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A Curiosity Shop With Stock to Covet From Around the World

By HOLLAND COTTER

PLUCK and luxe are what you need to get an art fair right. When they work, it works. So, welcome to the 52nd Annual Winter Antiques Show, which opens today on Park Avenue.

This was once the hands-down swellest event of its kind in the New York season, but it has competition now. Lots. The Seventh Regiment Armory has functioned as a glorified loading dock for all kinds of shows, coming and going, with specialty items like the International Asian Art Fair and the Tribal and Textile Arts Show generating serious incandescence.

Actually, one thing that keeps the Winter Antiques Show distinctive is variety. While it tilts heavily in an 18th- and 19th-century Euro-American direction, there's a little something for everyone. Asian art? Got it. African? Check. Italian Renaissance? Ma, certo. You're in the mood for a Egyptian faience pectoral of the winged goddess Isis, circa 1069-715 B.C.? Step right this way. Rupert Wace Ancient Art from London awaits you.

52nd Annual Winter Antiques Show

Seventh Regiment Armory

Indeed, you'll bump into several goddesses as you hike the miles of aisles. One is the never-ever-antique Audrey Hepburn, seen in a signed photograph at Kenneth W. Rendell, purveyor of "historical letters, manuscripts and documents," where she shares space with Josephine Baker, Susan B. Anthony and Marie Antoinette.

And the Winter Antiques Show — often called the East Side show for the charity it benefits, the East Side House Settlement in the South Bronx — looks different from other armory shows. In fact, it set the model for most of them, and then brashly pumped that model up.

Other fairs have booths; this one has architectural structures and furnished interiors: shops, parlors, floor-through salons, with nooks and crannies to peer into and corners to peek

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Top, a dolphin sofa from about 1820; above from left, a glove maker's beechwood hand forms, from around 1890; German armor from around 1560; Egyptian faience depicting Isis, from 1069-715 B.C.; a centaur weather vane; and a sun mask from Northern Vancouver Island, circa 1870.

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around. All is tidy and trim. What's clutter in other shows is cluster here. Yes, it can get a bit too ye olde. But life is short; someone had fun; snippiness would be mean.

Besides, the look changes from year to year, adding a crucial element of novelty, even suspense, to the proceedings. The element of surprise helps compensate for a comparative shortage, at least this year, of truly blockbusterish objects. In other words, in place of eight-digit price tags, you get material muchness and a heady atmosphere of edging-over-the-top largess.

The effort pays off. Last night, with support from Elle Décor magazine, organ of "the new generation of affluence," the show held its famously fancy kickoff bash. Today, it's open for business, but still dressed up for fun.

Where to begin? Walk a few steps straight ahead from the entrance to see that Egyptian goddess I mentioned. Or alternatively, make a hard left to look for a case of antique rings — Hunnish, Spanish, Merovingian — at Les Enluminures, and a mint's worth of old British silver at S. J. Shrubsole.

But before moving on, a thought about terminology, which also means attitude. Most, if not all, of the objects that were called antiques 50 years ago are called art now. The objects haven't changed; we have. We are less uptight, or we should be, about all those old-time hierarchies: art versus craft, high versus low, etc. Sculptures, rings, teapots, photographs: they're all art to me, or can be. Just so you know.

Onward. A good example of the flair for installation on which the show prides itself is visible at Elle Shushan, who has artfully turned her wee space into an evocation of

A fabric bird at Jan Whitlock.

ONLINE: SLIDE SHOW

Additional photographs from the Winter and American antiques shows: nytimes.com /arts.

the Gallier House, a New Orleans landmark that inspired the setting for Anne Rice's "Interview With the Vampire." The historic house, built in 1857, is said to be haunted, and Ms. Shushan has supplied some ghosts of her own in the form of portrait miniatures.

