

From the sidewalk to Sotheby's,
The Cigar Store Indian
is a piece of American tobacco history

By Evan Schuman



IT'S NOT A JOB THAT SOUNDS ALL THAT ATTRACTIVE:

Stand motionless and guard a cigar store for 150 years and never light up. Your job is to alert those who can't read, or speak English, that they have found the tobacco merchant they seek, and you must endure the snow, sleet, rain, and sun (but, unlike the mail carrier, you are rarely applauded for your efforts). You remain stoic as people punch you in the nose and kick you in the shins.

It gets worse. Once upon a time, there were hundreds of thousands of you, protecting cigar shops in many countries. When wars came, your owners either chopped up most of your brethren for fire and fuel, or they melted down your metal cousins to make weapons. Today, you are among a very small and elite group for which people bid as much as a half-million dollars for you to stand sentry over their cigars.



The New York City loft of antique collector and tobacconist Mark Goldman is now home to this motley crew of cigar store figures. Note the sailor (*seventh from right*) raising his arm to symbolize a tavern. The zinc pageboy, clutching a cigar bundle (*fifth from right*), was created by William DeMuth, c. 1875. Gambrinus (*third from right, also known as "King Lager"*) advertised a hofbrau house, or a brewery.

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Yes, the cigar store Indian certainly has seen his fortune change since his extreme popularity in the mid- to late 1800s.

Collectors will pay hundreds of thousands of dollars for pieces they believe are authentically from the nineteenth century, despite the fact that craftspeople today are knocking out virtual carbon copies for as little as \$600. So why buy the original, then? Because collectors aren’t buying just six feet of wood, or metal: They are getting as close as they can to buying a part of tobacco history. They want to own that impassive figure who was around when buying cigars was noble and a matter of pride.

Chie Kramer of Indianapolis is one of those collectors, but he is also a modern-day cigar store Indian manufacturer. “People absolutely want to own that piece of history, but it’s not just the statue,” Kramer asserts. “The original pieces generally tell a story, detailing where the statue was made and the various places it stood guard.” Thus, in addition to the actual figures themselves, photos of Indian statues in their original locations are also prized by collectors.

Kramer may be right. Cigar store Indian statues have become one of the most popular types of folk art purchased today, according to Nancy Druckman, who has served as the director of the American Folk Art Department at Sotheby’s, one of the world’s largest auction houses, for thirty years.

Druckman says there is something very humanistic about the statues, which intrigues collectors. “They’re very evocative, old-fashioned pieces of Americana. They really unleash a whole lot of nostalgia and remembrances of times past.”

She has also seen a general trend over the last ten years for any three-dimensional piece to attract a lot of auction interest. “The beauty of the carving and the integrity of the pieces,” she says, are what make cigar store Indians particularly popular.

Another collector, Mark Goldman of New York City, is a big fan of the era and owns one piece that he estimates is valued at more than \$500,000. But his interest is less an infatuation with



This eight-and-a-half-foot Indian chief with base, carved by William DeMuth, cost \$175, new, in 1870.



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their history than it is an intrigue in the statues as symbols of American business marketing strength. Put another way, the cigar merchant sees the Indians as less Americana and more nineteenth-century Madison Avenue. “I’m in the tobacco business. What makes these pieces wonderful to me is that they are truly commercial,” Goldman says. “They didn’t start life as art items. They were made for someone to make a living off of. The true cigar store Indian was not meant to be decorative. That Indian that you put outside was your special personalized symbol.”

But in the nineteenth century, a store had to rely more on marketing than on

merchandise to set itself apart from the competition. “They simply didn’t have that kind of vast variety,” he says. “The product line inside the store generally did not differentiate itself, ‘I’m a discounter,’ [or] ‘I’m a chandelier store.’ They all had the same products.”

