

OLD TREASURE IN A NEW LAND

MONDAY, August 12, 1957, will be remembered in Palmerston North as the Day of its Relief. For 12 months before this important date, the dignitaries of a small town with a big heart had been beset with problems and frustrations. A year ago a lady with a penchant for things of beauty and age urged upon the chief citizens of Palmerston North that the town should arrange an Exhibition of Antiques. The project grew into New Zealand's first Antique Dealers' Fair, and support was canvassed from the major dealers in both islands.

The headaches need not be listed. The work in recruiting support from dealers from Auckland to Christchurch, the timing and volume of national publicity, the soothing of outraged feelings that are inseparable from every endeavour which must embrace conflicting interests and prestige; all these were the lot of the organising committee, and above all, of the Public Relations Officer and his staff.

Finally the day approached. The entire space allotted to the Fair had been sold, a programme of lectures had been arranged, and the moment was at hand for stocking the booths of the exhibitors. The morning of Monday, August 12, brought the expected confusion: In the world of theatre, a hopeless dress rehearsal is the augury of success, and at the Opera House every augury was there in full measure. There were the exhibits that had not arrived, the show cases that defied discovery, and the disaster of minor breakages and accidents. Even by midday the situation looked impossible; but by five o'clock in the afternoon order had crept out of chaos. The furniture was effulgent; the silver sparkled, the porcelain gave an air of daintiness, every case was there and full, carpets added their dull, warm lustre to each stand, and within half an hour the hall was locked and barred, exhibitors and officials were on their way home for refreshment, ready to take their place in a grand affair and to gather the harvest.

At seven o'clock precisely, the Public Relations Officer unlocked the outer door and things were in motion. Within the hour the hall could hold no more

A report from DAVID GOLDBLATT on New Zealand's first Antique Dealers' Fair

people; it was full to capacity with an excited audience, who had found their way from far and near to take their fill of what were to them pieces brought, in the main, out of an older and more cultured civilisation. Still one doubt remained. With so closely packed a throng, what opportunity would they have to inspect the goods for sale; and would the dealers be able to hold the individual long enough to clinch a purchase? Within a few minutes even that doubt was resolved. Goods and money were changing hands and order books were in evidence. By 9.30 p.m., the closing hour, the Relief of Palmerston North was complete. Success was assured.

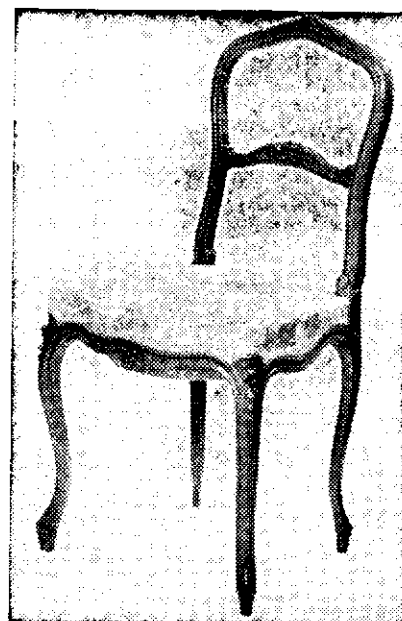
I AM not going to say that this, the first Antique Dealers' Fair, was above criticism or without its many faults. The hall was too small and a number, if not all, of the stands were overlaid with goods, and had the appearance of being, in the main, a jumble of bric-a-brac, among which it was difficult to spot the gem. This overcrowding was inevitable. It would have been asking too much to demand that the first essay in this field should be made in too large a hall, with all the expense that it would have entailed; and therefore each participant was bound to be somewhat cramped. Let it be said, however, that every stand avoided the appearance of the second-hand dealer which, it must be regrettably admitted, is the normal appearance of most of the antique shops in New Zealand. The exhibitors showed what they could do given the opportunity, and that they were more at home than in their normal hole and corner places of business. Perhaps the most pleasing feature during the hours of preparation was the friendly and co-operative spirit of the exhibitors. Each was ready to help his neighbour; and they mingled without reserve. Yet the individual stands portrayed a variety of approach and outlook, ranging as they did from quiet dignity to near bric-a-brac.

