

1 Jerry's Game

I walked across the street from Bruno's shop to the antiques mall to peruse for sleepers. The Strasburg Emporium is one of the largest antiques malls on the mid-Atlantic seaboard. Somehow, the word had gotten across the street that I was in town with a load of Louis Vuitton, which can be a problem. More than once I have witnessed dealers rush around their booth changing prices *up* because I was headed down their aisle. Any dealer who raises their prices for that reason is a novice or a fool or both. Said fools will display the same level of stupidity at auctions that I attend, too. They'll run me up on a bid because they believe, incorrectly, that anything I bid on must be worth more than I am willing to pay, and so they bid higher. But no one really knows for sure what a bidder's motivation is, except the bidder.

In the early 1980's I ran a spongeware soap dish up at auction to \$285 before I dropped out. At the time, it was worth less than a hundred, but I didn't know that and apparently neither did the high bidder. At that time, I was still a novice second-generation antiques dealer. The spongeware soap dish was the first that I had ever seen, and so I ran it up. Only later did I discover that the successful bidder was also a rookie. She got stuck with an \$85 soap dish for which she paid too much. A few weeks later, I was a vendor at an antiques show in Manassas for a day. She was there, too, set up in a booth across from me. The contentious soap dish was on display in her booth for \$285. I could tell from the dealer's sheepish behavior that by then she knew that she had paid too much. To make matters worse, the soap dish was shoplifted at the show. That dealer paid very high tuition to learn a cardinal rule: set your limit at auction and *never* exceed it no matter what. I do.

That incident was a long time ago. Now I'm a battle-scarred veteran in more ways than one. Dealers whisper when they see me shopping down an aisle or when I take a front seat at an auction. In a way, I'm the old sheriff in town and I have earned the right to wear my badge the hard way: I've lost fortunes and been lucky, but mostly lost fortunes because I take risks.

Such is the life of a picker.

The Strasburg Emporium is located at the junction of Interstate 81 and 66, in its namesake village. In the olden days, teamsters waylaid here overnight to rest their mules and oxen from transporting milled grains, timber, furs, pottery, and everything else grown or manufactured on the early American frontier. The Shenandoah River runs swiftly nearby and Signal Knob is its backdrop. This prominent mountain, a sharp endcap to the long and high Massanutten Ridge, was used by both Union and Confederate signal corps troops during the American Civil War. They would glass for opposing troop movements using collapsing brass telescopes and then signal to friendly forces what they saw. I had been told this story many times but by luck, I had also read about it in a cache of love letters written by a signalman to his sweetheart in 1863. He described a peculiar spyglass with 'two eyepieces bound together.' His description set me on the hunt for what ultimately proved to be a prototype pair of binoculars made by the ocular innovator, Robert B. Tolles. As I walked around to the entrance of the place, my method of its discovery was still fresh and poignant.

Jerry Houff, the owner of The Strasburg Emporium, met me at the entrance in the gravel parking lot. "Hello again, Charles," he greeted me with a smile and a handshake.

I returned his strong grip and replied, "I was in town and thought maybe I should find something to pay for my gas." This is a colloquial expression amongst dealers indicating that we're looking to pick something with enough profit potential to offset the cost of gas for the day; a modest objective.

"Want to bet again, Charles?" he teased. "You know, to see if there's another sleeper as rich as the Tolles prototype?"

I shrugged confidently, pushed through the entrance doors, and replied, "It's your money."

Jerry and I engage in this sport that we call "Jerry's Game" whenever I visit The Emporium. How we got started doing it I don't remember, but it evolved into a marketing ploy on Jerry's part after the Tolles. Thereafter his objective was to get the "big dealer" (me) to buy something in his store so that his "little dealers" (his booth renters) would be impressed. It worked. His wait list doubled and I didn't mind because I made my gas money. If I lost the gambit by failing to find a sleeper (an undervalued object) for the agreed upon amount, then my obligation was to rent a small booth for three months. Either way, it was a marketing coup from Jerry's perspective, a win-win. For me the game was fun and the risk negligible. So far, I have never rented space in The Strasburg Emporium.

I asked him, "What's it going to be *this* time, Jerry?"

"Oh, I'll give you a ten minute window. How much gas do you need, Charles?"

Word had traveled. About eight or ten other dealers had gathered around to watch us, and also about half-a-dozen nosy customers who were trying to figure out what was going on. I could hear snippets of whispered comments.

"I looked all the way around the store, pirouetting, and then checked my watch. "Let's make it \$150, or more, this time," I suggested nonchalantly.

"Alright." He looked at the clock on the wall. "Ten minutes ... starting ... *now*."

