



A change in values

Quality of life and pleasure in human contact are the latest trends to emerge from antiques and art fairs.

IT'S EARLY SATURDAY MORNING AND ON A whim I decide to go to the Old Biscuit Mill organic farmers' market in Woodstock. I am worried about getting lost. The area, despite its beautiful, dilapidated Victorian charm, is not one to get lost in.

I call a friend to get accurate directions. Don't worry, she assures me, you can't miss it. When you get to the main road just follow the line of trendy people all walking in the same direction. No sweat.

And there it was: a place to recycle, recharge, reconnect – to drink coffee, to buy fresh produce and deliciously prepared food.

In the spirit of the slow-food movement I linger, inquire, delight in the samples offered, dedicating myself completely to the moment.

Organic food markets have been around for a long time, but they were mostly frequented by people who were vegetarian, meditated and wore Birkenstock sandals, not executives in convertibles, models in tank-tops and moms with thousand-dollar push-prams. These new frequenters of organic food fairs had until fairly recently opted for the interior-decorated aisles of brightly lit super-superstores to stock their fridges to the brim with flawless super-super bright perishables. Now they have discovered the charm of the

unhurried and well-considered, of fresh produce with a sell-buy date of a few hours, not a few weeks, of windfall and rust-spots – they have fallen under the spell of imperfection and patina.

And they are demanding the personal contact. Talking to the guy who grows the carrot connects them to earth again, reminds them that they are part of a bigger picture.

"Wealth?" asks poet Bruce Mau. "Wealth is time. Wealth is children. Wealth is love. Wealth is ideas, invention, exploration. Wealth is books. Wealth is collaboration, colleagues, friends, working together. We are sick of the fake and the phony. We want it real. Forget bandwidth. We don't need a getaway, we need a get-to." Where did I find this? In the bible for hip people: *Wallpaper* magazine. The yuppie has finally had to make way for the neo-hippie, a high achiever dedicated to quality of life rather than mere quantity in bank account.

A fad? I acquiesce, but, then again, fads and fashions have been the most important driving forces behind consumer behaviour for centuries.

Yes, I know you are wondering what this has to do with antiques and art. But I assure you, dear reader, that everything always has everything to do with everything else. The trick is to find the connection!

The immense popularity of these types of food markets all over the world points to a new trend, a new kind of concerned consumerism – one that has huge implications in the world of antiques and art.

Antiques and art fairs have been an indispensable part of this industry for more than 40 years. At these events dealers and galleries get the opportunity to strut their stuff. Stands filled to capacity with the most beautiful antiques and art give the prospective buyer an immediate sense of what the market has to offer. The best fairs are always vetted. Vetting means that a group of experts carefully assesses each item on display for quality, authenticity, originality and the correct description. In a mostly unregulated industry, this process affords the prospective buyer greater peace of mind. And with price tags that can reach hundreds of thousands of rands, pounds, dollars or yen, peace of mind is a fair prerequisite. Add this to the heart palpitations that any self-respecting collector experiences upon entering exhibitions like these

2008 FAIR CALENDAR

■ South African Antique Dealers' Association (Saada) Cape Town Fair. February 9-10. Kirstenbosch Botanical Gardens, Cape Town. (www.saada.co.za)

■ Joburg Art Fair. A new arrival on the scene and the country's first dedicated fine art fair. March 13-16. Sandton Convention Centre, Johannesburg. (www.joburgartfair.co.za)

■ National Antique and Decorative Arts Faire. July 18-20. Sandton Convention Centre, Johannesburg. (www.naada.co.za)

■ Saada Johannesburg Fair. October 4-7. The Wanderers Club, Johannesburg.



COURTESY OF BURR AND MUIR

This beautiful and highly desirable “Marine” blow-out bowl by Emile Gallé (circa 1900) will be for sale at the South African Antique Dealers’ Association Fair, which will be held at Kirstenbosch on February 9 and 10.

and one could surmise that fairs will be around for a long time to come, provided that the organisers keep up with changing trends.

But what has changed? How is the new zeitgeist affecting the market?

Remember the '90s credo of time is money? The rush for efficiency this attitude entailed meant big national and international antique and art fairs were enormously popular. The bigger, the better. It made sense: it was a one-stop shopping experience, the super-superstores for those with a project, a marvelous solution for someone who had to buy the entire contents for a new house, lodge or hotel in one go.

Business was fast, efficient and impersonal. An interior designer or the curator (depending on the status of the client) would come to the particular fair, walk through the stands and assess. An introduction and a small brief to the dealer, and on to the next stand. Next day the representative would be back, this time with the time-starved client in tow. Items would be pointed out, quiet discussions would follow, decisions would be made. Everything quite anonymous, quiet and, oh, ever so discreet!

Not so any more. Towards the end of the '90s these fairs encountered difficult times and after September 11, 2001 they almost came to a halt. “The Americans did not come!” trade newspapers lamented.

The fact that the Twin Towers fell did not cause the lacklustre performance of the market; it was merely the final catalyst, the accelerator for an emerging trend brought on by the realisation that things were out of control, running amok. People wanted to slow

down, make contact with others and have fun.

But the antiques-fair industry has survived many ups and downs and has learned to adapt. At the most recent Summer Fair Olympia held in London in June 2007, the organisers, Clarion Arts, approached the firm of Corfield Morris to provide a team of experts who were available to accompany visitors around the fair. The aim was to guide the prospective buyer to become a collector rather than just a furnisher. Attuned to the trend that people want to decide for themselves but are often intimidated by the sheer vastness of what's available, these expert advisers play the role of interpreters and intermediaries. But in the end, the adviser is still a go-between, so whether this will work, only time will tell.

Connecting on a personal level seems to be the new in-thing. In order to take a safe and informed decision, it's a good idea to talk to the guy who picked the field mushrooms you intend to buy and eat – it gives you the edge. The same applies to your relationship with the person you are buying your art and antiques from. Getting to know the dealer means he or she is getting to know you, your special preferences, your particular needs. And as a prize customer you get access to the prize pieces and all the *lekker skinder* that goes with the industry.

Do you remember the theme song from the '80s hit sitcom *Cheers*? It seems that at last we do want to go to a place where everybody knows our name.

■ Jo-Marie Rabe is a cultural historian and co-owns Piér Rabe Antiques in Stellenbosch.