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Another Great Winter Show, This Time Live



A pair of fine carved marble benches, with top edges with anthemion motif, the front aprons adorned with central grotesque mask, acanthus scrolls, and clusters of fruit, the supports with volute scrolls, robust acanthus leaves, and delicate foliate tendrils, Italian, c. 1880. 47 x 22 inches high, 14 ins. deep. (Courtesy Barbara Israel Garden Antiques)

By **BRIAN T. ALLEN**

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This historic art fair teaches us we're in another Gilded

Age, with plutocrats aplenty.

I KNOW I've written this before, but the **Winter Show**, which used to be called the Winter Antiques Show, is one of my favorite art fairs, along with the American Art Fair. Both attract the old-time, high-quality dealers, who are, after all, connoisseurs. Many are multi-generation family businesses, so the passion and commitment are there. It's in its 68th year, which makes it, I think, the oldest New York art fair.

Last year, the show was virtual. This year, the people who run it postponed it because of the Omicron scare, which paralyzed New York. It's in the building Barneys used to occupy on Madison Avenue. I went to the press preview, which was ideal as no one was there except some of the dealers and lots of construction workers finishing the lighting and, amazingly, some of the walls. It's a good space.



Rendering of the Winter Show 2022. (Courtesy of the Winter Show and Owen Walz)

The fair's ticket sales and sponsorships benefit the East Side House, a historic nonprofit focusing on young people in northern Manhattan and the Bronx. Education and technology are gateways out of poverty, and that's the East Side House's specialty. If its success stories were to be listed, they would be Manhattan-phone-book sized.

The fair opened on April 1 and runs through the 10th. With thousands of objects and 60 exhibitors, the fair covers a big range, but, chronologically, it runs from the Old Masters to Modernism, with some but not much contemporary art. Since the fair was for many years an antiques show, decorative arts are a strength, but flat art reigns.



Left: Meta Platforms CEO Mark Zuckerberg testifies at a House committee hearing, April 11, 2018.

Right: Twitter CEO Jack Dorsey testifies during a remote video hearing held by House subcommittees, March 25, 2021. (Leah Millis/Reuters; U.S. House of Representatives Energy and Commerce

Committee/Handout via Reuters)

This year, I found myself drawn to Gilded Age art since we're living in a new Gilded Age and ruled by oligarchs with disgustingly big fortunes and unchecked power. This mutation has made many, many billionaires, many of whom are bored, hubristic, and, here and there, psychotic. With so much money sloshing around, social, political, and moral vandalism is bound to happen, as is the sad case today. At least the robber barons of the old Gilded Age didn't hate the country that made them rich.

I wish these new people would spend their money on good art as offered at the Winter Show, but most are young and in Silicon Valley. Their taste is undeveloped or chronically exiguous. From the days of the Greeks, rule by oligarchs doesn't last long, as a strongman arises and, in one way or another, at least clips their wings and at most plucks and roasts them, metaphorically of course.

The Gilded Age in America started around the arms and oil booms in the 1860s and ran, roughly, to the introduction of the federal income tax in 1913. I would call some of the styles florid or overwrought, and I saw examples of this, but craftsmanship reached new heights, too. Technology helped, as did American innovation. A new aesthetic confidence was in the air.



Tiffany and Co., coffee pot, oxidized silver and enamel, 1893. (Courtesy S. J. Shrubsole)

I often write about **S. J. Shrubsole**, the antique-silver dealer on East 81st Street. Old English, American, and Irish silver goes in and out of vogue. I look at the best English silver — things made, for instance, by Paul de Lamerie and the other Rococo Huguenot refugees and by Paul Storr — as sculpture. Casting and engraving, at their best, are the stuff of the Old Masters. Pre-revolutionary American silver tells us that simplicity and elegance could find a happy Puritan marriage.

In America, Shrubsole is the best dealer in these fields. Connoisseurs run the place. They know where the best material is. They're loyal to their customers. Shopping there is a walk down luxury lane, and snootiness is not allowed. A classier place is hard to find.

