemed to be of national significance.

"It's getting even worse," said the antiques dealer. "Take 'Bonads,' which are folk paintings from a certain area. You can buy them in Sweden, but they are restricted for export and

today most are seen in Swedish museums."

Curvilinear Clocks

Still, Ms. Gilson manages to bring Bonads to Cupboards & Roses Antiques. Hers are from the south of Sweden and date from about 1650 to the middle of the 19th century. They might be considered the "poor man's tapestry," and are painted on paper, burlap or hemp in bright colors that brought interest and a touch of elegance to the small, dark interior of early homes.

Ms. Gilson also avidly pursues Mora clocks for her shop. "I buy pretty much every one I can get because it is so hard to find them now," she said.

She explained that clock-making came to Scandinavia in the 18th century. The Swedish Mora clock first appeared in Stockholm during the Rococo period in the mid-18th century. Bad weather and poor soil forced the farmers in the Mora area to look for ways to supplement their income, and the villagers of Östnor, outside Mora, turned to making clocks.

Each family specialized in producing a specific

part, some made the brass clock works, some painted the faces and others built or painted the cases. At the height of production, more than 90 families were engaged in the trade, and Mora functioned as one large clock factory. More than 1,000 clocks, named for their place of origin, were produced each year, but within 80 years competition from Europe and America brought an end to this communal enterprise.

The curvilinear shape of the classic Mora clock is still sought after today, and the clocks at Cupboards & Roses retain their original faces, hands and works. All the surfaces feature original paint or, in some cases, old secondary paint. Before each clock is sold, a clockmaker gives it a thorough inspection and adjustment and, when properly installed and leveled, the clocks still keep accurate time.

Looking around the shop, it is evident that color is a major factor in Scandinavian antiques. Chests, armoires, tables, ceramics, wall hangings, clocks and toys are often decorated with Swedish blue and tones of orange and red. Ms. Gilson said the use of color provided relief from the long dark winters and covered the ubiquitous pine used to make furniture.

“When I started 16 years ago with just painted things, people said, ‘Are you that crazy?’ because painted furniture was not that popular. Now, people like lighter things,” Ms. Gilson said.

Bruce Sikora’s Treasures

Just up the road from Ms. Gilson’s store is a dealer whose main specialty is 19th-century art. Bruce Sikora of Bruce Sikora Antiques gives a new definition to the word antiques, however: “Most shops don’t really have old stuff,” he asserted. He led the way to a closed cabinet and began to describe the antiquities within.

There one could see a “creussen,” a squat little drinking vessel that undoubtedly presages today’s German stein. This one is dated 1671 and features a rondel of the Virgin and Child, flanked by figures of the 12 Apostles. The old German text reads “Drink Mich Aus Und Schenk Mich Ein Dv Erflicht Das Herz Dein 1671,” which has been translated as “Drink me empty, make me full, make your heart rejoice, yours 1671.”

Mr. Sikora, who meticulously researches each item in his store, said a similar cruessen is found in the Stadtmuseum Bayreuth, a work that appears to be by the same hand.

A 335-year-old drinking vessel would seem to be antique enough, but Mr. Sikora topped it easily. He pulled out a small silver bracelet of Roman origins, an early Christian ring with a primitive cross, and showed two lightweight silver drinking bowls from ancient Greece.

While his shop has many examples of such antiquities, a fair smattering of impressive furniture and a stellar collection of 17th- and 18th-century tobacco boxes and 20th century Olympic medals, the main focus is on antique fine art paintings. “Paintings are a very personal thing,” he said of those who seek out



Clockwise from above left: a Mora clock at Cupboard & Roses; a river scene by Samuel P. Dyke at Bruce Sikora; a creussen at Bruce Sikora, and detail on an armoire at Cupboard & Roses.

early paintings for their homes.

Mr. Sikora said that many early paintings, particularly those of mammoth proportions, had difficulty finding new homes in modern houses. “Some of the paintings were so large people didn’t want to move them,” he explained.

He pointed out some of his favorite pieces as he walked through the shop. “Here’s one I can’t believe hasn’t sold yet,” he said, stopping before a diminutive painting that charmingly depicts three children beside a meandering stream. The children’s clothing suggests a date of somewhere in the mid-19th century. He pointed to the signature—one Howard Hill, who happened to be Norman Rockwell’s maternal grandfather.

Farther on, he stopped before a painting by Frederick Stiles Jewett, who went to sea at age 16 on a whaling vessel. “Oddly enough, many seamen became competent artists,” he observed, noting that this particular picture, painted in 1857, had been shown in the Alumni Exhibit at Yale University. Jewett, who was born in Simsbury and who painted for only the last seven of his 46 years, earned a reputation as one of the finest marine artists in Connecticut.

Mr. Sikora further pointed out a wonderfully restful scene done by George W. Waters—a river landscape with a blue heron, complete with its superb original frame. This painting, he said, was exhibited at the National Academy of Design in 1886. Waters, a professor

of art at Elmira College, had his first exhibition in 1850, at the age of 18, when one of his paintings was on view at the National Academy of Design in New York City.

The dealers who are members of the BCAADA have as many specialties as there are kinds of antiques.

