
March 2021

The memoir below was written just as we were closing our retail store in the Washington Metro Area. At that point, we thought our days as merchants were over. But not quite. In fact, we merely transformed ourselves into more 21st Century retailers. We took a large booth in Avery and Dash Antique Center (formerly Harborview) a first-class collection in the New York Metro Area – which freed us from everything except buying. And we supplied antiques to a highly successful NY Metro Area home furnishings establishment, something like Restoration Hardware.

But now, we are saying for a second time around: this is it: we have put most of our antiques into a local auction company, and we are closing our booth. Just check back in 10 more years to see if we really mean it.

Memoirs of Our 40 Years as Antique Dealers January 2012

In the Washington/Baltimore metro area, (indeed, throughout the US and Europe) the last few years have witnessed the closures of almost the entire spectrum of businesses, from “granny’s attic” version to our very large and diverse inventory of 18th and 19th century furniture and related furnishings. This year we felt almost like the last man standing. Finally, we decided now is the time for us to sit down as well.

Our 40 years incorporated numerous addresses and evolutions of our focus. WHY we are closing is a story for another day. Today, we are going to tell our story of what it has been like doing the best part of the business – the buying part – and maybe a few secrets.

What if your work required you to very frequently spend day after day finding beautiful, interesting, remarkable things to buy? Your day was a failure if you failed to spend any money. You typically had to spend almost a third of the year doing this. In addition, those spending sprees were spent in European locations most people dream of visiting for a short vacation. And since you were spreading money generously, everyone was happy to see you. Incredibly happy indeed. Lots of dinners and conviviality.

When you returned home, first with your Polaroid snaps, later with your 15 rolls of film, and lately with your digital slide show, your customers would line up to see the bounty, and put their names down on this and that, in order to have first opportunity to buy an item when it arrived by sea a month later. A week of unpacking, rearranging your store, and furious selling, and the buying process needed to begin again. Back to the shopping routine.

This is the outline of the seemingly glamorous life of the Antique Dealer which Ed Grant and I, Jane Grant have been living for going on 40 years. It has been beyond glorious in so many ways, almost all of them occurring in the buying phase, but at 10 o'clock the other night, while preparing for our retirement/going out of business sale, I took a rest on a comfy sofa in our showroom. Most of the lights were out and the showroom was shadowy, with the many chandelier lights looking like stars, and smooth mahogany looking like iridescent velvet. The mixture of colors and textures, curves and angles, silver and paint, all of it beautiful and beautifully put together – that will be my takeaway best memory, and the saddest thing we will lose when the doors close - we lose the showroom we can see and feel proud of.



The saving grace and sometimes most damnable thing about antique dealing is the constant exploration and discovery it affords and requires. America is a young country, with a comparatively short history of furniture construction and domestic architecture. Very few Americans outside of city centers grew up in homes of any significant age or lived with antique furniture or furnishings. When we started our business in 1973, many people had the haziest idea what an antique was or looked like. (a Singer Sewing Machine? A Victrola?) We began our business needing to learn Everything. Not so in the rest of the world where the past is an intimate part of the present from birth on. In this business, every day presents and demands close observations and discoveries about the things we own or want to own; there is always detective work to be done about the history and integrity of the thing, new fields of collecting to learn about, new buying locations to be discovered and conquered. We have never been content with our established route. England is our first and favorite country and furniture. Then we discovered France. Then Holland and Belgium. On to Italy, Spain, then Scandinavia and later China. As always, bits and pieces from the U.S. There's always something to marvel at, learn from and fall in love with. This is a great way to keep away the evils of boredom.

Then there is the cosmopolitan life that we have led. There is a lot of romance in Antique Dealing--romancing the seller, romancing the buyer, romancing the product, but most especially the romance of the landscape. I want to wax poetic about the glories we see each trip --from Yorkshire moors in all seasons, barren, stony, blowy mountains in Scotland, unbelievably green valleys dissected with their river and dry stone walls hundreds of years old, truly ancient cities and buildings everywhere, a 10 foot wide farm track from here to there, enclosed by walls and hedges, and blocked by a herd of sheep, a narrow back road running through a birch forest in Sweden with heavy snow falling, the transformation of the landscape as we drive from Paris to the south of France, detouring into the alps to visit our son and family in Grenoble, and then on to Provence and the Mediterranean coast.

