Howard County Historical Society tries its own version of 'Antiques Roadshow'  
Historical society's first appraisal fair brings out treasures

Pictured from left Beverly Speed, of Columbia, Todd Penstra, owner/appraiser of Penstra Antiques Appraisals in Annapolis, and Pam DeAngelis, of Ellicott City/Oella, examine a sculpture of a French woman titled "L'automne" (AUTUMN in French) to find the marking of the artist. DeAngelis was not trying to sell the piece, but trying to find more info about it and its current worth. To benefit the Howard County Historical Society the Antiques Appraisal Fair & Rare Book Sale was held in All Saints' Hall at St. John's Parish Day School. The event had experienced appraisers on hand to give a verbal estimate to items people brought in as well as plenty of rare books and other historic items for sale. (Photo by Nate Pesce, Putnam Publishing / May 20, 2011)

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Curiosity spurred John Nieberding to haul in the bronze Chinese floor lamp that had belonged to his late mother — that, and a long-held desire to sell.

With its seven-sided lantern-style shade and heavy base topped with an engraved dragon, the unusual lighting fixture had been appraised at $860 a quarter-century ago.

The Ellicott City resident had wanted to update its worth for some time, he said, but had been wary about finding a reputable appraiser. So when the Howard County Historical Society announced its first antique appraisal fair and rare book sale, he took note.

"I figured I couldn't go wrong with an event held in a church," said Nieberding, who sat patiently waiting his turn May 21 at St. John's Episcopal Church, on Frederick Avenue, in Ellicott City.

The historical society is preparing to move its Court Avenue offices, archives and library into the new Charles E. Miller Branch of the Howard Public Library System, which is scheduled to open in Ellicott City in December, and chose the unique event to raise funds to cover moving expenses. The museum will remain at 8328 Court Ave.

"This is our first appraisal fair, so he could say we're just trying this out," said Lauren McCormack, executive director of the society, about an hour after the inaugural event began. "We expect to hold it every year, expanding it with more vendors to make it an event that people look forward to."

Comparisons to PBS' popular 'Antiques Roadshow' television program were inevitable, making the fundraiser a popular one with the 145 people who got estimates on one or more items.

Just like on TV, appraisers sat across a table from clients who gingerly placed their inherited objects, hand-me-downs and other
curiosities on the cloth-covered surface for closer inspection. The owners of Peenstra Antiques, of Annapolis, and Games Art, of Westminster, volunteered their time.

Todd Peenstra and Lyndi McNulty worked independently to determine the possible age and origin of an item before setting a dollar value. Verbal estimates, not formal written appraisals, were the order of the day as was brief advice on what owners’ next steps might be regarding care or sale of their items.

Jim and Gail Kreckel, of Ellicott City, brought in a hefty, 6-inch-thick, gilt-edged Bible to be appraised, though they placed it in a wheelchair suitcase first — as much for protection as convenience. With its well-worn leather cover and illustration-filled pages in premium condition, the weighty tome appeared sturdy and fragile at the same time. The couple discovered the book when they cleared out a family member's attic, and assume it belonged to the house's original owners.

"The first owners had no kids to pass this down to and may have forgotten about it," Gail Kreckel speculated while they waited to get an appraisal, which cost $10 with all proceeds benefiting the historical society.

McNulty pulled out a jeweler's loop and closely examined the Kreckels' Bible, then pronounced it one of the nicest she had ever seen.

"It's not like they whipped these off," she commented, noting the beautiful color engravings on many pages of the book. "Their inks were better (long ago) than ours are now. They were thicker and they lasted longer."

Religious objects aren't all that popular with buyers, though, she said, and that fact suppresses the value somewhat. But upon further examination she said the Bible, which obviously belonged to a wealthy family or perhaps a scholar, was in such remarkable condition that she adjusted her estimate to a range of $500 to $800, which seemed to please its owners.

One of the more eye-catching pieces to arrive for evaluation was a 30-inch-tall porcelain statue of a female figure titled "L'automne," which is the French word for autumn.

Peenstra, with flashlight in hand, carefully examined the hollow piece, which was purchased by Pam DeAngelis, of Oella, a decade ago from a Historic Ellicott City shop. The appraiser said it was made in the early 20th century, possibly in Italy, and that it was most likely glazed in a dark brown in order to imitate bronze sculpture. An estimate of its value was not made available.

DeAngelis, an English teacher in the county public school system, said she acquired it after first spotting the statue in a Main Street shop's display window and being drawn to the features of the woman's face.

The statue was most likely one of a set of four to represent the seasons, she said, adding she wishes she could get more information about the artist as well as the work of art.

"I love beautiful things and she just spoke to me," said the owner, who isn't looking to sell. "I knew she had to come home to live with me."

Peenstra said that while there was some interesting stuff, "nothing jumped out like, 'Wow!'" and he didn't uncover anything worth an exorbitant sum. Yet, Civil War swords, a 19th century oil-on-canvas painting and Georgian silver from the late 1700s to early 1800s all crossed his table, he said.

McNulty said someone had brought in a gold watch on a 60-inch gold chain, an odd example where the chain was likely more valuable than the timepiece because of all those gold links.

As for Nieberding, he received an estimate of "at least $250 to $300" for his lamp, which was made sometime between 1880 and 1930. This was, in part, because it wasn't "upper echelon art" and had been reviewed at some point, Peenstra said. He suggested the owner consider what he feels the lamp is worth and then place it on an internet site where bidding could go as high as $1,500, though auctions are a "roll of the dice."
Nieberding said, "I was hoping for more, and I'd like to get at least $800 for it," noting he has other stuff he'd like to get appraised sometime, such as coins, 45 rpm records, and World War II medals.

"I'm doing this one item as a trial case," the retired engineer said, still focused on trusting an appraiser's integrity. "You hear horror stories of people who buy items and then turn around and sell them for 100 times what they paid for them."

That's what's nice about this type of charity event, Poonstra said.

"We give people their fun in the sun, and we raise money for a good cause," he said. "It's a win-win situation for everybody."

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