

Long Distance Information - Auctions in the Internet Age

(an article written for *At Your Fingertips*, Dorset Thimble Society, 2015)

by Susan Webster, Melbourne, Australia

Ah ! The frisson of excitement teasing the Antipodean collector as sound comes through the internet connection - the auctioneer's mutter, the platform manager's gentle murmur, the rustle as the on-site audience settles into their chairs: "Ladies and Gentlemen. Thank you to those who have bothered to come to our rooms, and welcome to our phone and internet bidders..."

How things have changed. Fifteen years ago, we who hungered for older needlework tools so rare in Australia or New Zealand had either to travel overseas or to register for airmail delivery of the printed catalogue. Catalogues came out a bit earlier then, but delivery was not guaranteed in time to lodge a bid, even by email or telephone with the auction house. Australasian bidders developed close relationships with the mysterious people at the other end of the phone, who always seemed helpful and willing, despite the finicky nature of the queries or instructions.

Earlier, in the 1990's, east coast Australians had wonderful opportunities to buy from tools researcher and author Nerylla Taunton, author of *Antique Needlework Tools and Embroideries*, or from other travellers who brought back a few treasures. After we lost Nerylla, it was back to the auction catalogues.

Then, the wait of anxious days until a letter (or maybe a call for a favoured client) gave the results. After an auction there was a tidal wave of work for the auction house to take immediate payment from on-site bidders, to match new owners with their prizes, to negotiate with the post office or the shipper for charges, to prepare invoices where needed, to store and pack goods not collected on the day, and to handle the cash. No wonder the off-site lodger of bids had to wait a while for a notification.

Then the catalogues began appearing on line - what riches, a photo accompanied each lot. No more trying to figure out from a 20-word description (less than a tweet, these days) the condition and date of origin. Printing an on-line catalogue was a challenge - photos were tiny, and black and white didn't really convey much; but for those determined to save the GBP10 or USD20, it was possible to create a bulky printed record of the auction.

Based on the on-line catalogue, I put in a bid at a Dutch auction - I was determined to have a long-chained Dutch chatelaine with a silver knitting sheath attached. I rang up - phweh ! What a relief ! The auctioneer spoke English. Still, the terrors of the SWIFT code and the IBAN number awaited a winner. But the auctioneer kindly took me under his wing and made sure my bid, conveyed to him over the phone, was registered - I won, fought my way through the international banking system and, in time, the chatelaine was mine.

As this experience shows, it helped to have a friendly representative in the room, to make split second decisions on questions like "If I win Lot A for less than £200, then I think I can bid up to £100 on Lot F."

Just about that time I became acquainted with a very experienced collector in the UK. My bidding buddy was a grande dame of the tool collecting world, a well-respected researcher, and an occasional dealer. At one auction she juggled individual paddles for each of her clients, resulting in a confused auctioneer, who knew he had already seen a different paddle in the lady's hand.

At another auction, she thought she had secured a ladies companion for me, the exterior veneered in piquet-studded tortoiseshell. At the cashier's window, she found that another bidder had claimed this item already, paid, and borne it off. Possession being nine-tenths of the law, and the auctioneer's decision being final, my friend eventually had to stop arguing and settle on the rest of her winning lots sans the ladies companion. However, she gave the auctioneer and his staff such a hard time that they promised to send off the rest of my wins to me in Australia immediately. When my friend wrote a few days later to explain the losing of the ladies companion, my other lots were in the air far in advance of my payment. I assume the trusting auctioneer felt it was easier to let the unpaid-for goods depart than to continue to receive my friend's reproaches.

It was good to have human eyes scrutinising the physical object - what didn't the photo show? What was the real condition? Another lot that got away under my friendship bidding system was a very clunky, non-descript sewing clamp. My friend, exercising her discretion as I always asked her to do, told me after the auction that the clamp did not have enough quality to join my collection; and, of course, I did not complain when she did not bid. I was grateful for what she did do for me.

What I had neglected to tell her was that I hungered after this item because it bore the label of the famous Wm Shepherd treen collection, auctioned at Sothebys in 1983, and one of the greatest ever collections of treen. Today, in 2015, catalogues for this auction sell on Ebay for £100.

Mr. Shepherd had enhanced his own collection from the Pinto collection dispersal in the early 1960s (now mostly in the Birmingham Museum); and Mr. Pinto had attended the Owen Evans-Thomas dispersal in the 1930s. Of course, I wanted that sewing clamp!