But some tobacco shops were specialized and some had a broader array of offerings. The cigar store Indian statue was intended to signal a soup-to-nuts line of smoking products, per Goldman. “The one that had an Indian had all the smokers’ needs filled: chewing tobacco, a box of pipe tobacco, a cut of chew,” he elaborates. The Indian statue said it all, without taking up much space: “On a big

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city street corner, space is at a premium.”

Indeed, the statues’ early existence in nineteenth-century America had less to do with current-day ideas of marketing than of simple store identification. With so many immigrants unable to speak English, these warrior images told

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Dubbed “leaners,” some Indians were carved resting an arm on a barrel, an oversized cigar, or a tree stump, as shown in this statue created by Thomas V. Brooks of New York.

passersby, “This store sells cigars,” in the same way that the striped pole said that another merchant cut hair, and a mortar and pestle revealed the pharmacist’s storefront. These Indian statues even communicated various merchant types: An Indian holding a cup of sugar would symbolize a general store, whereas one wearing a kilt of tobacco leaves and clenching a fistful of cigars announced a smokeshop.

As the years progressed, the statues were sometimes repainted to change their purpose. For example, collector Goldman once saw an Indian statue holding a box of candy. When the paint was chipped away, Goldman discovered that it was originally a cigar box.

Unlike the barbershop pole, though, the Indian statues were not identical and they were never intended to be. Shop owners would contract with the artists, who would take instructions and carve unique six-foot-tall calling cards.

It’s also important to note that the genre of cigar store Indians is not actually limited to statues of Native Americans. Although the image of the Native American was quite popular - with a range of chiefs, squaws, and braves, often headdressed and armed - as the statues became more commonplace, variations were created, portraying such characters as Uncle Sam, clowns, and a popular period character known as Punch.

Trivia note: Cigar store Indians are classified as American folk art, which is important to know if you’re looking to bid on one at an auction house. But they are mistakenly classified as such, despite the fact that most of the Indians are clearly *not* folk art.

Folk art by definition is traditional, anonymous art created usually by untrained artists. However, “Cigar store figures have become known as folk sculpture, but that is something of a misnomer because clearly they were created by trained artists,” says Henry Joyce, chief curator of the Shelburne Museum, a Vermont museum well-known for its cigar store Indian

collection. Today, Shelburne has about forty cigar store figures on display, according to Joyce.

The detail-oriented artistry of these pieces is what fascinates collector Kramer. “These carvers, they didn’t just make signposts. They went all out and made lifelike replicas of a human being,” he says.

For years, Kramer was baffled by how the original carvers were able to get so detailed and precise in their creations. After all, Kramer had been trained to carve wood statues out of one giant piece of wood, which places a physical limit on some detail efforts. But he then discovered that the tactic of carving a wood statue out of a single piece of wood is actually a very new phenomenon, starting only in the 1940s with the invention of the chainsaw. That piece of equipment revolutionized the carving industry (as well as the teen horror-movie market, but I digress).

When these original statues were created in the 1800s, the carvers worked in elaborate workshops filled with specialists. “The shops had people specializing in different parts of the body. They assigned each artist one part of the body,” Kramer said. “These pieces are truly pieces of Americana,” collector Goldman adds. “You can buy a bottle of Cabernet and it’s a commodity. You can’t do that with these Indian statues, as they are unique.”

Goldman sees a world of difference between current Indian statue carvings and the originals. “The new ones are the same things that are knocked out again and again,” he says. “In 1880, it may have taken the guy a week to carve it.”

Most of these artists had originally been trained as ship carvers. Until the 1850s, East Coast port cities including Philadelphia, Baltimore, and Boston kept the ship carvers quite busy, according to *Artists in Wood*, a well-regarded 1970 book on the topic by Frederick Fried. When the demand for boats declined, those craftsmen realized they had to find other work. And meticulously making Native American statues for cigar merchants was how many of these talented ship carvers survived.

For the tobacco merchant, the figure of a Native American symbolized the history of tobacco - and what better way for a cigar merchant to welcome customers than with this romanticized version of history, a statue

RELIC OR RACIST?

