

Talk of the Trade: New Kids on the (Auction) Block

By Randall Decoteau

There is a whole lot of auction business going on, and it seems like there's much more than there used to be. Just this year we've counted three notable additions to the field, each accessible on the Web. We talked to Mosby & Co., Old Toy Soldier Auctions USA and Woodbury Auctions to get the latest on these three new houses. We hope you'll search out (auction) action with these three new kids on the (auction) block.



Keith Spurgeon with Mosby, his well-traveled Senegal parrot.

Keith Spurgeon, Mosby & Co. Auctions, 905 West 7th St., #228, Frederick, MD 21701, (301) 304-0352, www.mosbyauctions.com

I asked how Keith took the name of Mosby & Co. for his new auction company, which had its first sale in May of this year. It seems that Mosby is a Senegal parrot who came to Keith when she was just six weeks old. "Nobody cares about me," he complained good-naturedly. "They all want to know how the bird's doing; actually, she's the complaint department - she attacks the telephone - I think she sees it as a rival for my attention. Mosby's been cross country 25 times; she's the only bird I know who's been to the Grand Canyon."

Keith favors Disney and comic character toys, his original specialty. He got started as a kid when he found a piece from a Disney tea set belonging to his mom that he thought was pretty cool. He ended up going into the toy business in his twenties. His focus has evolved to include more variety, such as Americana, advertising and all kinds of toys.

Several pieces did very well at his last auction, including a penny toy boat by Issmayer that sold for \$3,300. Another stand-out was a pre-war Japanese tin and celluloid Uncle Wiggly Crazy Car that finished at \$3,630 after a lot of activity. He also sold Handel lamps, saying that he likes auctions that mix things up. "My next sale is going to be a real assortment with some fine art, advertising, Americana, Civil War items and coin-op machines," Keith said. "I'll also be selling an extremely rare original John Brown Sharps rifle used in the raid on Harper's Ferry." He'll also put up a great star pattern American flag that was started in the 1850s and finished in 1865. The piece will include a photograph of the woman who stitched the flag.

Most of the bids come in via the Internet. Catalogues go out by mail, so he also gets mail and phone bids. His sales run 10 days from opening until closing. "I love this business," he admitted. "One of the best things is the people and the friends you pick up along the way."

Ray Haradin, Old Toy Soldier Auctions USA, P.O. Box 13324, Pittsburg, PA 15243, (412) 343-8733, www.oldsoldierauctions.com and www.oldsoldier.com

Fewer sales per year keep the excitement high, according to Ray Haradin at Old Toy Soldier Auctions USA. Planning

two auctions per year, Ray tells that "we are the only auction house in the world to specialize in toy soldiers." Haradin does everything via Internet, absentee bids and phone bids. He likes to think of his business as a live auction without the sale room. Old Toy Soldier publishes a catalogue with quality photos and descriptions. The company strives to correctly catalogue the items and guarantees every item it sells exactly as described.

The heyday of production for old tin soldiers was prior



Ray Haradin examines an old toy soldier.

to World War II, but even today kids grow up playing with toy figures. There are Napoleonic soldiers, Foreign Legion, Roman figures and soldiers from this century's wars. Since the big war, he said, we've changed our view of the military, bringing in all sorts of civilian figures, including farm, circus, police and other categories. "One nice thing is that you can collect toy soldiers from any economic base, even as low as 50 cents per figure," Ray told me with enthusiasm. "You can buy very respectable figures for \$30-40 apiece."

There are two classes of collectors in this field. There is the advanced collector who seeks out extreme rarities in extreme condition. The second type of collector likes the pieces for what they are and wants a nice diorama to play with. Some sets of eight figures can go for as little as \$200 or for as much as \$10,000 for something over the top. Ray loves antiques. "I'm not in this for the money," he said with a laugh. "I love the thrill of the chase. Finding something I've never handled before is really exciting for me."

Tom Schwenke, Woodbury Auction, 50 Main Street North, Woodbury, CT 06798, (203) 266-0323, www.woodburyauction.com

After 40 years in the antiques business, what better direction could Tom Schwenke take but to start an auction house? "I haven't had an auction house for 10 years, but I've been to a hundred thousand auctions and I know the business inside out," he said with a serious look. "Woodbury Auctions is something I want to do and it's in the best interest of my clientele right now." Tom's first auction was this past May.

"I view myself as a boutique auction house," Tom told me. "I have a degree of specialization in my furniture



Tom Schwenke stands in front of a Charles II stumpwork mirror; it fetched \$23,400 at his first auction.

business and have a lot of contacts." He told me that when he shopped an estate, he used to buy only three or four items. Now he can handle the other 6,000 items that will surely be desirable to his customers. "Having an auction platform is a good way to continue to provide service to my clients."

Woodbury's first auction was what they like to call an Opportunity Auction. By the time they closed the door to consignments, they had 586 lots from seven states and the merchandise ranged from soup to nuts. There was good furniture, decorative and Continental material, a good deal of glass and a Charles II stumpwork mirror that brought \$23,400. The sale was held right in Tom's facility on Woodbury's Main Street. Sarah Pratt, who ran Sotheby's Arcade for nine years, was the auctioneer. The firm plans four live auctions per year and at press time had already developed 200 registered bidders.

A catalogue is being prepared for the October auction with new consignments coming in every day. "The material for our last auction was here to be sold and it was met with enthusiasm," Tom reminded me. "We have a great team and provide a need to both buyer and seller with a high level of transparency. People appreciate that."



Sawmill at Zena by Robert Angeloch

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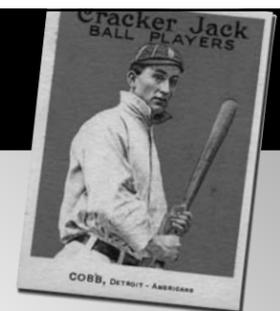
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