

ANTIQUES

A 'Roadshow' Star Grabs the Gavel

By Eve M. Kahn

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A 'ROADSHOW' STAR

Grabs the Gavel

The Americana dealer Leigh Keno, as maniacally enthusiastic in person as he comes across on "Antiques Roadshow," was recently giving a tour of his Upper East Side store. It closed last summer; a few forlorn typeset labels were still posted on the bare walls, but the usual displays of lightly polished brown furniture have been taken away. The rooms were piled instead with hundreds of consignments for an auction house he has improbably founded, at a sluggish time for the Americana market.

On Saturday he will hold an all-day sale preview at the Loews Regency Hotel on Park Avenue at 61st Street. (The auction is on May 1 and 2 at the Marriott Hotel in Stamford, Conn.) His new company, Keno Auctions, is filling a hotel conference room with scrimshaw, ceramics, nested baskets, silver (including web-footed 1780s sauceboats by Paul Revere), furniture (there's an 1830s mahogany crib made by Duncan Phyfe for his grandson), and paintings and drawings (among them 1770s watercolors that a teenage boy painted of Revolutionary War soldiers bleeding on battlefields).

Mr. Keno bounced from topic to topic as he scrambled around the piles, pointing out some modernist furniture from his own collection; he may eventually hold a separate auction for those egg-shaped or rectilinear tables and chairs by Gerrit

Rietveld, Carlo Mollino and Marc Newson. He spoke bluntly about market trends, but then quickly qualified his remarks so that his words in print would sound upbeat and not offend any dealer, auctioneer or collector.

After explaining that his auctions will offer fresh-to-market material rather than his inventory, “and that is refreshing,” he immediately added, “I don’t want to imply that everyone else doesn’t do that refreshing thing.” When asked why he is holding the sale in Connecticut, he mentioned the antiques stores in downtown Stamford that could use some publicity and his suburban customers’ possible distaste for Manhattan hotel and parking rates, but then added, “Can you say that without ... ,” and trailed off. “I love New York,” he said. “I don’t want to hurt anybody. My curse is that I want to make everybody happy. It’s a curse.”

The blond, wiry dealer, 52, who founded the store in 1986 after a stint at Christie’s, has become a public figure with his twin brother, Leslie, the director of American furniture and decorative arts at Sotheby’s. They have been profiled in New York and People magazines, published a memoir and appeared in 14 seasons of “Roadshow.” (Sometimes one can be spotted chatting up visitors in the background while the other is appraising on camera.) For two decades, until this year, Leigh Keno also rented a booth in January at the entrance to the Winter Antiques Show in Manhattan, which opens on Friday. Since he announced his auction business last summer, he said: “I’m so energized, I feel like I’m 28 again. I loved being a dealer, but it was time for me personally for a new challenge.”

But what about Americana’s falling prices, which have been widely reported in the trade papers? “It has definitely, you know, gone down in value, but truly great pieces still bring great prices,” he replied. He hopes to help reinvigorate the market by serving as charismatic auctioneer, at a pace of 70 lots an hour. “I whip up the crowd,” he said.

An 1830s mahogany crib by Duncan
Phyfe will be auctioned by Keno
Auctions and can be seen on
Saturday in Manhattan.
Keno Auctions

Most lots will have no reserves, and estimates will be so low, he added, that “people will lose sleep the night before.” The prices are meant to attract “the young collector,” he said, and encourage older consignors to approach him with housefuls of high-end and middling material. “We’ll just broom-clean,” he said. “We want to be full service.”

His competitors have been sending messages welcoming him to the scene, he said. “There’s enough merchandise, enough property out there, for everyone to be happy.”

Colin Stair, who runs Stair Galleries, an auction house in Hudson, N.Y., is one competitor who has congratulated Mr. Keno. The trade, Mr. Stair said, will monitor the new venture’s progress and turn out for the Stamford event. “I’ve rearranged my May sales so I can go check it out in person,” Mr. Stair said. But he would caution anyone who, like Mr. Keno, starts an auction house in midcareer, maneuvering hundreds of objects through hotels-turned-salerooms at razor-thin profit margins. “You have to be prepared for an initial bloodletting until you catch on,” Mr. Stair said.

A GROOVY KIND OF WEAVE

Cora Ginsburg, a venerable textiles gallery on the Upper East Side founded in 1971, has been displaying finically stitched, centuries-old needlework at the Winter Antiques Show for three decades. This year modernity has crept into the booth. The gallery has brought stacks and rolls of screen-printed cotton that the British companies Heal Fabrics and Tarian Design produced in the 1960s and '70s. Their op-art patterns teem with sine curves, bubbles, scribbles, polka dots and paint splashes.

“It’s so groovy,” said Titi Halle, the gallery’s owner, while admiring some swatches of interlocked curlicues in purple, aqua and brown. A British dealer sold her the collection a few years ago; the 42 pieces came with original showroom tags and most likely belonged to Evelyn Redgrave, a Heal executive. The cottons, signed along the edges by prominent designers including Zandra Rhodes, Barbara Brown and Ms. Redgrave, have pattern names as hippie-ish as Gyration, Modulus and Expansion. The collection also came with three binders of brochures and press clippings, including ads that show psychedelic stripes and concentric circles used as cafe and greenhouse partitions, college dorm banners and playroom tents.

A few sheets in the binders have handwritten explanations along the margins, as if Ms. Redgrave was trying to document her career for posterity. “Traditionally, sales girls wore dresses for the launch,” reads the caption for a photo of a brunette showroom worker clad in a sheath of paintbrush-streaked curtain fabric.

Ms. Halle is selling the textiles and accompanying paperwork for \$12,500. She also has individual British and American modernist fabrics at her booth, starting at \$500. Just don’t ask her for a particular pattern in specific colors or measurements, as if the antiques were customizable for couch pillows. That faux pas would be the equivalent, Ms. Halle said, of “seeing two chairs in an antiques store and right away just asking, ‘Do you have 10 more like that?’ ”

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