A 2001 story in the *Navajo Times* describes images that “depict Indian people as cartoonish caricatures with the stereotypical big nose and red skin, wearing breechcloths and brandishing tomahawks” as “outright racism.” The story describes “a wooden chief Indian mannequin placed in storefront windows of pawn shops, curio stores and ‘forts,’” standing among various odds and ends, “as if some official Indian greeter.”

Many collectors, though, maintain that the statues are appropriate if viewed in context: Through the eyes of a nineteenth-century merchant. “I have never seen an Indian statue portraying [a Native American] as anything less than noble,” collector Goldman states, adding that he had not always been so tolerant of political considerations. “I used to have a store on Fifth Ave. in New York City,” he recalled. “Every once in a while, I’d have an Indian coming in and say, ‘You’re degrading us.’ Of course, we told them to stick it in their ear.”

But Clara Sue Kidwell regards the cigar store Indian quite differently. Kidwell, a history professor and the director of the Native American Studies program at the University of Oklahoma, sees the statues as a contributor to the stereotype of Native Americans.

“Beauty is in the eye of the beholder. The manufacturers of these things may think that they are noble. To me, the connection to tobacco is not particularly noble,” says Kidwell, adding that the traditional Native American purpose of tobacco had deep spiritual meaning and was not a form of entertainment.

In Native American culture, the reason to smoke tobacco, whether as a cigar or the quintessential (although stereotypical) peace pipe, is to make breath visible, meaning that when someone smokes with another person, an agreement is being made; the smoke is thought of as the visible manifestation of that agreement. In the typical American business world, agreements take two forms: A verbal agreement and a written contract. In Native American tradition, a visual agreement is equally regarded, Kidwell explained.

What’s the problem with young Americans seeing these nineteenth-century statues in the twenty-first century? “If you put it into context, it might serve to make people more aware of the stereotypes in people’s minds,” Kidwell interprets. But she says that without the proper context, the message might be, “Oh, aren’t these quaint and funny little figures. I guess Indians must still go around in headdresses carrying bundles of cigars.”

“The cigar store Indian simply perpetuates a stereotype of the Indian as the exotic other. I suppose this is because of the Indian’s use of tobacco and image of the peace pipe,” she ponders. “Like all stereotypes, it allows the viewer to conceive of the Indian as a singular and static entity. It is hard to think of cigar store Indians as representing real people.”

“There were literally hundreds of thousands of the statues made in the nineteenth century,” later destroyed for material during wars.

of the Native American in traditional garb graciously presenting his tobacco to the peoples of the world? Reportedly brought to Europe by the returning crew of Christopher Columbus, tobacco became wildly popular.

As tobacco shops began popping up throughout Europe, the merchants wanted to use symbols that would represent the Native Americans from whom they received this tobacco. However, a small number of statues credited to seventeenth-century European carvers portray African people wearing headdresses and kilts made of tobacco leaves (it is speculated that the carvers mistakenly attributed tobacco to the Americans’ slaves of African descent). The very few of these figures that remain are dubbed Virginians, paying tribute to the American state that Europeans associated with tobacco.

The European symbolism was not simply, “Indian statue means cigars.” It was a more sophisticated marketing angle and it meant “*American* cigars and *American* tobacco.” At that time, Portugal, France, and Canada also grew and sold tobacco, but, “...the English wanted to represent the country that the tobacco it was selling came from [originated],” Kramer states. As cigar stores made their way to the United States around the 1850s, artists often took care to be much more accurate in their renditions, hiring models for reference.