Fortunately, a few weeks later I perused the final list of hammer prices per lot, as issued by our auction house. There was the lot number for the clamp - and no sale ! Back onto the auctioneer immediately by telephone, asking if I could secure the clamp. He was kind enough to get in touch with the seller, and after a bit more rigmarole, the clamp was mine. I don't display it; it is too ugly. But I get misty-eyed when I admire its label.

Another piece that got away under my bidding buddy system was a very rare ivory knitting needle gauge. Knitting needle gauges have been long collected; and the variety of British gauges up until World War II illuminated the history of sewing and knitting needle manufacture. The ubiquitous bell gauge was sold or distributed by at least 15 manufacturers.

One of the first ever gauges was Mme Lambert's round ivory Standard Filiere - at least, Mme Lambert said it was the first. Yet, here, pictured in the auction catalogue was the same ivory gauge, drilled with the same 26 holes, but with the name on it of another early needle maker, Boultons. My heart sang, and I vowed to win this lot if I had to sacrifice every other desirable item in the catalogue.

I so instructed my friend, but apparently others had the same idea. My friend bid fiercely for me, and the bids rose into the multiple hundreds. Finally she stopped. When she rang a few days later, I was devastated but not complaining. I was lucky to have such a good friend and I appreciated her help. Apparently, she was told, a dentist bought it as a gift for his mother.... (Hope her teeth fall out.)

Then, of course, auctions appeared on the internet in real time. I could still put in early bids - or I could rely on my ability to keep up with the bidding and punch the BID button next to the picture of the lot currently being auctioned.

A new set of terrors opened up. Firstly, there was the same opportunity to get swept away and bid way beyond sense that has always been a characteristic of any auction. Auctions in the United Kingdom and the United States always take place during the Australian night. Two hundred thimbles is not my fancy and takes about 2 hours to bid through. One night during an American auction I fell

asleep during the thimbles and awoke just as a handsome Tunbridge ware worktable was came up for bidding. Only USD400 - cheap, cheap, cheap, my sleep-riddled brain sang. I had decided against this item in the pre-auction deliberations, but the low price at which it was offered as "going once, going twice..." made me spring into action and offer a bid or two. Soon it was mine. I was delighted at the bargain. Next day I remembered the reason I had originally decided not to bid - shipping costs.

The worktable was a writing slope/paint tray/sewing and knitting box combination. It would be packed by the professional shippers contracted to the auction house and would be shipped in two large cardboard boxes, each about three feet cubed. The worktable itself would sit in one box, and the legs and feet structure had the other. Cleverly I had them shipped to my brother in Florida and determined to bring them home with me as excess baggage the next time I was in the US.

For 10 months, the two unopened cardboard boxes served as bedside tables in the master bedroom of my brother's house. Eventually I visited but could not conceive of how I would drag them to the airport as my excess baggage. I flew home. Finally, desperate to get rid of them, my brother used a freight shipper to send them to me as unaccompanied household goods, a category available to people moving house between countries. They arrived in Australia about 18 months after I bought them.

I dived into the boxes and soon discovered why my auction lot had been so cheap - all four feet were detached from the central support pillar ! I rushed to the original auction catalogue to see how this had happened. Well, yes, the tiny photo did show, when I magnified it by 200 per cent, that there was something wrong with the feet, and, in fact, the table was pictured supported on stretchers.

A thousand or so fixed up the problem through my favourite restorer, and the work table sits proudly on its rickety legs in my sunroom. I indulged wild thoughts of what sort of tidal damage could have caused each of the four curved legs to deteriorate to the point of breakage. My restorer whispered to me that the damage was caused by the very big body of the workbox being too heavy for the delicate Chippendale-style legs. The moral of the story is - do not wake up during an on-line auction and suddenly bid without careful scrutiny of the item on offer.

Eventually - distance being no hindrance to me by now - I ventured into recycling some of my auction items. Two sturdy workboxes were deemed by me to be surplus to requirements and I packed them into my carry-on luggage for the flight over Tashkent to the UK. On unpacking in London, they were still sturdy, and I speedily consigned them to the next auction event.

Back in Australia I settled in with satisfaction to enjoy both the buying and the selling side of the auction. Although I didn't make a profit, I was pleased to have more room at home for new treasures and to think of someone else smiling with satisfaction over these boxes. My sellers reconciliation note finally arrived, but these two treasures were not listed. Politely I emailed back to point out the omission, and was told the two workboxes had not sold. How could this be, I queried. I heard the hammer fall and had noted down the final bids. A notational error was the answer... So I guess it is not only buyer beware....