Susan Silver Antiques on Route 7 in Sheffield specializes in 18th- and 19th-century English and continental formal furniture and decorative accessories, with a special concentration on library furniture.

The Corner House

The Corner House, also on Route 7 in Sheffield, places its emphasis on 19th- and early-20th century American wicker furniture, while at Amy Bergman Antiques in Great Barrington visitors find an eclectic selection of decorative perfume bottles, atomizers, compacts, vintage costume jewelry and the like.

Elise Abrams Antiques

At Elise Abrams Antiques, on Route 7 just north of the center of Great Barrington, Mass., the specialty is fine antiques for dining. Her shop is deceptive from the outside, giving little indication of the depth of inventory to be found within. Here one finds glass dating from the 18th, 19th and 20th centuries, ranging from services for 12 to one-of-a-kind items.

Ms. Abrams said she has been collecting

glass for more than 20 years, and that the avocation led to her shop.

"I started out collecting glass," she explained, "and from that I started giving private lectures occasionally. People are interested in glass and love china and started buying from me privately. I eventually decided to open a shop. I have had a number of previous occupations—an art gallery, I've been a travel agent, and worked as an importer/exporter and designed jewelry—but this is definitely a commitment."

"What I like to offer is quality and quantity," she said. "You can always find one of anything, but I strive for sets in excellent condition." Thus, if you are looking for fantastic dessert plates, you might be attracted to her hand-painted plates, each one done individually by an artist. Particularly lovely are the delicate fish plates, with their swimming carp flourishing gossamer tails or the elegant roses that bedeck the centers of plates edged with cobalt blue and thick gold paste. "These plates are perfect," Ms. Abrams said. "There is no decal, they are not transfers—each one is a beautiful work of art. These were made for Tiffany and each one is different."

Priced at \$900 to \$1,000 a plate, depending on size, these dishes are not often used for eating. "We call them cabinet plates," she said, "but there are people who actually use them to serve food. Usually they were used for desserts because people wouldn't cut food on them."

Both the fish and rose plates are available in sets of 12, a standard Ms. Abrams strives for. "In the beginning I would only buy if I could get 12," she said, "but what I came to realize that the people really want sets of 18 or 24. So now, I will pick up six if I can find them. Sometimes it takes a while to make a perfect set, so I stockpile pieces in hopes that I can eventually put a set together.

Then, people occasionally will call and say, 'I broke a piece, can you get me another?' I have an uncanny ability to remember those things, and if I see one of something five years later, I know who needs that."

She says she is good at matching patterns for people who need to fill out a table setting, and also has good resources for researching emergency needs.

She gathers her inventory from points around the globe, although she rarely travels outside the country to shop. "Now that I'm known for what I do," she said, "people come to me, call me. I get pictures in the mail every day. A lot comes to me now, where it used to be a struggle."

Similarly, her customer base is steadily expanded through exposure. "A lot of it is word of mouth," she explained. "If a customer of mine has a dinner party and everyone ooohs and aaahs about the table, I just had advertising for 10 or 12 more people."

Even in vintage glassware there are trends and fads. At the moment, there is much interest in Venetian glass, she reported.

Venetian glass, which derived from techniques that originated in the 14th century, was revived at the end of the 19th century and gained favor among the fashionable set from 1890 until the 1930s. It is noted for its clarity, workmanship and fanciful designs.

"It's figural, hand-blown and fairly lightweight," observed Ms. Abrams. "My love and specialty is the figural 1920s kind of stuff."

Ms. Abrams carefully researches the items she sells, but often does not attribute an item to a given glassmaker. "A lot of earlier glass is not signed. I have a lot of archival books," she explained, "but glass is tricky because makers would move from one house to another and bring their designs."

She offers glass and porcelain items in many

different categories. She singled out a Majolica jardinière as one of her favorite pieces, terming it a "fabulous, extraordinary example."

"I also have a fondness for certain kinds of glass," she said. "I like wheel-cut glass—no one can cut like that anymore. It was always fabulously expensive to produce. And I love art glass, but I also like Steuben. I love the usability of it—it's not so expensive that you can't really use and enjoy it. When I find 12 perfect goblets, I get very excited."

Her shop is not confined to glass and porcelain, however. She also has some flatware, such as a complete set of sterling flatware with mother-of-pearl handles that is housed in a free-standing mahogany silver chest. Dating from 1906 and made by the English company Atkinson, it is, in the shop owner's words, "a beautiful package," and is priced at \$25,000.

The shop also has such historical icons as a 1930s console radio bar, complete with all the bar furnishings, paintings, linens, tabletop accessories and the like.

Getting the Brochure

There are many more members in the BCAADA than can every be explored in one article, but those who wish to survey their offerings more deeply can get more information by requesting a copy of the group's annual brochure. The brochure lists each of the members and offers salient details about specialties and contact information. Many dealers have Web sites with extensive listings of their inventories.

Copies of the brochure may be obtained at member shops, by writing or calling Berkshire County Massachusetts Antiques and Art Dealers Association, P.O. Box 426, Sheffield, Mass., 01257, 413-229-3070, or online by going to the Web site, www.bcaada.com.