

COLLECTOR

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PURSUING PASSIONS AND PROFITS IN ART, ANTIQUES AND COLLECTIBLES

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A Closer Look

Happy spring to all! Last month, both Sotheby's and Christie's announced their 2004 financial results, which were predictably robust: Sotheby's posted a 59% increase in auction sales over 2003, while Christie's declared a 25% jump in overall sales, auction and private.

Will 2005 keep pace? The big May sales may tell. While the hunger for quality is still there, and many enticing individual works are continuing to be consigned, I'm not seeing the landmark collections like those that made last year so strong: Forbes, Whitney, Duke, Fraad.

Markets to watch in 2005: India, Russia and China, where the combination of new wealth and cultural pride is spiking art sales. Sotheby's Russia sale just earned a record-breaking \$35.2 million, while Christie's 2004 Chinese paintings sale earned 162% more than in 2003. Looming ominously on the horizon: to curb archaeological looting, Beijing wants to restrict U.S. imports of any Chinese artwork made before 1912—which would devastate the trade. Meanwhile, for the scoop on the modern Indian art boom, read my lead story. —Missy Sullivan

BUYING SMART

India Rising: Art Since Independence



Celebrating all the way to the bank: Tyeb Mehta's *Celebration (Triptych)* holds the record price for contemporary Indian art at auction, fetching \$317,500 at Christie's in 2002.

The blockbuster art deal reportedly went down at the racetrack in Mumbai late last summer. Holding the checkbook: Guru Swarup Srivastava, a millionaire iron-ore exporter who admitted to knowing nothing about art, except that he was drawn to its potential for a “quick investment return.” Making the pitch: India's renowned artist-filmmaker Maqbool Fida Husain, a rock star of an 89-year-old known for his boundless energy, flowing white mane and keen interest in raising the value of contemporary Indian art. The outcome of their summit, trumpeted loudly to the press: a commission of 100 new Husain paintings for one billion rupees (\$21.6 million).

There may be no better example of the giddiness—and quite frankly, the greed—fueling the current Indian art market. Reportedly it took only 45 minutes for Husain to convince the CEO and art novice to pay, on spec, roughly \$200,000 per painting. Pretty audacious, consid-

ering that his record auction price at the time was only \$107,000 and, according to Alka Singal of New York's Gallery ArtsIndia, the retail price for his new works generally ranges between \$50,000 and \$100,000. Unfazed by this discrepancy and confident of an “at least threefold return” on his investment, Srivastava has announced plans to auction the works as early as this summer. Hmmm. Let's see. Historically untested works? Short hold? Maximum hype? I, for one, have doubts that the paintings will yield his desired return.

But it's easy to see how Srivastava could be bedazzled. Prices for post-Independence Indian art have been on a steep climb the last five years. Credit not only the booming Indian economy (India boasts 12 names on the *Forbes* billionaire list), but also the wealthy, highly educated Indian diaspora looking to connect to its cultural roots. According to a study by University of Georgia business professor Dr. Srinivas Reddy, the volume of all auction sales in this area has doubled since 1995, while

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COLLECTOR'S EYE

Artifacts of Classic TV

When Ben Affleck recently began his research to portray actor George Reeves in the upcoming feature film, *Truth, Justice and the American Way*, he was eager to check out the original Superman costume that Reeves wore in the 1950s TV series. So where did he turn? To James Comisar, a Los Angeles-based collector-turned-curator who has amassed more than 6,000 key artifacts of television history: important props, costumes and set pieces from TV's most popular shows. That's more than resides in the Smithsonian Institution.



The original in snazzy car phones, direct from the Batmobile.

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TV Artifacts

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Not only could Affleck find Reeves' vintage costume, with its thick wool tunic, rigid rubber muscle suit, long johns and cape. Comisar's cache also includes such beloved artifacts as Ralph Kramden's bus driver jacket from *The Honeymooners* ... Johnny Carson's complete *Tonight Show* set ... Maxwell Smart's shoe phone ... Jeannie's bottle ... Archie Bunker's living room set ... Mr. Spock's ears ... original costumes of Zorro, The Lone Ranger, Superman, Wonder Woman, Batman and Robin ... and countless other TV treasures.

Comisar, who began his career dreaming up bachelorette questions for *The Dating Game* and later writing jokes for Joan Rivers and Howie Mandel, fell into collecting when he was 25 years old. He now makes his living appraising, authenticating and restoring high-end TV memorabilia, as well as advising private and institutional collectors. Now 40, he is putting the finishing touches on "America: As Seen on TV," an exhibition of his collection that will travel to more than a dozen museums beginning in 2006.

