

In the Trade

Laura Fisher, New York City

by Frank Donegan

Lots of people go to auctions before they decide to become antiques dealers. In fact, it's probably safe to say that this is a fairly common progression: you go to a local auction; you buy a few things; next thing you know, you've got a houseful of stuff; you become a dealer.

It's also safe to say that the link between bidding on something at auction and becoming a dealer has never been more direct than it was for well-known New York City quilt and hooked rug dealer Laura Fisher. She was watching the annual fundraising auction on Channel 13, New York's public broadcasting station. One of the items being offered was space in an antiques center. On a whim she called in a bid. She got it. Voilà, she was an antiques dealer.

"I was so scared I called back and halved my bid," Fisher recalled. But she still got the space in a now-defunct antiques center at 54th Street and First Avenue. Her winning bid was \$50 a month for three months.

"I had absolutely no knowledge. No family heirlooms," she said. "Not a soul in my family was interested in antiques."

Actually, she admitted that she did have *one* family heirloom: "I managed to rescue the tablecloth my Aunt Rose had brought from Russia just as she was about to cut it up for rags. She had used it to wrap all her belongings in when she came to this country."

In retrospect, it's certainly fitting that Fisher's lone heirloom should have been a textile. Today, she is a recognized expert in the field of antique textiles with an inventory consisting of hundreds upon hundreds of quilts along with hooked, woven, braided, and ingrain rugs, jacquard coverlets, Navajo weavings, Victorian table covers, 10' plaid Shaker buggy shawls, fancy paisley shawls, Beacon and Pendleton blankets, and whitework Marseilles bedspreads. She's on the board of the New England Quilt Museum in Lowell, Massachusetts, and has written widely on textiles. Her pieces have appeared in a variety of museum exhibitions. Some of her whitework quilts were recently shown in Australia as part of the U.S. State Department's Art in Embassies program.

At the moment, she's particularly excited about a show she'll be curating later this year at the New England Quilt Museum. She said it will be called *Master Pieces: Haberdashery Textiles in Antique Quilts* and will consist of quilts made from men's clothing, such as wool suiting material, denim overalls, shirting cottons, rayon neckties, and long johns. It's scheduled to run from September 24 to November 15.

Fisher speculated that part of her attraction to textiles may derive from her pre-dealer job handling public information for the New York City Human Rights Commission. "There was the whole feminist thing going on, and anonymous work made by women was interesting," she said. She noted, however, that she has more recently developed an interest in quilts made by men, such as those sewn by British soldiers from scraps of worn-out military uniforms. She plans to include such items in her exhibit at the New England Quilt Museum.

Fisher actually did have a few things with which to stock her first "shop" when she made her successful Channel 13 bid. At the time she was a typical New York working woman, and, like so many New Yorkers, she went antiquing upstate on weekends. "I had an English picker friend, and we'd go up around Liberty and Pine Bush," she said. (It should be pointed out that for most New Yorkers, "upstate" refers to the lower Hudson Valley south of, say, Rhinebeck, Kingston, or Hudson. Such exotic places as Albany, Syracuse, and Rochester are rarely included in the term, and such indisputably "upstate" places as Plattsburgh, Watertown, and Oswego are simply beyond the pale.)

As a novice dealer Fisher had no particular interest in textiles. Her attraction to them was purely practical. She said, "I had a six-by-nine-foot booth, and you could always toss another quilt on the pile. You can't do that with highboys or blanket chests. One rocking chair would have taken up my whole space. Besides, I didn't have a husband to move stuff and didn't have a truck."

Fisher's current space isn't your standard antiques shop. The bizarre nature of the Manhattan real estate market—in which modest shops can easily cost \$10,000 or \$20,000 a month—forces dealers to be creative. "New York landlords are not adjusting to the downturn in the economy," she said. So she rents five storage rooms on the fifth floor of the Cirker Hayes warehouse at 306 East 61st Street in the middle of the Upper East Side design district. The building has long been known as a safe, fireproof site for storing art and antiques (the firm that runs it has been in the art-storage business since 1860). "There's a lot of major art stored here," she said.