Among several impressive American booths — Hirschl & Adler, Peter and Jeffrey Tillou, Frank and Barbara Pollack — my other favorites were also small ones. Jan Whitlock has transformed a cramped corner into a companionable room with a bed, a fireplace and funky "Peaceable Kingdom" rug.

And Stephen and Carol Huber have cooked up a kind of walk-in treasure chest of early American samplers, most made by girls learning to be little women. "Remember me, nor my words despise. The only happy are the wise." So stitched the sagacious, syntax-stretching Belinda Crosby, age 11, in Brookline, N.H., in 1827.

Such objects used to be consigned to the craft, not-art, compartment, but they just won't stay there anymore. Nor will the fantastic ceramic portrait — self-portrait? — bust of an African-American man by P. W. McAdam at Giampietro. Or the remarkable set of eight chairs made around 1902 by Charles Rohlfs of Buffalo and seen at Geoffrey Diner. Skinny and squat (a weird combination), they are seats with the presence of sculptures. Why can't they be both? They can. They are.

And before leaving the Americas, there are two more important New World stops. One is Throckmorton, to see ancient Mesoamerican sculptures. Wonderful. The other is Donald Ellis, a Canadian gallery specializing in North American Indian art.

The Ellis display style — white box, no frills — is an oasis of visual clarity. And the art is beyond beautiful, from an early 19th-century carved wood mask from British Columbia, to a Southern Plains hide shirt painted with images of a moon, a star and a river filled with floating trees the shape and colors of autumn leaves. The shirt was made around 1890 for the Ghost Dance, a ritual developed by a weakened Plains people in a last, desperate, mystical effort to ward off destruction by United States government forces. If ever a single garment could do something to deepen the still-shallow discourse about fashion-as-art, this one could.

Now for a dash across the pond, first to the dungeony booth of Peter Finer of London, bristling with swords, pistols and other guyware, an armory within the Armory. At Richard Philip we touch down in Italy with two 15th-century panel paintings — one of the hawkish archangel Michael — attributed to Benvenuto di Giovanni. And at Elinor Gordon Gallery, we're in China, or on the

A bust by P. W. McAdam at Giampietro.

high seas between China and everywhere else.

Ms. Gordon, at the top of the field in Chinese export porcelain, has been part of the Winter Antiques Show since Day 1, 52 years ago. Her capacious booth is a solid, unfussy, unfancy wall of hand-painted cups and plates in which entire cultures, East and West, melt together. I grew up with such fascinating material; because my mother, a person of superb and adventurous taste, adores it. Seeing it here is like coming home.

And I'll bet something in this show works like that for you. Do teensy clocks or cheeky brooches make you a little weepy? Head for A La Vieille Russie. Nymph-shaped fountains? Barbara Israel Garden Antiquities is your destiny. Carolle Thibaut-Pomerantz has wall-to-wall wallpaper (antique, of course). Keshishian has carpets floor to ceiling; it's like a Royal Aubusson womb.

But it's the American stuff that gets you where you live. Only the weather vane in the shape of the Dove of Peace from George Washington's home at Mount Vernon will do. Great news! It's here. Bad news. It's part of a special Mount Vernon loan exhibition installed near the front of the armory — a charmer of a show, by the way — and not for sale.

So you'll have to be content with looking. And while at it, why not do some thinking, about what makes art "art," and why we have the batty, priority-scrambling passion for it that we do. This passion took me by surprise in my own reaction to one of the rings in that case at Les Enluminures.

This one, plain and pretty, is 17th-century English and made of gold. Its only ornament is an inscription inside the band: "Providence divine hath made thee mine." For a split second, the covetous part of me read those words as being addressed to the ring itself. But no. They must be from a lover. Both work.

The 52nd Annual Winter Antiques Show runs through Jan. 29 at the Seventh Regiment Armory, 643 Park Avenue, at 67th Street. Daily, noon to 8 p.m.; Sundays and Thursday afternoon to 6 p.m. Daily admission: $20; (718) 292-7392, www.winterantiquesshow.com.