In addition to dealers the organisers made a happy and important innovation, for the outstanding exhibitions were those of two private collectors (one of silver and another of porcelain) and of the Dominion Museum of Wellington. These three were designed to touch off an urge that must surely come for New Zealanders to move into a field of antiques that is larger and more important than anything at present available. At the moment, it must be confessed, the articles for sale reek of Victoriana, and only here and there is the eye and maybe the heart caught by a creation that expresses the age of elegance which is the 18th century. The lovely line, the exquisite proportion, the confidence in design and finish, speak of an era when man was attuned to leisure in thought, and when materialism was put in its proper place. Only in the two loan collections do we get our fill of that breathtaking age. The use of porcelain as a finish and a decoration, the cold chastity of silver that has not yet descended to the fulsome chasing and furbelows of the 19th century, the slender elegance of a Louis Quinze chair that has not yielded to ormolu and extravagant gilding; all these stand out as a lesson and a pointer to the interding buyer who, although at the moment satisfied with the solid, wealthy, but rather dull product of the 19th century, will very soon show his desire to move into the rarer but more satisfying atmosphere of what is known as Georgian, and then finally, if his pocket permits, to the age of walnut that precedes it.

THIS criticism is not confined to furniture, and it is in the realms of porcelain and silver that the lesson is so clearly presented in the two private collections available. To me, these have a peculiar fascination in the personalities of the owners. The silver had been brought together by a man of many parts, full of charm, insouciant, almost devil-may-care, a descendant of a family that had its place in the history of the North Island. He is easy of approach yet down to earth, resolute in his determination to cull from the world's finest, with all the signs of a background of culture and of ease, and yet steeped in New Zealand's roots, the earth and the farm. His life interest is shared by his wife and children.

By contrast, the collector of porcelain is unattached and diffident. He would be surprised to find himself held up as the example or product of a family of deep learning or taste. His love for the particular facet of antiquity that has taken him is not backed by explanation or reason; it has just

"The use of porcelain as a finish and a decoration"—items from the collection of Mr Roy Madden, Palmerston North



Barry Woods photo

"THE slender elegance of a Louis Quinze chair that has not yielded to ormolu and extravagant gilding"

happened. He is dour, but relentless in the chase, and has a natural eye for the good, with promise of early appreciation of the superlative. Both these men have the flair that matters; and Palmerston North is fortunate to have inside, or near its frontier, men so diverse, but so quick with a love of the things they yearn to possess and enjoy.

All in all, this Antique Dealers' Fair has turned out very happily. In the climactic moments I asked myself the reason for its outstanding success. The crowds were still thronging in, the press and the radio and the flashlight photographers were still busy. Something more than mere propaganda has occasioned this flow of interest. The answer emerges from New Zealand's history during the last 100 years. The slow evolution that was her lot until a quarter of a century ago, and the burst of activity of the last generation, has meant that New Zealand has rushed from the wooden shack to the horrors of concrete and the gaucheness of mass production to fill, but alas, not to embellish, the home. And yet throughout it all remains the nostalgia in almost every household for the story and manners of the countries from which they stem in Europe. These old civilisations are the standards and the criteria which must finally govern the lives of New Zealanders as they graduate from the jejeune to the mature. No one will be satisfied until the home can boast of a trifle or two, and later be proud of the best that still remains, thereby showing that they have been lifted out of the ruck where the machine and the moving belt dictate an unbearable uniformity.

This is New Zealand's first Antique Fair. It cannot be its last. Palmerston North has created a tradition. It will have to fight to maintain itself as the site and organiser of the future. Next year there will be a scramble by dealers to catch the growing urge for antiques, and in healthy competition reputations will have to be made as the holders of stock less plebian than is at present available. It is an interesting prospect that will come to fruition very quickly, and Palmerston North is indeed happy to have the start of all others. If it remains in the forefront it will become a bigger town, though it must never lose its large heart or its exigent sense of adventure.



Barry Woods photo