ANTIQUES

Third-Century Cutlery at Auction; Schoolgirls' Samplers

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Now coming up for sale: 15th-century spoons, with apostle figures, from the personal collection of Jane Penrice Benson How.

By EVE M. KAHN
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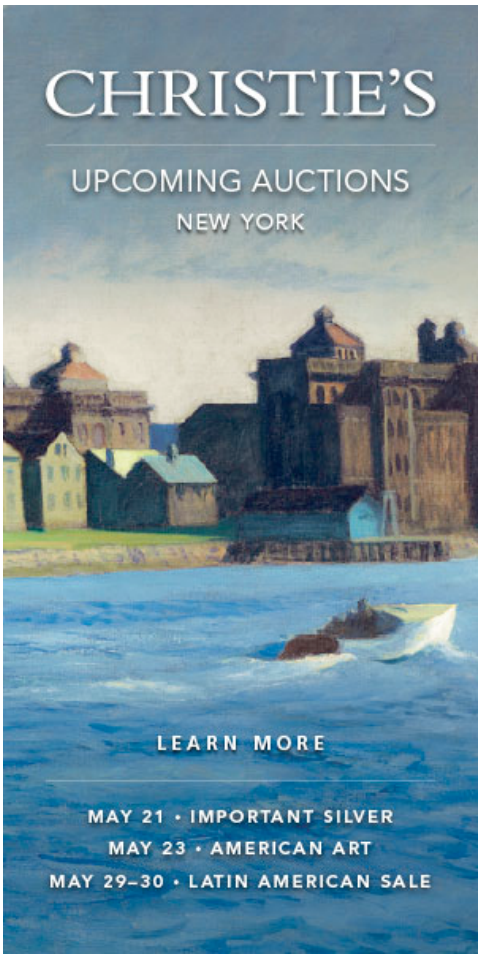
The London silver dealer Jane Penrice Benson How was notorious for ushering shoppers out of her gallery if she suspected that they were uninformed. When one dismissed customer swore never to return, Mrs. How replied that that promise "affords me the greatest possible relief."

As Harry Williams-Bulkeley, a senior director at Christie's in London, said in a phone interview, "She could be quite acerbic."

Mrs. How, who died in 2004 at 89, kept 45 ancient spoons and a fork in her private collection. On June 4, Christie's will offer them with four- and five-figure estimates each.

They date as far back as the third century, and many were excavated at British archaeological sites, including burial grounds, chalk pits and riverbeds. The handle finials are shaped like acorns, spears and apostles, or bear the monograms of unidentified original owners.

Mrs. How's descendants had lent the collection to the Ashmolean Museum of Art and Archaeology at Oxford for display, until last year. The historian David J. E. Constable published a book, "The Benson Collection of Early Silver Spoons" (Constables Publishing), just in time to learn that the family was selling the pieces.



Dan and Marty Campanelli/Hunterdon County Historical Society

An 1835 sampler by Elizabeth Runyan, daughter of a Ringoes, N.J., farmer.

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Dan and Marty Campanelli/Collection of Randy & Deborah (Shellenberger) Niederer

An 1828 piece by Maria Blackwell, daughter of a Hopewell Township, N.J., farmer.

"There's mixed feelings, to be honest," Mr. Constable said in a phone interview, adding, "I'm likely to bid."

A spokeswoman from the Ashmolean declined to comment on the loan withdrawal.

Mr. Constable's book describes Mrs. How's hobbies of raising bees and purebred mastiffs, as well as her offers of Champagne and honey to buyers who met her scholarly standards. Her town house showrooms "were glamorous in a peculiarly Dickensian way, with a creaking cage staircase and an Ali Baba-esque twinkle of precious metal," Mr. Constable writes. "To see silver gilt cups gleaming against cherry-red velvet in the somber dining room was an irresistible invitation to any sensual collector."

The book and the Christie's catalog speculate on the spoons' origins and purposes. Pierced bowls might have filtered wine for church ceremonies. Miniatures a few inches long were perhaps meant as toys or condiment servers. A gilded spoon topped with a weapon-wielding saint is almost certainly a 19th-century fake.