At the Shrubsole booth at the show, I saw an object that is the best of its kind but neither English nor aristocratic nor reticent. It's a Gilded Age piece from Tiffany. A coffee pot made in 1893 is both fetching and distinguished. It was exhibited at the World's Columbian Exposition in Chicago, which displayed the zenith of American craftsmanship in the decorative arts. The maker mixed dull oxidized silver, muted-colored enamel, and floral Arts & Crafts elements. The dense chased and applied, patterned decoration is Moorish Revival. It's what I call a harem form, attenuated and languid and curvy enough to suggest an odalisque who, when caffeinated, is apt to shake, rattle, and roll. It's \$110,000. Your morning Chock full o'Nuts will never be the same.



Charles Osborne, attr., pair of Whiting antique sterling four-light candelabra, silver, c. 1890.

(Courtesy Spencer Marks, Ltd)

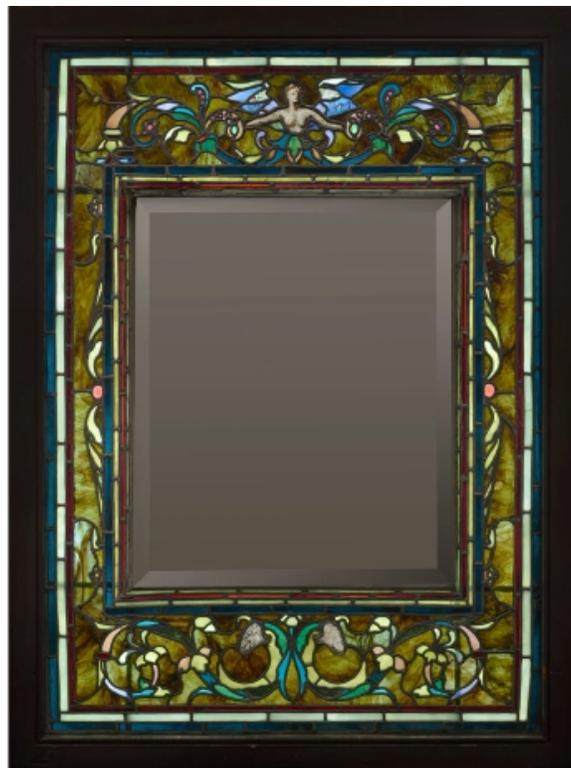
Tiffany was the most prestigious New York silver-maker, and a style-maker, too, until the 1960s, when the hippie mentality infected the yen for good living like a maggot. Today, Tiffany antique silver has cachet, and I don't dispute its quality. Whiting, another New York maker, was just as good. A few years ago I wrote a story about **silver sailing cups** given by the New York Yacht Club during the Gilded Age. They are of Babylonian resplendence, and many were made by Whiting, in addition to Tiffany and Gorham.

Spencer Marks, the silver dealer based in Southampton, Mass., is showing a pair of four-light candelabra designed by Charles Osborne and made by Whiting around 1890. Yes, they're French Rococo-inspired, but Juste-Aurèle Meissonnier, the French royal goldsmith for Louis XV, or Paul Storr could not, technically, have made these. Their outrageously bold three-dimensional berries, flowers, and leaves, spreading and pulsing in all directions, needed modern casting methods. They're almost 17 inches high and 14 inches across the arms. Rococo style is animated but, at 308 Troy ounces, or 21 pounds, these sticks ain't goin' anywhere. Puritan asceticism is filed under Old Business.



Detail of Whiting candelabra (Courtesy Spencer Marks, Ltd.)

The pair's \$44,250. They're Gilded Age but also flirt with the Machine Age, not in their aesthetic or craftsmanship, as they are handmade and one-of-a-kind, but in their technical innovation akin to that of the finest trains, carriages, and bridges and the earliest skyscrapers.