My God, the romantic places where we have dined, where important history is part of the decor: the restaurant in the 15th C. building in Kendal, Yorkshire which cooked food only from 18th century recipes, and whose floor was a section of the Roman Road; the Bistro terrace overlooking the Palais des Papes in Avignon, the seat of the Papacy from 1309 to 1377; the discoveries of Carcassonne when we were only looking for a restroom, which the Romans had built as a hilltop fortified town in 100 BC. But by far the best meals we have had are the hundreds of home cooked meals our friends have prepared for us through the years.



Our lives have certainly been cosmopolitan, but not exactly glamorous. Our itinerary changed each of the 5 to 6 trips we took per year, but the constant was a 7-day work week and most evenings spent driving to our destination for the next buying day. Usually we started in England, our favorite and easiest logistically, allowing a gentler pace to recover from the lost night of sleep on the transatlantic flight.

Here's the itinerary for September/October 2000, one of my travel folders picked at random: Tuesday night, September 26 Dulles-Milan; With only a few hours' sleep, drive to Parma on Wednesday; shop Thursday and Friday at the largest fair in Europe -- 4 huge airplane hangars plus outdoor stands filled with antiques; Friday afternoon with 8 hours of indoor/outdoor dust and debris coating our bodies and caked into our nostrils, we rush to catch a flight to Copenhagen. Shop Saturday in Copenhagen, catch the first ferry to Sweden on Sunday, and visit the country dealers on the 40 hour trip to Stockholm; Wednesday night, fly to Frankfurt and drive to Holland/Belgium; Thursday at 2 huge wholesalers and a 5 hour drive to Paris; up for the 5 am start at the Paris Flea market, then drive to Rouen two hours away for an afternoon in the great antique district, and back to Paris in the evening; Saturday an 8 am start at the flea market, and Saturday night a flight to Manchester England, where we begin a week combing the country from the north (less expensive) to the south (more expensive) to London (mainly prohibitive). Sunday fly home, turn in our rolls of film at the processor, pick them up at 10 on Monday, and off to the store to start the selling part of the routine. I remember wanting to strangle the employee who used to say, when we arrived at 10:30 instead of promptly at 10... "Oh, great, you're finally here"



While buying, we sent our buy sheets to our transporter or sometimes several, who then picked up and got everything to a central location. Sometimes we had a container packed in Europe and one in England or consolidated everything in England to get a more diverse selection. Our primary trucker/packer was Hedley's Humpers,



a name I don't need to comment on, other than to show the team, and me inspecting our.... purchases.

I have a wonderful memory from this Parma trip – our first -of an outdoor meal with 12 other antique dealers (eating Parma ham and the world’s best Parmesan – oh yeah, that’s why it’s called parmesan cheese), some we knew and made friends with, and more meals with, squeezed in different locations. And talk, shop talk and lots of determined what lunch was Italy, you sit down and have a nice sandwich and of course custom-made sandwich from a eaten there in a hurry, or in the Scandinavia – whatever we distances between our calls,



some we met that night went on to have many here and there in many always, shop talk, shop laughter. Location like: in France and cooked meal, or at least wine. England, a bakery or tea shop, car while driving. could find in great often just trail mix.

Each trip was different. Sometimes we would spend a week in France combing the countryside and only a few days in England. A memorable call was Beaune. It is a city with a large Romani population who dealt in antiques and brocante, French for second-hand. (Actually, this is a rigorous distinction in France and enforced by the “sign police”). They cluster together in newly built houses of brick with concrete surrounds, no grass. Inside the houses were usually furnished with new and traditional furniture, with the seating covered with plastic. But the people mainly lived out back in their caravans (U.S. translation, trailers, but these are highly personalized and exotic, often charming.) We have not been to Beaune in many years, so the younger generation may have decided to move indoors. Back then we found interesting tidbits among the brocante and antiques and got to know a slice of life few are familiar with.