How did you start?

The first items I ever purchased were two "bumper cards" from *The Tonight Show*, used at the commercial break saying "The Tonight Show....more to come." They had animated drawings on them, like a screaming tea kettle. I bought them for \$212 at an auction, with no resistance. That was in 1989. Back then, nobody was interested in TV ephemera, with the exception of *I Love Lucy* and *Star Trek*. So I put ads in *The Los Angeles Times* classifieds, asking for

things like Don Adams' shoe phone from *Get Smart*. I got tons of calls.

Any serious offers?

Some. But kooks too. A Las Vegas dentist offered me some plaque scraped off Elvis's teeth. ("Early" plaque, he insisted.) Outrageous stuff. I soon realized such bizarre claims would come with the territory. But if I wanted to acquire unique artifacts of television history, I needed to somehow substantiate what was being said.



Above: The thrones of the king and queen of sitcoms, Archie and Edith Bunker, donated by *All in the Family* creator Norman Lear.

Right: Who could forget the operator trying to refund a dime to Maxwell Smart's shoe phone? "But operator, it's an unlisted shoe!"



So how do you go about authenticating?

Establishing authenticity is the first and most important task. Take costumes. At the least, you need to know about materials and construction, and what perspiration and makeup stains look like when they're 50 years old versus five years old. You need to know that items stored in a vast studio warehouse will have a certain smell. And that because costumes hang for years on cheap wire hangers, the shoulders often wear thin.

Adding to the confusion is the studio practice of recycling costumes for rental to other productions. They remove patches, emblems, logos, buttons—anything that makes it look specific to a production. To fit the next actor, an item might be altered or redyed. George Reeves' Superman tunic was basically a blue knit wool sweater, easily reuseable—they just took off one of the sweaters; then it took me over a decade to reunite it with its handmade emblem patch.

What gets faked the most?

Star Trek landing-party props: pistol phasers, communicators, small items that can easily be popped out of molds. *Star Trek* fans, who can be

rabid in their knowledge of the show, aren't necessarily trying to defraud anyone when they build their own pistol phasers and sell them at fan conventions. But when the same items later appear at auction or online, described as "show-used," they can cause great confusion. I've seen only a handful of authentic *Star Trek* landing party hand-props—and at least 50 of each that are not. The other most-copied item? Jeannie bottles and Superman costumes. One guy was selling bogus Superman costumes for \$30,000–50,000 apiece. If you're not an experienced buyer, find an expert to

guide you. Or buy only from reputable sources that guarantee authenticity in writing and offer lifetime money-back guarantees.

How useful are certificates of authenticity?

They're very problematic. I won't authenticate anything in writing for any item valued under \$10,000 because I don't want my paper out there. People copy my letterhead and use it with lousy pieces. It's pretty common in this field. Good paperwork gets married to bad pieces.

What are other important determinants of value?

Real connoisseurs want an artifact worn or wielded by actors in their most trademark TV roles. A Don Adams prop used on *Get Smart* is a Fabergé egg, while items he used in other roles have almost no value. I have Gilligan's and the Skipper's caps. But non-Gilligan-related Bob Denver items? They're worth almost nothing. Out of context of the shows, the value really plummets. I believe it all comes down to childhood memories. You want the costume you grew up watching your favorite actor in.

Condition also affects value. How complete is the item? How original? Are the pouches still on that bat belt? Makeup, sweat stains and action wear, if not visually offensive, can be desirable as evidence of the item's use. You also consider rarity. For example, while there's a tremendous demand for Lucy material, only a few of her dresses have ever appeared at auction. Then there's provenance. If it came directly from the actor, that's a plus, assuming they can document the piece.

At what point did you transition from being a collector to a curator?

Maybe three to four years after I started, when I realized these things required archival care and I would need to learn or hire professionals. By my

WHERE TO BUY TELEVISION ARTIFACTS

Profiles in History, Beverly Hills, Calif.
www.profilesinhistory.com

Christie's and Julien's, New York, N.Y.
www.christies.com

Starwares.com, Agoura Hills, Calif.
www.starwares.com

Starticles, Toronto, Canada
www.starticles.com

Disney.com
www.disney.com

fourth year of collecting, we came to be known as the ultimate archive. That was the year that Mr. Carson donated his complete *Tonight Show* set. The next year Norman Lear gave us the final *All in the Family* set.

How do you conserve this stuff?