One of the better-known artists of that day was Julius Theodore Melchers. In a July 23, 1899 interview in the *Detroit*



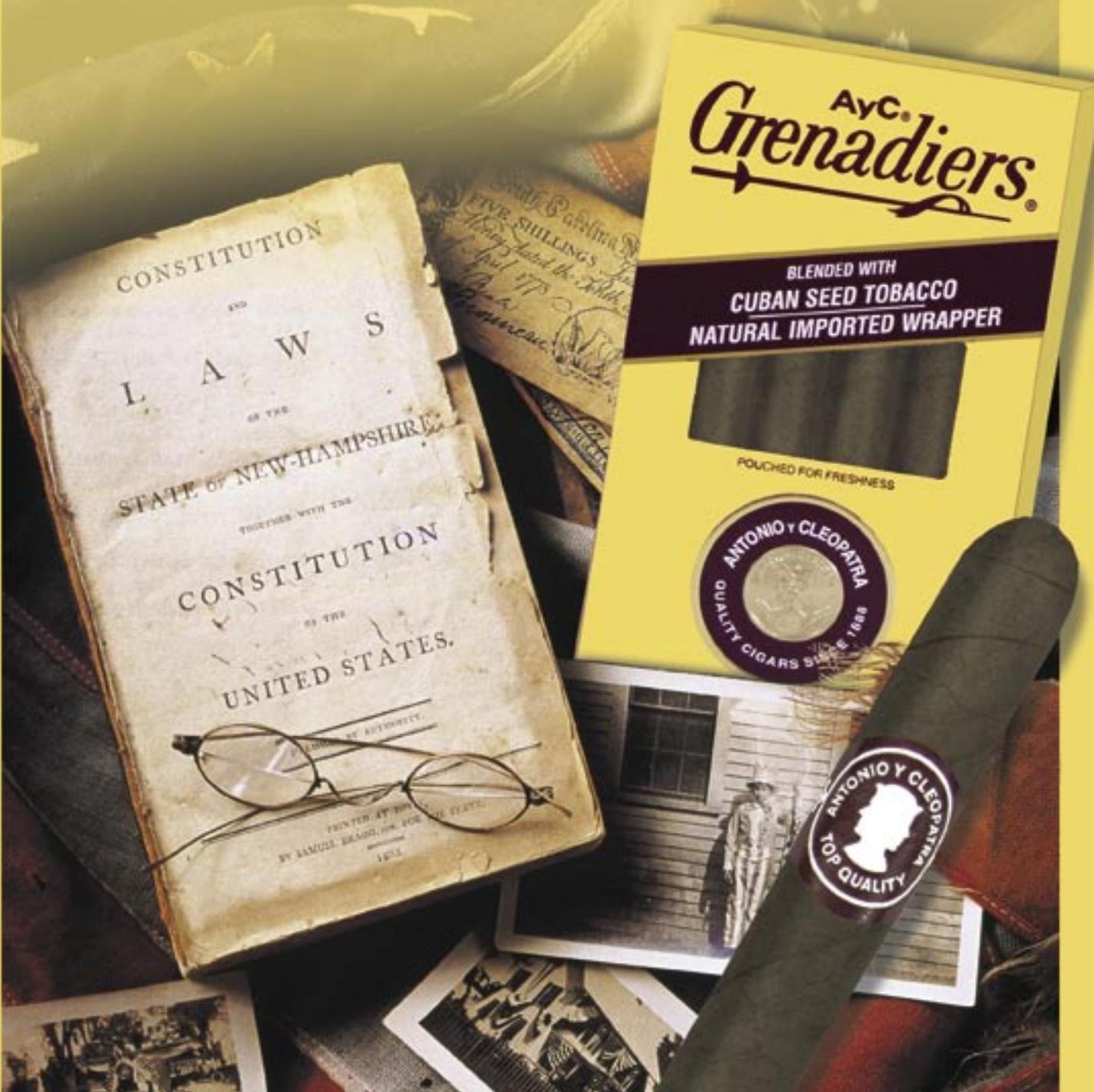
Another Thomas Brooks creation - this one not leaning, but instead standing tall and bearing a stoic countenance, as well as a box of cigars.

