

Handled with Care

Art and antiques fairs are glittering events. Ever wonder, however, what happens *before* the doors are thrown open and the crowd rushes in? A behind-the-scenes look at the city's most prestigious shows. By Leslie Jay

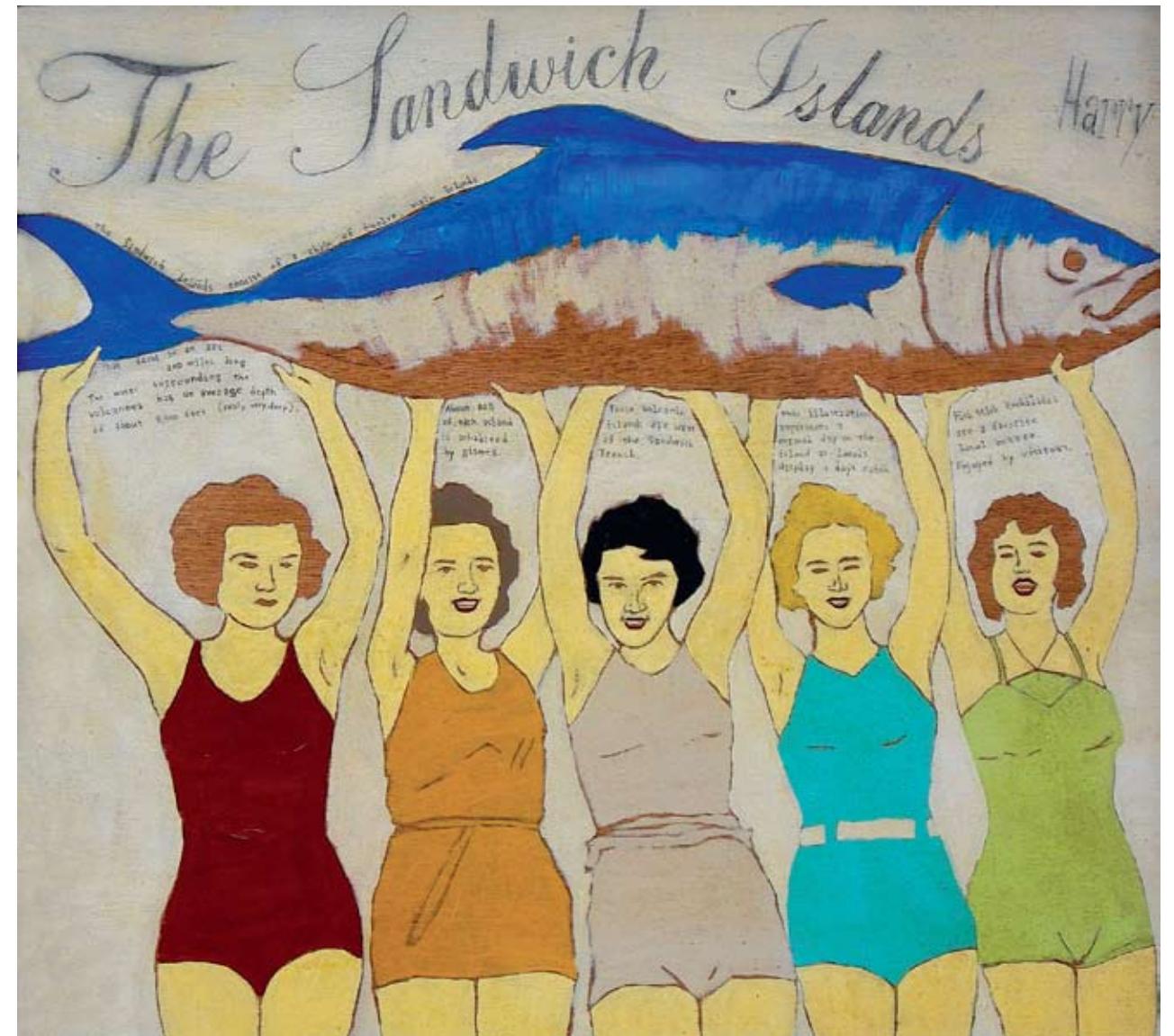


Elaborate booths characterize the elite Winter Antiques Show. Dealer Sandra Hindman's display strives "to show that 'old' art looks fabulous in contemporary settings."

New York is an art collector's destination in any season. But the choices become even more spectacular in January, when Manhattan hosts multiple, major fine and decorative arts fairs. With wares ranging from pre-Columbian artifacts to contemporary sculpture, the shows bustle with excited activity. But often that's nothing compared to the action (even drama) that occurs behind the scenes.

The first question for show producers: in which venue to hold their event. "I look for the correct amount of open space and a location that's accessible to the desired crowd," says Mark Lyman, president of Art Fair Company, which is staging the debut of the Metro Show (Jan. 18-22). With that in mind, Lyman chose the Metropolitan Pavilion (125 W. 18th St., 1-800-563-7632) in trendy Chelsea to emphasize that this expo—a successor to the venerable American Antiques Show—would be an edgy mix of traditional and contemporary Americana, with masterpieces of European, as well as homegrown art.

At the inaugural Metro Show: "Mother-Tongue II" (right), by ceramicist Avital Sheffer; "The Sandwich Islands" (below, 2011), by self-taught artist Harry Underwood.



Sometimes, ideal locations develop out of economy. Jeanne Stella, director of Stella Show Management, recognized a real estate bargain on the spot, so to speak: She reserved several of Manhattan's west side piers in 1984, when their remote location and rundown appearance caused them to be favorably priced. Now, 28 years later, the venue has become an events destination—and Stella's annual **Americana & Antiques at the Pier** (Pier 92, 12th Ave. at W. 55th St., 1-973-808-5015, Jan. 21-22) is one of the biggest shows of Antiques Week, with 200 vendors, most of them specialists in made-in-the-USA pieces, from folk art to fine furniture.