Now some dealers, like Fisher, are opening their storage

rooms as regular galleries and keeping normal business hours. Fisher has a "room" for each of her specialties. She rolls back one warehouse door and reveals a space stacked to the ceiling with quilts; she opens the next door and it's rugs to the ceiling. And so on—one "room" after another.

Everything is categorized by size or color or type or some other defining characteristic and neatly stowed on shelves and in roll-out bins. Fisher also has most everything photographed and filed—once again by size and category—in easy-to-handle albums. "People come in, and they've got five minutes," she said. "They're looking at their watches and want to get to Barneys to shop. When decorators want a certain size rug, you want to make it easy for them to see your whole selection in that size. Size matters in my business."

While this is certainly a novel and interesting way of selling one's goods, Fisher did not come here by choice. For nearly two decades her base was a downstairs shop at the Manhattan Art and Antiques Center on Second Avenue between 55th and 56th Streets. "That's where my business developed and became a real business," she said.

She moved to her current location two years ago after a disaster at her old stand. "A water pipe in the apartment building above my store broke, and my inventory really got destroyed. My best stuff—Amish diamonds, things like that—was stored on the top shelves where the hot water came down. I was underinsured, and I moved here in crisis. It's above ground, and there are no water pipes near me."

The move has taught her some things about her business that she hadn't realized. "I've learned a thing or two since I've moved," she said. "Many of my decorator and architect clients have used this building for decades to store things, so they're familiar with it. I presumed my people from the antiques center were in the trade and would follow me." And indeed they have. What she didn't realize, she said, is that "much of my business was absolute strangers who wandered into the antiques center. There were lots of celebrities who might pop in and buy seven or eight quilts. I've lost that communion with new clients. It's really the movie stars that I miss the most." She fondly recalled the Hollywood producer who chanced by six or seven years ago on Christmas Eve and bought 27 quilts. That's a lot less likely to happen at her current location.

The move to new quarters has prompted her to change the name of her business to Fisher Heritage. She explained, "Laura Fisher Antique Quilts got drowned, and I wanted to emerge as a new identity."

The stress of moving to new quarters has certainly not been ameliorated by current economic conditions. Fisher has seen a distinct drop in the textile market, although she said there has been an uptick in quilt sales recently. She said, "It had been real scary it was so slow. No calls; no e-mails. Reality has been pretty distressing over the last few months." She noted, for example, "I worked like a dog last week showing stuff, and I sold one piece. In the past people would come in and need six or eight rugs. Now they buy one or two."

Many quilt prices have softened substantially. Nice but standard 20th-century pieces are particularly soft. Fisher said that 1930's quilts "are coming out of everybody's chests, cellars, and attics. You see them all over eBay. A really pretty Wedding Band that used to be six or seven hundred [dollars] is now two or three hundred." Even top-end material has been hit. "A Baltimore album quilt that was fifty to seventy-five thousand dollars is now maybe twenty-five to thirty," she said.

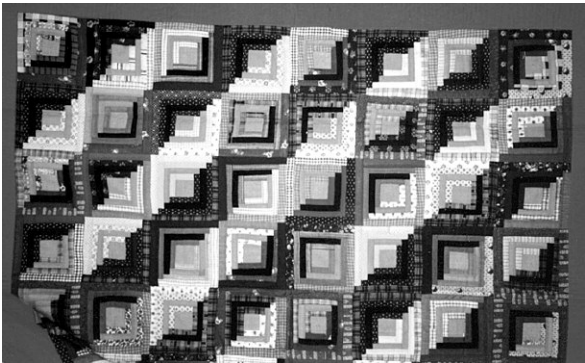
Fisher grew up in the Bronx and went to Cornell University where she attended the home economics school. "It was home ec, and there wasn't a man in it then," she said. "Now it's the School of Human Ecology, and there are lots of men." Men appear to have been an important field of study for Fisher while she was at college. She laughed and said, "I had only been with Jewish people my whole life." In Ithaca, she added, "I spent a good deal of time at the airport bar with non-Jewish fraternity boys. I just barely got through school."

