

An appraising eye

Antique expert and 'This Old Thing' columnist John Sewell is just the man you want with you at Christie Antique and Vintage Show in Flamborough

STORY AND PHOTOGRAPHY BY ALEX BIELAK

It all began with a candy dish, a distinctive green candy dish that sat on the living room mantel when John Sewell was still in high school. The little voice that wondered, "How much is that old thing worth?" was only satisfied after he consulted a newly acquired "Warman's Antiques and Collectibles Price Guide." Bingo. It turned out to be a Greentown Glass sugar bowl valued at $80. Sewell was hooked.

Since then, Sewell has become one of the best-known antiques experts in Canada, travelling across the country to advise clients on family heirlooms for estate and insurance purposes. He has also appraised about 1,700 items in "This





Christie Antique and Vintage Show attracts nearly 300 dealers every year. There are stalls full of everything from vintage clothing to dishes. Gasoline advertising and equipment was particularly popular at the show last September. Antique expert John Sewell was adept at finding the gems among the thousands of items.

Old Thing," a column featured for over 12 years in the Waterloo Region Record, among other newspapers.

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Last September, looking trim and distinguished, Sewell picked me up at dawn, en route to Christie Antique and Vintage Show in Flamborough, where he had been a regular dealer for many years. Our conversation during the drive was broad-ranging and animated. A biology degree from the University of Waterloo led to a short career as an environmental consultant, but his true passion, hunting for antiques, eventually became a full-time profession. For him, "it was all about the discovery of a piece, then the rediscovery through research." While buying and selling were obviously rewarding, he usually found the sale anticlimactic.

The Christie shows — promoted by the Hamilton Conservation Authority, which runs them, to be the biggest one-day antiques shows in Canada — usually attract 10,000 or so visitors, once in the spring and again in early fall. With nearly 300 dealers, they proceed rain or shine. Wet and cold were the order of the day for us, and attendance was down about 40 per cent as we began to wander the site.

Visitors and stallholders alike stopped Sewell to reminisce. Many still think of him as a "glass guy" and, true to his 18-year-old self, he retains a fondness for the subject. For a long time, he was particularly keen on Canadian fruit jars, once selling a Hamilton Glass Works specimen for $2,450, pretty darn good for something one might find in a country dump. Ultimately, Sewell humbly rejects suggestions he's an expert, saying he's more a generalist and pointing to the team on the British edition of "Antiques Roadshow" as people he regards highly for their specialized knowledge.

With a wry sense of humour, he's just genuinely nice, a gentleman. He's also a fount of elliptically told, novel-worthy stories, lessons learned and hunts won and lost. He described a painful formative episode when a Jean Paul Lemieux painting he purchased for $3,000 turned out to be a print worth less than $100. He got caught up in the auction action, led on by confident bidders he surmised knew what they were doing. Determined not to repeat his mistake, he undertook extensive research on print-making techniques and learned to know his subject.

Then there were the 12 improbably mint-condition dinner plates, purportedly from the Czar's palace in Russia, which he worried were reproductions. A second opinion, from a trusted colleague, helped determine they were real, and they eventually sold for $160,000, to his surprise, but apparently not that of the seller. A painting he acquired for $1,800 initially sold at auction for a hundred times that amount, but several twists and turns later

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John Sewell has a particular fondness for glass items. He once sold a Hamilton Glass Works fruit jar for $2,450. Pressed glass, Sewell notes, has fallen out of fashion and sells for far less than it did a few years ago.

turned out to be stolen and netted him just a small finder's fee.

He also mentioned a story that really stuck with him for its impact on an individual he never met in person. A picture of an oriental carving that came to him via the column turned out to be of a rare rhinoceros horn cup from the 1700s whose eventual sale, for $175,000, allowed the grateful seller to keep the home she was about to lose. Appraising an estate for writer Plum Johnson, in whose touching prizewinning memoir "They Left Us Everything" he was surprised to eventually find himself featured, was another highlight.

Sewell mentions he collected egg cups for a long time. Asked what constitutes a good egg cup, he laughed, and said that for him it was good-quality, interesting, rare, small, English-style single-egg cups. Alluding to the lengths devotees will go to obtain items they yearn for, he told me about a couple of specimens he had coveted to round out his collection. The eventual auction outcome taught him he was not truly an egg cup collector, though he had made a good stab at it.

He recounts bidding over the phone on the most interesting specimen he'd ever seen. You can sense the excitement of the hunt in his vivid recall: "It was damaged, a rare Canadian pottery egg cup, an amazing piece from the early 1800s, with a Molson's steamship on it, more an egg hoop really, a bit like a napkin ring. I thought I had it at $850, or about four times more than I'd ever paid for an egg cup. Just as I was thinking to myself, 'What have I done?' the bidding in the room suddenly continued. The hammer came down at $2,000." Conflicted, but ultimately relieved, he suspected the buyer was a museum.

