

NANCY DRUCKMAN

FOLK ART'S PHENOM

By Laura Beach



NEW YORK CITY — Folk art went mainstream in 1974. “The Flowering of American Folk Art” opened in February at New York’s Whitney Museum of American Art before traveling to Virginia and California. Between January and November, Colonel Edgar Garbisch and his wife, the former Bernice Chrysler, auctioned portions of their sprawling collection at Sotheby Parke-Bernet. Sensing a market opening, the auction house created a department of American folk art and named 25-year-old Nancy Druckman its director. Over the next 42 years, Druckman brokered the field’s most important single-owner auctions, the trajectory of her experience inseparable from that of the field itself.

I sat down with Druckman at the Yale Club in Manhattan, eager to hear her thoughts on the field’s past and predictions for its future. The expert left Sotheby’s in March, but is no less passionate about her work. She misses the daily interactions with colleagues, but is as invested as ever with her clients, the collectors with whom she formed tight bonds and continues to advise. “They have been the center of my existence,” she says.



Druckman holds the heart-shaped inkwell that broke the record price for stoneware when Sotheby’s auctioned it for \$148,500 in 1991. A promised and partial gift to the Metropolitan Museum of Art, the piece is by William Crolius.
—A&A Photo, R. Scudder Smith



Attributing the Americana movement, resurgent in the last quarter of the Twentieth Century, to the 1976 Bicentennial has always seemed too easy. “Postage stamps and cup plates,” agrees Druckman, who believes the seeds of the craze were planted decades before, in the baby-boom years of the late 1940s and 1950s. “Shelburne Museum, Historic Deerfield, Winterthur opened to the public. Millions of schoolchildren visited such places,” she says, describing the midcentury era as the “gestation period” for the bull market that lasted, with barely a pause, to the Great Recession.

Druckman discovered folk art on a trip to Colonial Williamsburg with her mother and two friends soon after the Abby Aldrich Rockefeller Folk Art Collection opened in 1957. “If an 8-year-old can have an electrifying experience, this was it. I wanted to spend my life in that world. It was a place to learn about American history in

Druckman handled the iconic “Racetrack Tout” by Rhode Island carver Charles Parker Dowler twice, in 1974 and at her final sale for Sotheby’s in January 2016. Dealer Adele Earnest sold the circa 1880 figure to Stewart E. Gregory. It brought \$29,000 at Sotheby’s 1979 sale of Gregory’s collection and \$54,000 in 1980 in the Francis Andrews sale. The 54½-inch-tall carving realized \$454,000 as part of the folk art collection of Stephen and Petra Levin in 2016.

a format that made you feel ‘you were there,’ to celebrate the patriotism, creativity, talent and forbearance that was such a source of national pride after World War II,” she says.

Williamsburg was an environment removed from Manhattan’s Upper West Side, where Druckman attended PS 166 before enrolling in Fieldston...

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“It’s a masterpiece, remarkable for its size, condition and artistry,” Druckman said of this J.L. Mott Iron Works molded copper Indian Chief weathervane after Sotheby’s sold it for a record \$5.84 million in October 2006 to collector Jerry Lauren and his late wife, Susan. From the collection of Josephine and Walter Buhl Ford, the circa 1900 vane was likely a special order for a fraternal lodge or community institution.

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