John La Farge (1835–1910), *Arabesque Mirror*, c. 1883. Beveled inset mirror bordered by leaded

glass with painted black wood frame. 38 x 28 ¼ inches. (Courtesy Debra Force Fine Art)

John La Farge's arabesque mirror from 1883 left me with palpitations of delight. It's at Debra Force's booth. She sells superb American things, and I think her taste is the best. I've written about La Farge (1835–1910), who was accomplished at everything: painting, design, and, of course, **stained glass**. Louis Comfort Tiffany, his contemporary and competitor, is more famous, but La Farge was the better artist. I'm the one-man La Farge fan club, though there must be others as discerning as I.

The mirror is one of a pair, the other owned by the Virginia Museum of Fine Arts. La Farge made them around the time he finished the stained-glass windows for William Vanderbilt's new Fifth Avenue home. The opalescent stained glass surrounding them shimmers like gems, with refracted light setting the colored glass on fire. We don't know whether the two mirrors were intended for the Vanderbilts. We do know they never made it there, staying in La Farge's studio until he died. The motifs are especially Islamic. I think the word "arabesque" to describe the pattern of scrolls and stylized palmettes isn't quite right, but it's safe to call them Islamic-inspired. They're the only mirrors La Farge made. This one can be yours for \$150,000.

I don't think I've even written about Barbara Israel, who is the finest dealer in antique garden furniture and sculpture in, I think, the world. It doesn't matter if you live in a Gilded Age like today or are simply loaded and living in any old era. You still want a nice, big garden and a place to sit. At Barbara's booth, I saw two fine carved, marble benches with anthemion motifs, grotesque masks, acanthus scrolls, and clusters of fruit. They're Italian, made around 1880, and were once owned by Charlotte Dorrance Wright (1912–77), the heiress to the Campbell Soup fortune.

As money marries money, Charlotte wed the son of a railroad magnate. The marble benches lived in the couple's garden at their Pennsylvania estate, Ravenscliff, and where else would the family live but along the Main Line with other railroad grandees? Ravenscliff was one of the last great Main Line estates, a place that could have been the setting for *The Philadelphia Story*. I went to the outdoor auction of the house's contents in the late '70s, on the same day I visited the Barnes Collection for the first time. I sat on a folding chair, alas, and bought not Italian carved benches but lightly worn, white button-down shirts. The benches, like everything Israel sells, are very elegant indeed. They're \$35,000 each but really ought to stay together.



Carlo Bugatti, side table, walnut ebonized wood, pewter inlay, and copper, c. 1908. (Courtesy Milord Antiques)

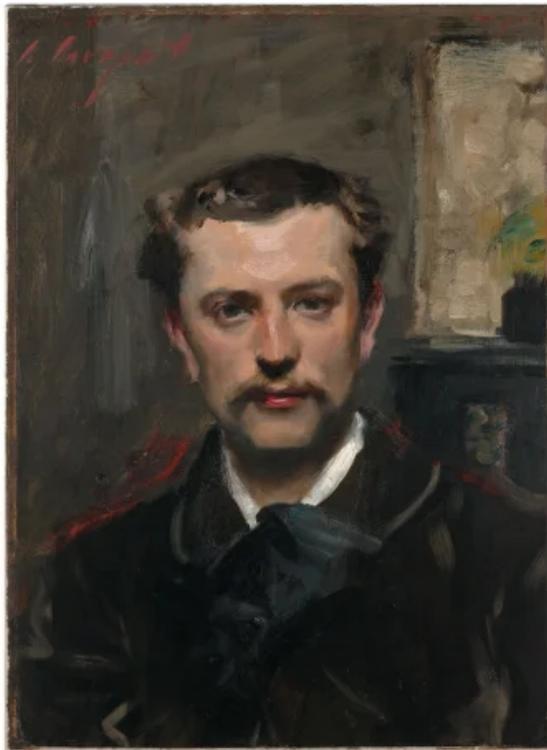
I would be negligent if I didn't write about furniture. Milord Antiques from Montreal, a first-time Winter Show exhibitor, has a rare side table by the Italian Carlo Bugatti from 1908. Bugatti (1856–1940) was an Art Nouveau maker of the wildest furniture and jewelry. Art Nouveau style is wide ranging, covering Gaudí but also the Scottish Charles Rennie Mackintosh. Shapes are sinuous, organic, and sensual, but this table, which is on the edge of Art Nouveau, is both handsome and tough. It's ebonized walnut, pewter inlay, and applied copper. I would call it architectural.