Aristocrats used the cutlery during feasts, leaving signs of wear. Gilding has washed away, and many apostles have lost their halos.

TRACING GIRLS' EMBROIDERY

Discoveries kept emerging as the married New Jersey textile historians Dan and Marty Campanelli finished obsessive research for their new book, "A Sampling of Hunterdon County Needlework: The Motifs, the Makers & Their Stories" (Hunterdon County Historical Society).

The Campanellis pored through archives, piecing together biographical data about 18th- and 19th-century schoolgirls who embroidered alphabets and scenery on linen, silk and canvas. Only occasionally did the Campanellis fail to trace a family tree.

"If we don't get the answer, we don't sleep at night," Mr. Campanelli said in a phone interview.

They uncovered more details than they could publish, including stories about legal troubles in the girls' families.

"We know that there's descendants" who would not want the scandals unearthed, Ms. Campanelli said in the same interview. The book reproduces 74 samplers made in and around the county, at the state's western border. Motifs recur, partly because of New Jersey teachers' tastes for outlines of houses draped with bunting; fenced yards; Bibles; deer wearing collars; fruit bowls; willows; blue urns; and lions with raised paws.

The Campanellis have visited the graves of the pupils and their schoolmistresses and family members, many of whom died young. In 1821 Emily Ryall, about 9 years old and newly orphaned, stitched strawberries and a hipped-roof cottage, symbols of comfort. Permelia Cooley died at 10, around 1836, without finishing the shutters on her sampler's design of a farmhouse wreathed in bouquets.

In some cases no gravestones for the schoolgirls could be found. A signed sampler, Mr. Campanelli said, "is all we have to prove their existence."

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The girls studied needlework at New Jersey academies, including the Flemington Female School and the Young Ladies' Institute. Mothers did not give their daughters instruction in laborious stitching techniques by the glows of fireplaces and candelabra, despite the standard quaint image of womenfolk at the hearth.

"Probably only simple hemming or sewing could be done in such dim, flickering light," and the girls sat by the windows instead, the authors write.

The Campanellis could not find every Hunterdon County piece known to survive; a few were published in textile history books and sold over the years and then disappeared. One girl's family tree, listing a relative named Charity Case, vanished sometime in the 1970s. Drusilla Quick's tableau of deer and flowers, sewn in 1837, was last seen at a 1999 auction.

In April an 1835 sampler with the county's typical collared deer surfaced at Freeman's auction house in Philadelphia. The Campanellis acquired it for about $1,500 and are tracking the ancestry of the maker, Elizabeth Ann Drake.

On June 1 the couple will hold a book signing at the historical society and display a few dozen samplers. The public is invited to bring heirlooms for evaluation and possible publication.

"This book is not an end; it's a beginning," Ms. Campanelli said.

They have company in the pursuit of narrow-bore regional sampler scholarship. In "Columbia's Daughters: Girlhood Embroidery From the District of Columbia" (Chesapeake Book Company/Sampler Consortium), the historian Gloria Seaman Allen identifies regional patterns like colonnaded houses, brick churches and portraits of George Washington. The book lists about 300 academies and teachers offering needlework classes, including the Washington Female Orphan Asylum School and the Resolute Beneficial Society.

"I My Needle Ply With Skill: Maine Schoolgirl Needlework of the Federal Era," the catalog for a show this year at the Saco Museum in Saco, Me., points out cherubs, columns, baskets, roses and harbor scenes in the state's sampler traditions.

In Maine, as elsewhere, tragic back stories pervade embroidery history. Mary Carr's 1825 linen square is mostly blank; she managed to complete some colorful triangles, an alphabet and two words from a religious verse before her death at 10.

Historians collaborating through the Sampler Archive Project have set out to document all American pieces. In June and July the group will hold events in Delaware inviting the public to bring embroideries to be analyzed and photographed. A November symposium will focus on samplers made by Delaware schoolgirls.

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