Here is the hard reality behind every trip: the logistics. Transatlantic flights: Washington to Milan, London to Washington; 3 internal flights: Bologna to Copenhagen, Stockholm to Frankfurt, Paris to Manchester; 4 rental cars; 17 different hotels for a 19-day trip. Calls to all the wholesalers we want to visit to make sure they are available on the day of our call. (If not, start again.) Coordinate schedules with fairs or auctions we also need to attend and find someone to bid for us because we could not stay in one location more than a day. All booked in advance, calculating time durations from A to B and likely times at destinations, but never factoring in time for meals or a good night's sleep. If we ran late for an appointment, we had to call from a pay phone, as cell phones came later. We had an entire suitcase of country maps, city maps, and magnifying glasses in order to read them at night; hotel guides, business supplies, camera's, walkie talkies – no cell phones -- flashlights, batteries for everything, an immersion heater for tea and tea bags, bags of snacks for the long night rides. Later we had to add computers, phones, fancy camera and lenses, and loads of chargers and electrical convertors.

Another essential reality of life: the money! How to juggle the money in perhaps 8 different currencies in the space of 3 weeks. (Now, thankfully, we have the Euro, making things so much easier, and the players in European buying and selling have gotten to know each other better.) But in the beginning, we had checking accounts in all the different countries we wanted to buy in, often dealing with clerks who didn't speak English and we didn't speak their language. We had to get familiar with often arcane requirements. We had to get money into each account in advance, not knowing how much we might spend in any country. Study the currency fluctuations to know when to transfer money. Balance the checkbooks. Find time to find and visit the bank during hectic shopping days, to withdraw cash, because so many dealers only wanted cash.

On one trip to the bank in Paris, we were the targets of an elaborate sting by maybe 10 men and women. Apparently, they had lookouts in the bank waiting for people who were getting cash. I was at the wheel waiting as Ed emerged from the bank and tossed his knapsack onto the back seat. Suddenly there were 5 chattering and gesticulating people surrounding the car and bank notes flying around and on the pavement, Ed thought the money had fallen out of the knapsack and started collecting it. Meanwhile a man opened the back door, so I jumped out, thinking he wanted to carjack the car and he wouldn't get me as well. But the car wasn't in park and starting to roll backward, which knocked him off balance and gave me a chance to call out for Ed. The man grabbed the bag, and headed into traffic, where he handed it off to a woman. Ed saw the hand off, also ran off into oncoming traffic, jerked the bag out of her hands, and ran back to the car where I was already pulling out of the parking place. Somehow, we zoomed into traffic on one of the busiest streets of Paris, but the gang was not done with us. Four men pursued us, surrounded the car, and flattened a tire with a knife. We drove two blocks on the flat tire, until we saw a gendarme on the corner and pulled over to him. The gangsters abandoned the chase and incredibly we came out ahead of the game, counting the money Ed had picked up from the street. It went to pay for the flat tire, and the bottle of wine we needed to calm our nerves.

Robberies were also a big problem at the Paris flea market and at the huge fairs in the south. Many dealers paid by cash, and the thieves got to know who they were. Then they would follow them until they found a quiet place to do the heist. If you objected, you got beaten up. After a few years of this, the dealers found a way to pay without the risk – we would pay the transporter, whose burly guys would pay as they picked up each item for shipment. The Paris police now started to have a larger presence in the markets.

Buying antiques overseas used to be a very cold business. Most of the wholesalers kept their inventory in unheated locations with cement or dirt floors, and of course the flea markets and huge fairs were unheated. Barns, sheds and garages were also very popular. Calling at one of these places was not a brief stop. Furniture was usually displayed in long rows with tiny aisles between; often chests of drawers were piled so high you had to get the top one down to see it properly. Lighting was sometimes nonexistent. One dealer in Stockholm had such an extensive inventory it took most of a day to walk the aisles. Not only no heat, but no bathroom. He kept his customers going with doses of Jägermeister but never any snacks. At the end of the day, our feet were blocks of ice. It took hours for our bodies to warm up.