Detail of Bugatti table (Courtesy Milord Antiques)

The arches are vaguely Moorish, but the fringe elements below the tabletop, the stylized inlaid garlands, and mix of wood and metal, plus the Bugatti name, make it exotic enough to be called Gilded Age. I'm drawn to it in part because it belonged to the legendary dealer Allan Stone, who deeply collected Bugatti to the point that there was a baby Bugatti car in his living room, designed by Carlo's son, Ettore. Stone discovered **Wayne Thiebaud** and Richard Estes, among many others, and represented Willem de Kooning, John Chamberlain, and Joseph Cornell. Everything he owned was of the very highest quality.

Milord Antiques has very good things. I hope they become a staple at the fair. The table is \$32,500 and a good buy for something with a big name, exuberant design, lush materials, and presence.



John Singer Sargent (1856–1925), *Portrait of Henri Lefort*, 1882. Oil on canvas. 23 1/2 x 17 1/4 inches, 59.7 x 43.8 cm. (Courtesy Adelson Galleries)

I'll end with two paintings. John Singer Sargent (1856–1925) is the quintessential Gilded Age portrait painter, envisioning an age of aristocratic entitlement, new money, splash, and swagger in Paris, London, Boston, and New York. He was, though, a various artist who depicted lots of moguls and their wives but also intimate portraits of his artist friends. His *Portrait of Henri Lefort* from 1882 is an example. Adelson Galleries has it. He did this a year before he painted *Madame X*, and it has all the same intensity of values and free, vibrant brushwork. Lefort (1852–1937) was a French artist friend whose career was based on engravings after portrait paintings of historic figures such as George Washington and Benjamin Franklin but also Edgar Allan Poe. Sargent, young and still not well known, painted portraits of his friends for fun and as gifts. It's very beautiful.

In the early 1920s, Sargent said of these pictures, “Oh, I had it then,” “it” being the touch of savant genius.

I read the provenance and saw that the Saint Louis Museum of Art once owned this and sold it in 1942. Blurted I, “stupid dumbasses.” So true.

Adelson always has good work by Sargent and is the understandable magnet for the best since it funded and produced the eleven-volume Sargent catalogue raisonné, the pinnacle of dealer-driven American art-history scholarship. I initially gulped at the \$950,000 price tag, but it’s a perfect portrait, and perfection is sometimes expensive.



Childe Hassam (American, 1859–1935), *New York Street Scene (Rainy Day, New York)*, 1892.

Watercolor, gouache, and charcoal on paper, 15 x 10 1/4 in. (Courtesy Hirschl & Adler Galleries)

I’ve written about Hirschl & Adler’s modern and contemporary art department but not about its historical art, which is the basis for this distinguished gallery’s fame. Childe Hassam (1859–1935), like Sargent, is a quintessential Gilded Age artist. He did some bloated plutocrat portraiture, but it was his Impressionist-infused landscapes and cityscapes that made him a Gilded Age fortune. *Rainy Day, New York* from 1892 is a watercolor, so its calling card is spontaneity. This view of Union Square, a Gilded Age development, shows a hansom cab, stylish pedestrians, the Domestic Sewing Machine Company’s French Second Empire headquarters and the Gorham Silver Company’s showroom. Gorham, based in Providence, went where the money was. Tiffany was on Union Square. The Union League Club, the nerve center of the Gilded Age rich, is there. Frederick Law Olmsted designed Union Square Park. The watercolor, which has attractive charcoal touches, is \$850,000.

I wrote about the **Whitney Biennial** earlier this week. This year's is very strong, but most are dreadful. This is, in part, a curatorial problem since New York curators tend, and I say "tend," to know little about art outside New York, and it's a show about the state of *American* art. The Winter Show never disappoints. It's always the best and, with so many good dealers, has an eclectic range. Every edition of this historic fair is a hit.

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