Without missing so much as a beat or taking a step, I pointed and said, "I'll take the pair of ceramic owls behind you, Jerry, on the middle shelf."

He nearly jumped out of his handlebar mustache. "*What?*"

"You heard me, the owls." I tried my best to keep from grinning and poked with my index finger in the direction of the fifth shelf where a matched pair of Picasso chouette owls perched. Jerry had his own items for sale on display just inside the door behind the front reception desk, where we were standing.

"But, but you don't even know what I have on them."

He meant their price.

I kept a poker face. "I can see that the amount is three digits in the reflection of the price tag in the backmirror, so they can only be priced so high."

For a moment, he stood locked in place looking at them with his hands on his hips. He was wearing an argyle sweater vest, jeans, and white sneakers. Perhaps he was mentally willing them to fly away. Dejected, he finally forced himself, one by one, to place them on the counter. The advertised sticker price was \$495 for the *pair*.

"You still have my current tax exempt form on file, right Jerry?"

His shoulders slumped. "Maybe," he faux-sulked.

I managed to keep my poker face even though inside I was hysterical. I knew Jerry well enough to know that he was elated and that he was working the crowd that had formed. I also knew that he was suffering more from having me find something under his very nose within five seconds of the start of *his* game, than for the loss of a higher profit. More onlookers had gathered around the counter to hear the details. By now, the rules of the game were known by all and everyone was

waiting anxiously for me to reveal the details. I picked up one, then the other, and looked at each of their bottoms. Their bottoms were covered with green felt. An explanation was in order. The on-looking dealers were straining not to miss the lesson.

I explained, "Jerry, someone covered the hollow bottoms of the two figures with green felt. Because no one looked under the felt the pair remained unidentified until now." And with a thumb I pushed in the green felt, grabbed the loose edge, and gently pulled it away revealing clear markings. I lifted it for all to see.

"Picasso," the crowd whispered in unison in mutual epiphany, and then I lifted the other one. By the onlookers' reactions, Jerry realized that whatever he had lost by not identifying the two pieces as Picassos, he would gain back in PR. He had inadvertently tapped into the collective consciousness of his niche market: collectors and collectors who rent space. This particular episode of Jerry's Game would remain his favorite for years to come. Ultimately, it had wide-reaching effect. A couple of issues later in the year, this episode of the game appeared in the "Maine Antique Digest" as national news.

"What's it worth?" someone in the crowd asked. Others echoed the question within the noise of the general hubbub of excitement. Rather than be a curmudgeon and not disclose, I decided that the best course of action was to turn the event into a PR double whammy for both of us by teaching those present what I knew.

I answered the voice asking the question, "Well, at auction a matched pair of Picasso owls in this condition might fetch \$10,000 dollars." More gallery noise erupted and subsided as they eagerly waited for additional information.

From the back someone hollered, "Is that retail or wholesale?"

I answered, "Retail. Many collectors buy at auction these days. That makes an auction result difficult to distinguish. Some hammer prices are retail and others are wholesale. In this case, \$10,000 would be retail."

Someone else asked, "I didn't know he made ceramic pieces like these. So, how do you know it is really by Picasso?"

I nodded in the direction of the voice and thought of what to say, as I remembered the part that I couldn't tell them – that in my incarnation as Randolph West I had met Picasso in 1937 in a café in Montmartre. I was a war photographer fresh from the carnage at Guernica with a briefcase full of black and whites. What I showed him changed his life. What I told the group before me was just part of the story. "I was in Barcelona last year. They have a wonderful museum there dedicated to Picasso. I saw a lot of Picasso's work. Perusing museums might be time-consuming and expensive, but the payoff can be substantial, as you have witnessed with your own eyes here. Specimens like these were represented under a glass dome in the museum and there were thousands of other forms of his ceramics. Picasso had a relatively large line of ceramics: plates, bowls, figurines, vases, and other utility wares designed with the mass market in mind. Art was a business as well as a compulsion for Picasso. He was one of the few who made that combination successful, and that is rare. The key ingredients for success in the art world seem to be talent, business acumen, productivity, longevity, and a bit of luck. Picasso had all of the above in spades. And that, my friends, is the perfect transition I was looking for to present Jerry with a proposition," I turned to Jerry who had a what-the-heck look on his face.

"What proposition, Charles?" he asked quizzically. He was practically quivering.

"I want to set an example here with this episode of Jerry's Game," I turned to the audience, "as Jerry and I call it if you didn't already know." I looked around the room at all of the faces. They looked at me like deer in headlights not comprehending my next move.