News Tribune, he detailed how he approached his statue-crafting assignments: “When I came to Detroit in 1852, a few rudely carved and badly painted signs were found at the stores. The first work I did in Detroit was to carve a little chief, about five feet high,” he said. Reflecting the attitudes of the day, he explained, “I hired an Indian to put on a lot of savage finery and pose as a model. It was no trouble getting an Indian model in those days,” he elaborated. “He would pose all day, if I wanted him to. When I got the image done, I received \$55 for it.”

In that same interview, Melchers weighed in on the controversy of the gradual disappearance of the cigar store Indian from American sidewalks. Typically, blame for their disappearance is assigned to a series of anti-sidewalk-obstruction laws, starting around 1911, which is how Chie Kramer

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understands it. Those laws, that theory goes, forced the Indians off the sidewalks and into the stores themselves, where much of their value was irrelevant. Another popular theory is that the statues started vanishing in the early twentieth century, as electric signs made them obsolete.

But when Melchers was interviewed in 1899 - a dozen years before those sidewalk laws became mandatory - he tried to explain the disappearances, which obviously had already started happening. Asked to explain the statues' rapidly shrinking

numbers, he blamed American business: "I think that Yankee thrift has done it. The American merchants are pretty shrewd businessmen and there is a demand for space on sidewalks for fruit and newsstands and many other kinds of business. The [merchants] pay good rent for the space and there is no room for the signs."

To be absolutely precise about it, neither the shrewd businessperson nor the sidewalk bureaucrats caused the death of these statues. At best, they sharply curtailed their use and made

WHAT TO LOOK FOR AT AUCTION

Given the ever-increasing prices paid for true cigar store Indians at auction, it's critical that you, as a prospective bidder, know what to look for. One of the rarest statues is one that still has its original paint job. The very first statues were meticulously detailed with a very expensive polychrome paint process, applied with soft brushes - much softer than those used today - that delivered a sheen unlike any seen on modern creations.

Collector and statue maker Chie Kramer of Indianapolis has unsuccessfully tried to replicate this original style of finish. "I have made more than 2,600 statues and, with every statue, you're always trying to improve yourself and the painting technique," Kramer said. "But the original polychrome painting is truly something beautiful. They thinned their paint down and would apply twenty to thirty coats."

But even such well-prepared statues couldn't hold up under continuous weather exposure. Some statues had more protection than others; those are the ones to try to find at auctions, but they will have healthy price tags.

But there's also an argument for having to pay a lot for pieces that indeed show their age. Henry Joyce, chief curator at the Shelburne Museum, which is well-known for its cigar store Indian collection, maintains that, in their current classification of folk art, signs of extreme old age for cigar store Indians are part of a piece's allure. "That's absolutely part of the charm of a lot of folk art. A worn condition is seen as integral to its value," Joyce says. If a customer is going to pay big bucks to own something that is 150 years old, he wants his friends and relatives to be able to quickly tell that it's 150 years old. What's the point of paying for an antique car if everyone thinks it's a current model?

"In the history of art, the conditions of the piece's original environment become a part of the condition of the object," Joyce says. "As part of the culture here in the West, we have grown to enjoy the haphazard effects on works of art. All objects fade and decay and get old. In many works of art, the fading of color or the roughness is generally thought of as interesting."

So how does a bidder tell the difference between a good original piece and a new piece made to look old? Bearing in mind that the odds are against finding a true gem, collector Mark Goldman offers tips based on how he tries to differentiate:

THE WOOD

The original artisans of the wood-carved statues were ship carvers, and used the same aged, fully dried wood that they would have used for ships. The wood had a look and feel that is different from the woods typically used today to create cigar store Indians.

"It's an aged wood. The guy who copies it, he might be able to find a weathered piece of wood that looks similar. Look for the wear and tear [that is] natural for what it was used as," Goldman instructs. "The base was the first to go," he adds, noting to examine that first to see if its wear and tear is more severe than that of the actual statue.

Why was the base the first to go? "Dogs peed on them," Goldman replied, making me wish I hadn't asked the question.

THE SMELL

Goldman recalls incidences in which he was able to get close to an allegedly older statue and inhale. "Sometimes, I could smell the [fresh] paint," he reveals.

