

## FINANCIAL TIMES

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WEEKEND W1

## COLLECTING

## US is swept up in a craze for colonial

Items used and made by the early settlers are coming into vogue as other types of collectables become more difficult to track down and more expensive, writes Brook Mason

It's not just New York's design elite who are hungry for a spot of old-world Americana these days; now you're as likely to find a fashionista sashaying amidst the stands of stodgy American antiques as any more weighty collector.

Colonial wares have become highly fashionable. To prove it, just take a look at the committee organising *The Winter Antiques Show*, considered to be the grandfather of Americana Week at 52 years of age.

Kicking off the winter social season, the winter show vernissage, which debuts on January 18 at the turretted Seventh Regiment Armory on Park Avenue, boasts some serious names for the fashion industry.

There's show chairman Arle Kopelman, a former Chanel USA chief execu-

who designed the home line for Oscar de la Renta and Thomas O'Brien, who fine-tuned fashion designer Giorgio Armani's Manhattan pad, will also take in the winter show vernissage, where tickets start at \$1,000. "Above all, they're drawn to the purity of line of Americana," says Russell.

Americana buffs are bound to snap up the treasure trove of George Washington items at the show, such as five French 19th-century clocks in glittering gilt bronze, busts and even an 1819 full-length portrait of Washington dressed up with a white lace ruffled collar by Herbrandt Peale, at Hirsch & Adler. "Washington is the face you put to America but now, with the lack of availability, the demand for such material has shot up threefold," says Liz Feld, Hirsch & Adler director.

Other Washingtonian items at the show include documents signed in 1783, with Kenneth Rendell, and even some of the US founding president's buttons, with the Manhattan Alexander Gallery.

It's not only all things colonial at the fair - a bevy of tip-top English and continental antiques as well as antiquities are on show.

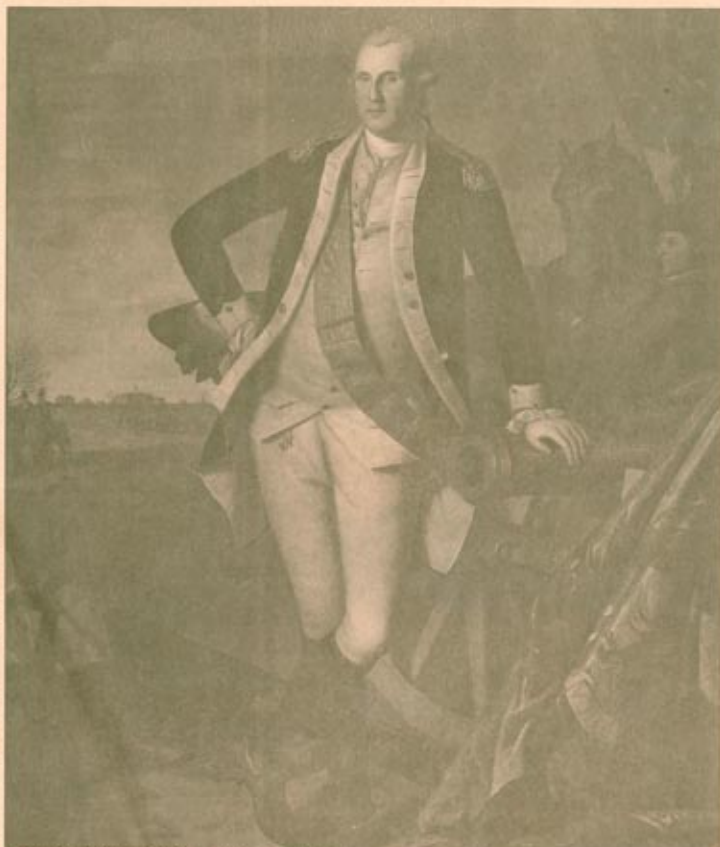
With close to 500 art and antiques dealers showing in town, collectors fly in from all points. Many will take in the Casky Leon New York Ceramics Fair, opening on January 17 at the National Academy of Design on upper Fifth Avenue.

Practically busting out at the seams of its beaux arts mansion setting, this seventh annual event boasts a stunning 80 dealers. This fair's success is in part due to a bevy of Americana buffs snatching up English delft and Staffordshire pottery at the fair. The reasoning is simple: colonists set their tables with such fare.

Then the Stella Shows management company hosts *Antiques at the Armory* at the downtown Armory on 26th Street. With 100 dealers, this fair is packed to the rafters with pewter, vintage quilts and reasonably priced highboys.

Meanwhile, the American Folk Art Museum hosts *The American Antiques Fair* at the Metropolitan Pavilion from January 19-22.

It's not only connoisseurs, novice collectors and curators serving in on the colonial past. There's a trickle down effect. Over at Stella Shows' *Americana & Antiques at the Piers* - that is Piers 90 and 92, right smack on the Hudson River - savvy uptown dealers and designers are on the



On offer: Charles Willson Peale's 'George Washington at Princeton'

ground, scouring the objects offered by more than 300 dealers.

Designers from such retail fulfillment lines as Ethan Allen, Henredon, Bonbay and Drexel Heritage scour the piers in search of antiques to copy. The material runs the gamut from colonial Windsor chairs, centennial furniture and Navajo clothing to American shop signs. Some call the piers fair "Pickers' delight".

Americana could even prove to be a

veritable cash cow for the auction houses. Christie's is hoping for a \$28m windfall from 750 lots to be sold in *Important American* on January 20 and 21 while Sotheby's is expecting 967 lots in its *Important American*

sale to fetch upwards of \$28m from its auctions from January 20-22.

Christie's sales include a crowd pleaser, *Property from the Collection of Mrs J. Inley Blair*, the grandmother of Americana collecting, who focused

on early Chippendale chairs and colonial portraiture way back in 1916. That was a bit like precocious buying of Microsoft and Google stocks.

Christie's has tagged her diminutive 17th Massachusetts painted chest to go for \$500,000-\$600,000. "She only paid \$2,500 for it," says Christie's specialist Martha Willoughby. If the chest hits the half-a-million mark, it will have jumped 200 times in price.

But Blair's Charles Willson Peale portrait "George Washington at Princeton", with a chunky \$10m-\$15m estimate at Christie's, just may prove to be the most stellar Americana investment of all times.

Blair forked out more than \$12,100 for the 80-inch canvas back in 1910. Should the painting only graze its low estimate that's an appreciation of 763 times her initial investment.

"She was ahead of the curve and just maybe she was the Mrs Walton of

Americana buffs are snatching up English delft and Staffordshire pottery. The reason: colonists set their tables with such fare.

her day," says Derek Ostgard, author and decorative arts consultant, who served as founding dean of the Bard Graduate Center for the Decorative Arts. (Wal-Mart heiress and museum founder Alice L. Walton is reported to have paid \$50m for an Asher B. Durand landscape last May.)

To put the price Blair paid for the Peale in perspective, back then her dealer Duven was charging \$650,000 for a Gainsborough.

Still, why the pronounced penchant for the red, white and blue in this frenzied global age? "People are desperate for quality with so many collecting areas truly drying up," says Ostgard.

Brook Mason is chief correspondent of *Art & Antiques magazine*.

## SETTING SALES

- [www.caskeyles.com](http://www.caskeyles.com)
- [www.christies.com](http://www.christies.com)
- [www.folkartmuseum.org](http://www.folkartmuseum.org)
- [www.stellashows.com](http://www.stellashows.com)
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