The big fairs were the agony and the ecstasy in microcosm. They were generally held in the rough: cement floored expo centers with roofs but gaping open doors, and miles of outdoor stands. Of course, no heat or air conditioning. During most of the 80's, they opened, like the Paris flea market, according to long tradition, under cover of darkness. Here is a photo of the entrance to The Chatou Fair during the 80's: it's not sunup yet, but there we were. The sign announces, "Fair of Secondhand things (Brocante) and Hams." The "used things" shared space with farmers or tradesmen producing ham, sausages, cheese, foie gras, a chocolatier, maybe some wines. So, no wonder this was everyone's favorite fair.



Before opening, all the lorries (trucks) were guided into their positions in enormous halls or adjoining fields. No one was allowed to open his truck until the whistle blew at the appointed hour: usually 5 or 6

in the 80's, although at some fairs some dealers would sneak in earlier. In the 90's the time became saner at about 8. I just checked for 2021-- 10a.m. We live in degenerate times!

But back to the 80's. The whistle at 5: there was a frenzy of activity: trucks were thrown open, dealers worked frantically to get their things unloaded. The buyers ran from truck to truck with their torches (flashlights) looking for a compelling leg or silhouette. The rule was that once you put your hand on a piece and asked the price, the dealer would give you the first chance to buy, but you had better be quick. The conversation would continue about the item's merits and unseen elements, and the prospect could ask for a discount, but he sometimes had to buy it sight unseen. Once he declined to buy at the negotiated price another prospect could inquire about it.

It was a mark of your mettle as a dealer to be able to take the risk of spending sometimes quite a bit of money on an object you could only see a small portion of. No one stopped to pay during the frenzied first hours, just slapped his sticker on and ran to the next lorry. There was a lot of trust in the air. When we all returned after sunrise to the sites of our blind and aggressive decisions there was jubilation or despair. The wine started to flow early on these occasions at the outdoor concessions. What's wrong with wine with your croissant? In France, absolutely nothing. The buying continued in the more sober, or not, light of day and was essentially finished by 11.



awaits still.

After lunch, time for the mop up. The industrious dealers would travel all the aisles again, looking for good things that had been overlooked or unloaded too late for the early impulsive early buying. Many of the most eye-catching things were gone, but often there were still treasures that had to be carefully unwrapped and were now there in full splendor. We were more the tortoises than the hares, and we spent the afternoon in a slow mop up action, with extensive rewards.

On to the peacock parade. Through the morning we handed in our buy sheets to the transporters, who work all the big fairs and move things to central distribution centers. After lunch, the transporters began their pickups in earnest. As the items arrived back at the lorries, we began to compare our choices to our— lunch mates and friends. At times we would pick up the light things ourselves, and proudly march our trophies through the halls and on to the shipper, meanwhile looking with jealousy at great things others bought or with pride at what we had scored. Or sometimes with horror. “Oh God, how will we ever sell that!” “Oh Damn! I saw that before he did, and I didn't have the nerve to pay the price and now

look how fabulous it is. I have to have it, and now I have to pay even more.” Lots of further dealing took place in the parking lots, current anger and jealousy at being aced out turned into satisfaction at the subsequent purchase, for a modest up charge. Those were the days, my friends.

At the end of the day: 1) filthy clothes, most especially if it rained, turning the fields into piles of mud 2) filthy body 3) Sunburn or serious freezer burn 4) nostrils petrified with dust and truck exhaust 5) an empty bank account 6) merchandise we are exulting or pouting about 7) a long way to drive and an unknown bed.

Speaking of beds, here are my hotel recommendations starting with the one to stay away from: your car. Don't travel without booking a room (in the early days, this lack of foresight made us cozy up into our car regularly), but even with a destination, the night may find you up close and personal with your car for the intimate 8 hours: an unexpected blizzard on the motorway; unexpectedly running out of gas on the London ring road at 2 am in the fog; arriving after the cut off time for your room reservation, and suffering the slap of paying for the room you can't sleep in. The night in the car and the wash up at the petrol station next morning.... well, what words are there?

Further up the hostelry chain is the Auberge du Lac, where we stayed somewhere in the Burgundy region. After a really fine country dinner, thank goodness, we investigated our room upstairs. It presented us with the alternative of opening our suitcase or moving. Literally, we had to take our suitcase into the hall to open it. We had two children's beds, sunken in the middle with unspeakable bedding. Another night in our clothes. Early in the morning we woke up to screeching noises outside. The window 3 inches away showed us the landlord's wife butchering the chickens and rabbits for that day's meals. We had roast chicken for lunch, and they were indeed an epiphany of taste. We were still there at lunch because there was only one shower for the 10 rooms, and the slow drizzle of water meant awfully long showers. Happily, the line for the single WC was a bit shorter.