I have a climate- and humidity-controlled warehouse that is completely dark except for one hour a day. Memorabilia can suffer serious fading or degradation if placed in front of sunny windows without UV protection. And if you shut the A/C off at night, wild fluctuations in temperature and humidity levels can wreak havoc, especially on textiles. We also check weekly for insect infestation. Archival techniques are expensive, but I feel personally responsible for all of the pieces I curate. Maybe since they are Hollywood artifacts, they feel like old friends. I feel like I'm not going to let Captain Kirk or Superman down. Not on my shift.

How has the market changed since you started?

The top stuff has shot up significantly. Take Batman and Robin costumes: I bought the pair 15 years ago, for under \$5,000. Today, complete and in good condition, they would approach \$200,000. *Star Trek* costumes have also soared in value, especially the first year's velour tunics. William Ware Theiss, the series' original costume designer, said that the uniform tops shrank half a size with each dry cleaning. And of course it didn't help that William Shatner was renowned for hitting the catering table. So they decided to change materials for the second season, making the first-year velours particularly collectible. In the early '90s, they sold for \$500 to a few thousand dollars. Today, Kirk's or Spock's tunics can sell for \$100,000.



Left: Jeannie's bottle;
Below: Wonder Woman's well-worn costume.

Do you buy on EBay?

EBay is both the best and the worst thing that has happened to the memorabilia market. It rocks for connecting sellers and buyers. But the problem is: what is being sold? I buy online, and while some of the stuff is great, a lot is fake, stolen or otherwise problematic. It's a huge buyer-beware situation. If an EBay seller won't answer my questions or let me come see an item in person, I won't buy it. Too many online buyers make a multi-thousand-dollar buying decision based on a one-paragraph description and three bad digital photos. There's such an emotional connection, they toss due diligence out the window.

Where do you find the good stuff?

I buy privately, from estates and collections, from people in the industry, from public auctions. Online, I like Disney.com and the other studio sites, which often auction items with EBay. I got *Mickey Mouse Club* and *Home Improvement* costumes on Disney's site. I also find current artifacts online. *Survivor*'s creator Mark Burnett sells items on EBay to benefit charity. You can pay \$7,000 to \$10,000 for a torch. And I've seen the voting urns sell for upwards of \$25,000. That's some tall money for contemporary stuff.

Which pieces are closest to your heart, that you live with at home?

The H.R. Pufnstuf costume. When that show aired in 1969, I was five years old. Pufnstuf was the Mickey Mouse of my generation. And Mr. Carson's desk and chair. I grew up watching him every night, wanting to be a joke-writer for him. He was the king of television, on the air for 30 years. Long live the king.
Thanks. Jfc

GOOD...BETTER...BEST

What determines the value of TV artifacts? According to Comisar, who not only collects, but who also appraises and brokers this material, proof of authenticity is paramount. Then collectors should look for a show's most signature costumes or props. Rarity, originality and condition also play a part. We asked Comisar to look at a recent catalog from the Profiles in History auction house, and help us understand relative quality.



Daggit costume from *Battlestar Galactica*

GOOD From a 1970s sci-fi series with a dedicated fan base, this futuristic costume was actually worn on camera by a monkey, arguably the show's most beloved character. It's rare to find this in such good condition, with so many original bits—from the bodysuit, feet and snout to the remote control that animated the mouth and ears to the original comb used to brush out the costume. Pieces from the '70s rarely top \$30,000.

April 2005 Price: \$34,500.

Mary Ann costume from *Gilligan's Island*

This gingham blouse and shorts ensemble personifies the wholesome sensibility of farm girl Mary Ann Summers from *Gilligan's Island*. It was her quintessential identity piece. Still, it's not as instantly recognizable as Gilligan's red shirt, which he wore in every episode. It doesn't hurt that it was consigned by Dawn Wells, the actor who played the part. Few costumes survived the three-year production. This one, custom-made for the show and in very good condition, is one of few that did.



BETTER

April 2005 Price: \$20,700.

Superman chest emblem from *The Adventures of Superman*



The "S" on Superman's chest is nothing less than one of the most recognizable pop culture icons of the twentieth century—condition problems and all. At the end of each season, actor George Reeves was known to cut his chest emblems and send them to sick kids

who had written to him, adding to their magic.

Demand for all things Superman is very high and the marketplace is littered with reproductions. A complete George Reeves Superman costume with great provenance would sell for up to \$250,000.

April 2005 Price: \$12,650.

Stagecoach shotgun from *Gunsmoke*

The poor condition of this prop makes it look like it was dragged behind the stagecoach



AVOID

rather than carried inside of it. Note that guns were maintained at all of the studios, and while they were likely used in many productions over the decades, definitively tying a weapon to a certain show or actor is very difficult to do. Today, collectors (especially consignors) tend to overcatalog the attribution of such weapons.

April 2005 Price: \$690