

# The Newport Daily News

## COLLECTORS AND CONNOISSEURS

### *Newport Antiques Show gala preview opens annual showcase*

BY C.F. SHERMAN/  
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MIDDLETOWN – The Newport Antique Show preview gala on Friday, sponsored by Brown Brothers Harriman, was buzzing with 450 of Newport’s brightest. As some guests sipped cocktails and listened to live jazz, others perused the booths of vendors from 17 different states, set up in the transformed ice rink of St. George’s School.



Dianna Bittel of Dianna Bittel Antiques in Bryn Mawr, Pa., an event manager, greets visitors to her booth on Friday night during the of the Newport Antiques Show preview gala. The annual show runs through Sunday at St. George’s School in Middletown. (Photos by David Hansen)

Running today through Sunday, the show will raise money for the Newport Historical Society and the Boys & Girls Clubs of Newport County. Historical Society executive director Ruth Taylor said after this year the show will have raised \$1 million for nonprofit groups.

“Let’s just say I’ll be shocked if we don’t make it,” Taylor said.

The two beneficiaries show that attendees are “supporting Newport’s past and Newport’s future,” Taylor said. Anne Hamilton, event chairwoman and honorary director for the society’s board of directors, said having more than one beneficiary is unique.

“We have brought two very different nonprofits together, and we’re a team,” Hamilton said.

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Proceeds collected for the boys and girls club help fund its summer camp programs, scholarship fund and teen entrepreneurial training program. Some participants from the teen program, such as high school students Thakeyha Johnson, and Ja'shane Moreino, acted as greeters at Friday's event.

Taylor said she hopes to see as much variety in visitors as she does in vendors.

"Folks should not feel like they have to be high-end antique buyers to come," she said.

Although the show draws dedicated collectors, many visitors "treat the show like a broad-spectrum antiques museum," Taylor said, something she encourages. An antiques show allows viewers to get up close to the pieces, a luxury an ordinary museum cannot give its spectators. Annual guests include a motorcycle group that zooms through on their bikes to view the displays.



From left, Hunter and Lynne White of Little Compton view hand-made frames during the Newport Antiques Show preview gala on Friday at St George's School in Middletown. At right is James Butterworth of Antique American Wicker in Nashua, N.H.

Starting in 1996, the Newport Historical Society put on an artisans and arts fair each fall to raise money.

"It was a fun and funky event, but it didn't make any money whatsoever," Taylor said. "They were lucky to break even."

Hamilton attended one of the struggling arts fairs, and pegged Newport as an excellent place to start an antiques show.

"Newport is the seat of furniture," Hamilton said, "It made sense to bring an important antique show to the place that was the home of furniture."

Hamilton approached the society board and suggested that, besides being a beneficiary, it help organize the show. Members were unconvinced, but board member Jessica Hagen-Hill called Taylor at home.

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“She said, ‘I know you haven’t been hired yet, but you need to jump in,’” recalled Taylor, who was hired a short time later. “The board is about to say no to the best thing to ever happen to the Newport Historical Society.”

Once Taylor was officially hired as director, she convinced the board to endorse the show.

Taylor describes the first venture as a “mad house.” Hamilton brought in a group of philanthropists from the Philadelphia Antiques Show to handle organizational details. Since then, the show has seen continued success.

The society has added a more scholarly aspect to the show, bringing in speakers to talk about topics related to antiques. They hope to expand this to have multiple, “bite size” talks, and provide guests with more information about what they are seeing.

This year’s show will feature three exhibits: one from the society and two from William Vareika, whose fine arts store is the presenting sponsor. The featured exhibit is a collection of 17th and 18th century samplers collected from Newport, entitled “Their Manners Pleasing and Their Education Complete: Newport Samplers 1728-1835.” Vareika’s exhibits will include paintings and etchings by John La Farge and paintings by William Trost Richards, two 18th century American artists.

On display Friday evening was an eclectic collection of antiques, ranging from weathervanes to tapestries. A first edition copy of “The Life of George Washington,” written by John Marshall was on sale. The book was owned and bears the signature of Joseph Whitous, to whom a letter about the loss of the whaling ship, Essex, was written.

A favorite piece of Shelley Brown’s, owner of Blue Heron Fine Art from Cohasset, Mass., is a painting called “Under the Oaks,” done about 1903 by artist George Whitaker. Whitaker was close to Edward Bannister, a prominent black artist. Bannister won an award for a piece of the same name in 1876 at the Philadelphia Centennial Exposition but was not permitted to accept his award, so Whitaker accepted it on his behalf. After the piece was lost, Whitaker created this tribute to it, Brown said.

Other notable pieces for sale include a rare sailor’s shell valentine with an anchor motif, a German carved and painted Noah’s ark, both from about 1880, and a Rhode Island Windsor chair, from about 1790.

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