THE NOSE

After the base went (for reasons we won't revisit), Goldman said the next to go was the statue's nose. Why the nose? "People hit them. They thought it was fun to beat up on a statue," he said. Fellow collector Kramer agreed. "Probably quite a few of them got worked over during Saturday-night drunken brawls," he muses.

If the nose is untouched, it's not likely to have spent forty years out on nineteenth-century New York City streets. A cauliflower nose, however, might be a sign of authenticity.

THE ARMS AND THE FACE

Although the original statues were made by different artisans for different kinds of merchants, every sidewalk statue had to conform to certain restrictions. Goldman said he has seen some recent statues that didn't seem to fit these restrictions.

"Does it have a protruding arm that wouldn't have been practical because someone might run into it?" he asked. Of the face, he tells us, "You were meant to look it right in the eye, so they tended to carve very realistic-looking faces. Most of the new ones don't have the fine carvings. With the old ones, they simply looked real."

WORKMANSHIP

This is probably the most difficult area for most new collectors to judge. "My experience will tell me the difference," Goldman says. "I am looking for the quality of the carving. Was it typical of the style then used?" In other words, do your research before making a bid!



The Highland lass (*foreground left*) offering a cigar bundle was made by Samuel A. Robb of New York, an artist credited for carving more statues than any other carver at the time. James Campbell of Baltimore, Maryland is the carver of the large Punch (*foreground right*), a popular period character.

it unprofitable to build new ones. What really killed the vast majority of these statues were wars. More precisely, the metal and wood drives held to aid those wars.

The two most popular materials used for the crafting of cigar store Indian statues were wood and metal (particularly nickel and zinc). “There were literally hundreds of thousands of the statues made in the nineteenth century, but the wood ones were destroyed for material and they melted down the zinc ones, too,” Kramer says.

However, there weren’t nearly as many zinc Indians as there were wood ones. One reason for that was simply the cost. “The metal pieces were about forty percent more expensive to make,” Goldman says. Given that the metal statues were identical and that the wood statues could be more easily individualized, that gave quite an edge to the wood creations.

The cast-hollow metal statues, to their credit, were far more durable than wood, though. “There was the continuity of it,” affirms Goldman. “If you didn’t drop it, they’d last forever. They wonderfully withstood the elements, other than needing new paint.”

According to Sotheby’s Nancy Druckman, zinc cigar store

Indians, though rarer on the auction circuit, are less popular than those carved from wood. One reason for this is that the metal figures are cast pieces, made with molds and thus lack the individualized style possessed by the wood carvings. “They were manufactured from molds so they’re pretty much cookie-cutter images,” Druckman explains. “They don’t have quite the same tactile quality,” she said, which is important in an antique. Buyers want the piece to feel as it felt when it was originally used.

The look is important, too. “We *are* talking about visual art here,” she said. The use of cold, impersonalized metal negatively impacted the warmth of the piece, she believes.

Druckman said there was another very practical reason metal cigar store Indians are usually strangers to the auction bidder: They are often extremely tall, typically seven feet or higher. Saying that she didn’t know *why* they were made that much taller, Druckman pointed out the logistical challenges of an apartment-dwelling collector, or someone living in a small house, to display such a piece.

In many ways, these stoic warrior statues proved to be the ideal cigar symbol. They were literally born of the seafaring ships that first brought tobacco from America to Europe. Their

“YOU FIND OUT WHAT YOU REALLY BOUGHT WHEN YOU TRY TO SELL IT.”

At antique auctions, a healthy asking price doesn't necessarily mean a high-quality antique. Sometimes it means little more than a greedy seller. Or perhaps a careless seller - offering something that turns out to be something else. Or possibly even a full-blown fraud. But maybe... just maybe... it's actually the high-quality antique that it's billed as. Nowhere are these scenarios more evident than when attempting to buy a cigar store Indian at auction.