Of course, we have a car story. We were overseas so much we finally bought a station wagon (estate car) from a dealer in England. A few years later, just as we were pulling into the pay station 25 miles outside of Paris, of course at midnight, the engine seized. Out of the car, peer into the engine, despair. An English truck driver, recognizing our English car and obvious distress, came to our rescue. We pushed the car to the side, emptied our luggage and multiple boxes of antique accessories we were taking to the shipper, put everything into the cab of his truck including ourselves, and he took us as far as he could. No trucks his size was allowed into Paris proper, so he dumped us on the outskirts of the peripherique in the middle of the night with all our belongings around us. Finally, a taxi appeared, and luckily the hotel had not given away our room. The Paris mechanic we towed the car to said he would have it fixed in a week, but three weeks later, we had our transporter put it into one of his trucks and take it to England. New engine, \$3000, no problem. A few months later, a thief got a broken-down looking car with a brand-new engine.

The very best part of buying trips was visiting with the dealers we got to be friends with. We planned our visits to arrive at them for the end of the day, and then have dinner together, and often a bed in a house instead of a hotel. We followed them as they moved houses and stores, watched their kids grow up, and talked shop and local politics incessantly. At our favorite stop, we watched as our friends, mainly by themselves, turned a rundown farmhouse back to the splendid Elizabethan manor house it had started as.



Another regular early stop was the moated Thurland Castle, outside Kirby Lonsdale in Cumbria. (Google it). One antique dealer friend hit on the idea of buying a castle instead of a retail shop. It had acres of room and romance, he could live in it and entertain in it, everyone would be impressed and want to buy things that came with such a wonderful provenance. It also had loads of upkeep expenses, but that discovery came later. For two years, the castle flourished. Buyers came and went, and after buying we all joined in cooking dinner in the huge servant's kitchen, and then marched the results to the grand candlelit dining room. It was dress up make believe, but it was wonderful.

On the other side of reality, Thurland was not heated, and we slept under mountains of covers. The bathroom was down the unlit hall and into ghost territory down another long unused hall. It was a later addition pasted onto the castle exterior. If the rooms and hall were frigid, the bathroom was deep freeze. I took soft cloth things with me when I had to wander off in the middle of the night (believe me, I put those trips off as long as possible) to keep my skin from freezing to the toilet seat.

So many other wonderful places. Pennard House, Bath Market, Islington, Kensington Church Street, King's Road, Warminster, Brighton, Leeds, Harrogate, Arundel, Lewes, Edenbridge, Petworth, Avon, Knaresborough, Gidley Manor, Fawsley Hall, the car ferry navigating the English channel in a tempest, Calais, the markets of Paris, the Left Bank, Terrass Hotel, Toulouse, Avignon, Bezier, Bonnieux, Lyon, Nimes, Rome, Amsterdam, Brussels, Bruges, Mechelen, Knokke, Roermond, Antwerp, Helsingborg, Ljungby, Norrköping, Gamla Stan, Clås Pa Hörnet...In the dealing world, an interesting location to end the story with.



As I reach the conclusion of this paean to a lifetime spent buying antiques, I should not close without giving a nod to the other part – the part that makes the buying possible. The antiques arrived to us via container ships; once in the US a crane lifted the container to the dock and hooked onto the business end of a tractor trailer. We shipped 40' ones, sometimes an additional 20 foot one. As we had been selling from the prior influx, we readjusted the store to give more space to everything else. Now we had to reverse and tighten up the placement to find places for up to a hundred major pieces, plus objects, mirrors, art etc. By any standards, our stores were large – 10,000 to 13,000 square feet, plus satellites in other locations through the years, but even so, it was a daunting experience to unpack a container, weave the new things into the current setting, and get it all priced. And then, unloading days increased the numbers of customers, some more interesting than others: we did have many famous names through our doors.