Walking through the Christie show with Sewell was an education. It seems he can spot something neat, or a worthwhile buy, even if it's partially obscured at 50 paces. We darted from tables laden with odds and sods and stalls of vintage clothing, shoes and hats, to dealers specializing in glassware or furniture, to more displays than Sewell had ever seen before of automotive and gasoline advertising signs and equipment. As we walked, Sewell, his compact black umbrella held high, provided running commentary about factors that influence the market for antiques.

The strength of an economy in a country can be significant: Chinese and Japanese buyers have been dominant in certain areas. Chinese porcelain, for example, climbed to record prices because the Chinese economy was strong, but buying habits are changing with the devaluation of the yen. Fashion is another driver, with whole categories falling in and out of favour. Related to that, in this Internet age, is the impact of celebrities who accumulate certain sorts of collectibles, which can escalate values, albeit temporarily.

Conversely, he said, "Ikea is where it's at. People want new and fresh and there are no buyers for solid, well-made Victorian or Edwardian furniture and dining sets unless the pieces are unique. Pressed glass is out of fashion too, with pieces worth $250 a few years ago fetching $30 now." Moving along, as we pass an array of Shell and Red Indian advertising signs, selling at thousands of dollars, Sewell added, "Gasoline art has been absolutely on fire for the past six or seven years." Engrossed, neither of us

ANTIQUING TIPS

FROM JOHN SEWELL

Sewell's favourite saying related to looking for antiques is by Louis Pasteur: "Chance favours only the prepared mind." The more you know, the easier it will be for the good pieces to find you. To get the best bang for the buck, bear the following in mind:

- Pick one area of collecting to begin with
- Learn as much as you can. Read books, visit museums
- Get a sense of values, past and present
- Condition is important
- Visual appeal is also key. Make sure you like the piece
- Buy what you want, at a price you can afford

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noticed the unintentional pun.

Sewell greeted well-regarded antique-dealing brothers Justin and Ethan Miller, of J.C. Miller Antiques in Baden, asking, "Anything real special?" as another early-morning buyer queried whether they had any railway stuff. They didn't but opened up their van to show us a classic secretary desk, protected from the rain. Sewell marvelled at the "phenomenal finish." We stopped by another dealer to pick up a pretty blue and white Sandwich Glass dolphin candlestick, set aside for him by a friend. Sewell had a client who needed to make up a set. He examined it carefully, holding it up to the light to look for damage, pinging it and listening to assess the lead content. Made in Cape Cod, Mass., the candlesticks are one of Sewell's all-time favourite objects. He likes them so much, there's an image of one on his letterhead.

Walking on, I asked about his success as a dealer. Once again, he demurred. "I was a dealer more in the romantic fashion. I am intrigued too much for my own good to be a really good businessman at this. I just can't handle it that way and that reflects. I have a big conscience and feel good about that. There's a certain air of caution in me and consideration for my client, and I'm a big advocate of return business."

He reflected a moment before he continued. "Reputation and credibility are key for most dealers, but things have changed with sales over the Internet. To undo things can sometimes be a nightmare. I like face-to-face and never had to rely much on the computer." His main business now is the appraisals he conducts in person, across the country, almost weekly and the hundreds he does online or for the column.

His genteel sensibility manifested itself when he spotted a kerosene oil lamp. Immediately engrossed, a careful assessment happened automatically. In good condition and a pretty blue, it was marked at $225, less than half the price it would have been a decade ago. Sewell was tempted, but it was I who asked dealer Gavin Wilson, of Renfrew, if he would let it go for less. Sewell wrote a cheque as I asked how long he would keep it. The thrill of the chase already wearing off, he quipped, "At least 15 minutes," noting he would likely sell it to a couple of folk he knew.

Our day was winding down as the rain continued to lightly fall. Suddenly, Sewell grabbed my arm. "You won't believe this," he exclaimed, directing my gaze to a stall diagonally across the crowded walkway. "You'll think this is a setup. You remember that Greentown Glass bowl I told you about? There it is. And not just the bowl, an entire set!"

We crossed to the booth and I finally appreciated what he's talking about. There were 11 — to my eye, relatively ugly — pieces of the green glassware in all. They rested on a battered table among other seemingly equally undistinguished pieces of china and glass. The vendor asked "$100 for the lot." I could see Sewell was tempted, but almost out of a sense of responsibility, rather than seeing a cheap deal. He was almost in a reverie and I'm not sure whether he realized he was speaking out loud when he said, "That's an unbelievably fair price. Remembering the old prices makes you want to buy, to rescue it. Do I love it? Can I make a dollar? Who can I sell it to?"

It was the perfect example of the piece coming to him. Of a prepared mind, an appraising eye.



John Sewell got hooked on antiques in high school. A green candy bowl sat on the living room mantel and Sewell felt compelled to learn more about it. At the Christie Antique and Vintage Show last September, Sewell found a green glass set, including the same green bowl.