Well-known collector Russell Barnes from Austin, Texas has found that many auction houses will try to identify the original creators of unsigned statues by simply taking a guess. Collectors, under the impression that the auction houses have all the answers, might just end up bidding on a priceless cigar store Indian that may not at all be what it is supposed to be.

“Most people try to assign specific carvers to all the different Indians and this is just not based on that many known or verified facts. I have recently seen two major auction houses that incorrectly attributed the carvers of two pieces auctioned in the last year,” Barnes says. “It is *very* difficult (if not impossible, with the current information) to tell who carved a lot of the Indians. Of course, Indians tend to sell for more if you can ‘label’ them, and so many dealers and auction houses incorrectly guess at the carver.”

Worse, Barnes points out that many incorrectly identified pieces are not the result of mistakes but of outright fraud. “There are quite a few fakes - along with twentieth-century pieces passed off as nineteenth-century pieces - out there, and several of these have also been sold by major auction houses recently. The demand is just greater than the available old authentic nineteenth-century pieces.”

There are many photo collections and historical texts available today, along with museum exhibits and private well-regarded collections, from which a prospective buyer can gain pertinent information. Barnes strongly urges collectors to do their homework before investing in an auction purchase.

“A person who buys a nineteenth-century cigar store figure without doing a great deal of his own research will

usually buy something that is not what they have been told, or assumed, they were buying. As the old saying goes, ‘You find out what you really bought when you try to sell it.’ Of course this is not what the average person wants to hear,” Barnes says. “I can think of about a half-dozen examples of people who did not heed my warnings, thought they were getting a ‘deal’ and ended up buying a five-figure fake.” Barnes encourages people to do the math and remember the small number of high-quality pieces that could possibly be still around today.

“The nineteenth-century examples are museum pieces and *very, very* few really good authentic pieces are in private hands. In the last few years, I have repeatedly seen questionable pieces hit the market and go from one dealer to the next, each time for more money, until someone finally gets stuck with it,” Barnes recalls. “This also tends to happen with a lot of the auction pieces. An excited antiques dealer pays too much and then keeps it for a long time until he can finally unload it on an even less knowledgeable person.”

“CIGAR STORE INDIANS WERE THE ANTIQUE COLLECTIBLE IN THE LATE 1950S AND ALMOST ALL OF THE GOOD PIECES WERE COLLECTED BACK THEN.”

Making matters worse, major collectors with substantial assets are very likely going to grab up the best pieces before a typical collector has a chance. “The demand is so great that most of the old authentic nineteenth-

century pieces have immediate serious, knowledgeable buyers, and so most of the pieces that come up for sale are usually lesser pieces - someone else's mistake,” Barnes said. “I am amazed at all of the people who still think they are going to ‘find’ an Indian and then make a lot of money on it. Most people do not realize that cigar store Indians were *the* antique collectible in the late 1950s and almost all of the good pieces were collected back then.” Cigar store Indians were even featured in many 1950s magazine advertisements; Barnes recalls one of his favorites, “A guy is standing by a cigar store Indian and his new RCA TV, calling the TV his *second* most valuable possession.” He adds, “These modern-day treasure hunters are better off spending their time looking for unknown six-figure pieces of early antique American furniture than nineteenth-century cigar store figures. I have heard of a lot more unknown good furniture showing up in the last decade than unknown Indians.”

creators were trained at making those ships, and their actual bodies were parts of the long-dried wood intended for use in building those ships.

Today, though, their few remaining numbers are a saddened and cynical lot. After their many decades of service and neglect, today they find themselves

mostly being abused at auction. Like cheap soap-opera characters, no one truly knows who their “fathers” are, resulting in rumors about their origins. They are bought and sold, their homes now being determined based not on their service but on the whims of the market. The only job they were trained to do - offer cigars to

the passerby - is often denied to them in the modern day.

Stoic to the end, the cigar store Indian stands tall and says there is nothing he won't do. But, for heaven's sake, can someone at least let him have a few puffs?

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