And sometimes, a change of venue can be serendipitous. Caskey Lees' co-founder Elizabeth Lees had produced the **New York Ceramics Fair** at the National Academy Museum for more than a decade before the building stopped renting facilities to commercial events in 2010. Lees was concerned that her niche show, which features everything from fine enamels to humble earthenware, would end up homeless. Happily, she recalls, she discovered The Bohemian National Hall (321 E. 73rd St., 1-310-455-2886)—a lovely and appropriate venue, given Czechoslovakia's long, rich tradition in decorative glass-making. The fair returns to the hall for the second year (Jan. 17-22), with 32 vendors displaying antique and modern English, American and European oven-fired masterpieces within its chandeliered confines.

Upon securing a location, producers have different strategies for dividing up the space. At the prestigious **Winter Antiques Show** (Park Avenue Armory, 643 Park Ave., 1-718-292-7392, Jan. 20-29), "booths are planned months in advance to present museum-quality objects in a sumptuous, retail-like setting," says Executive Director Catherine Sweeney Singer. "Each booth is a unique 'stage set' with special lighting, moldings, etc." The elaborate, theatrical presentation befits the show's setting—a stately 19th-century landmark—and its roster of elite international exhibitors, most of whom come back year after year to display their fine and decorative artworks: rarities from every continent and era, from antiquity through the 1960s. "The entire show takes a week to install," Singer adds—almost as long as the show's 10-day run.

For the Metro Show, the Art Fair Company is providing 10-to-12-foot wall systems from its immense prefab stock to create customized booths with lighting troughs (enclosed channels for continuous lighting), Internet connections and, sometimes, hookups for flat-screen TVs. The walls are painted or covered in fabric, per the exhibitors' specifications. "Each booth is a separate process," says Mark Lyman, adding that the planning phase takes about two months, as his staff and the vendors exchange blueprints. The on-site prep can take two to three days.

Over at the Ceramics Fair, Elizabeth Lees supplies comparatively modest cubicles covered in gray felt. Her



Art fair treasures range from a pair of amethyst chandelier earrings (above, ca. 1830) at **Antiques at the Armory**, to a vintage American wood ten pin set (below) at **Americana & Antiques at the Pier**.



crew, which has worked with her for years, assembles all the stalls in about six hours. Walls are reinforced, if vendors need to suspend their heavy clay or glass wares. "Once, somebody wanted to hang 10 plates," reports Lees, who arranged for extra supports 10 inches from the top, three inches from one side, three inches from the other, and so on, based on precise measurements from the exhibitor. Otherwise, her dealers are responsible for their own areas; people who need display cases can order them from a source Lees recommends.

Participants at the Americana show don't get prepared spaces at all: "Our booths are chalk lines on the floor," Jeanne Stella says. Her vendors visit the pier before they set up shop, so they can mark their assigned space and run wires. The next day, they handle their own build-outs. "The exhibitors take raw space and make it beautiful," Stella says. "You don't realize you're walking into a ship terminal."

However the booths are built, and by whom, the exhibitors are responsible for filling them. Stella often watches the carefully choreographed dance of vendors transporting their wares into and out of the single freight elevator serving the property. "It's lots of labor," she says. "I always wish I could show it on a slow-motion, stop-action camera." Most are savvy enough to pack portable items, but there are always a few pieces that are too heavy for human hands to carry, such as a cement table for the garden or a marble sculpture. "Once, we needed a forklift to bring something in," Stella recalls.

Before coming to New York, Metro Show participant Amy Finkel—the "daughter" in M. Finkel & Daughter, a Philadelphia dealer that concentrates on antique samplers and embroideries—selects 40 to 50 of her prime schoolgirl-stitched pieces, plus another 15 to 20 objects, such as crafts and furniture. Then her staffers lovingly tuck the items into crates and cartons outfitted with cardboard and foam separators. "After that, they could travel to Alaska," asserts Finkel. "The pieces are happy in their spaces." Upon arrival, she takes two days to unload and set up her collectibles.

Similarly, Ceramics Fair exhibitor Alan Kaplan, co-owner of Leo Kaplan Ltd., needs three days to pack his pieces, even though they're traveling less than a mile between his gallery and the show site. Because the fair is a vetted show (meaning, all the wares are authenticated by

administrators), each item gets tagged with a descriptive invoice. Then it's wrapped in tissue paper and swaddled in bubble wrap. "The trick is to pad each one into the shape of a geometric figure, until I can't feel an edge," Kaplan observes. "The hardest to handle are those detailed 18th-century porcelain figures that have trees with leaves and flowers."

Winter Antiques Show vendor Sandra Hindman, owner of Les Enluminures, a Chicago- and Paris-based gallery that specializes in illuminated manuscripts and other medieval treasures, faces another kind of challenge. "France requires a 'passport' for every traveling manuscript, no matter how little its value," she explains. Applications are submitted to the Ministry of Culture, which can reject



Some of the clever, colorful oven-fired works at the **New York Ceramics Fair**: a set of Spode tulip cups and stand (above, ca. 1820); an enameled goose-shaped tureen (left, ca. 1770) made for export in Qing Dynasty China.

them to give the state the opportunity to buy the document. "The whole procedure, while cumbersome, protects French patrimony," says Hindman—and prolongs her preparations.

No matter what aggravations they endure in delivering the goods, exhibitors are thrilled to participate in these shows. Like many dealers, American flag specialist Jeff Bridgman does a lot of business over the Internet nowadays. Nonetheless, he'd never miss out on January Antiques Week. "My best clients are in the city," he declares. "New Yorkers are very educated, very patriotic. And I like to hope that I provide them with something different."