Ironically, her school had an important textile division. Fisher said, "I didn't even look at it. I thought I'd be a psychologist or an elementary school teacher." She hadn't counted on how a single fit of auction fever would change her life.

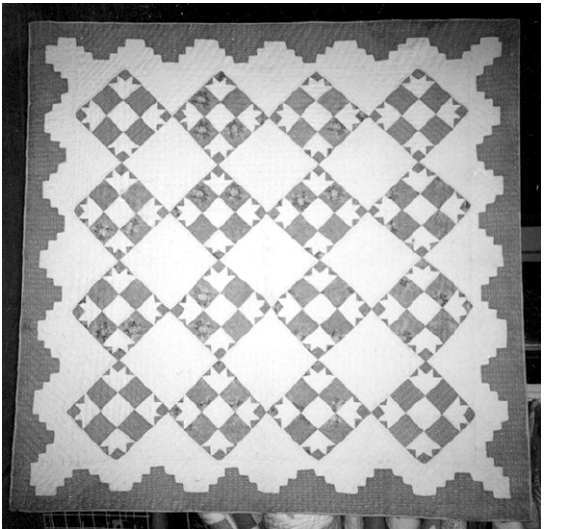
For information, contact Laura Fisher at Fisher Heritage, 305 East 61st Street, New York, NY 10065. The shop is open Monday through Friday during normal business hours and is closed weekends. (Union contracts govern just about everything in New York City, and staying open beyond specified contract hours, Fisher said, means incurring heavy overtime charges.) A call ahead is advised: (212) 838-2596. Web site (www.laurafisherquilts.com); e-mail fisherheritage@yahoo.com.



Laura Fisher with some of her 300 or so hooked rugs. She also has dozens of rag carpets and braided rugs.



Lancaster County, Pennsylvania, wool challis quilt, Log Cabin in the Straight Furrow variation, circa 1880, with unusual lavender-pink squares and a blue border, \$2800.



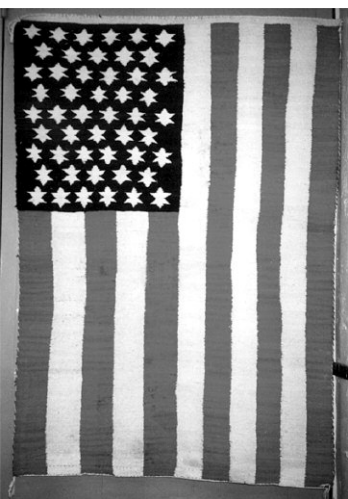
Bear's Paw crib quilt in red and white, 40" square. It is probably from Maryland, circa 1845, Fisher said. It's mounted on a stretcher so it can be hung. Fisher lamented, "Any time I have something mounted, I don't sell it. People come in and say, 'Just take it off the stretcher and I'll buy it.' And there goes my eight hundred dollars." The quilt is \$3000.



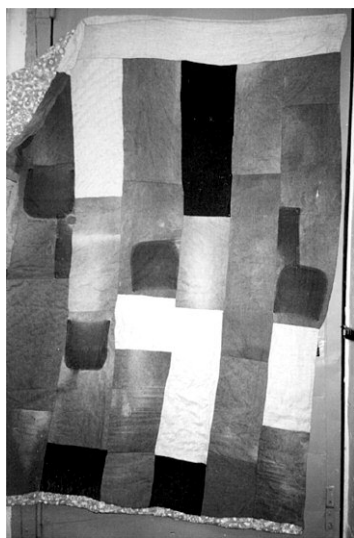
Pictorial hooked rug, circa 1890, on a preprinted burlap pattern of the type produced by New England makers, \$3500. Fisher said, "Usually you see a lion, dog, or cat on a cushion in these rugs. This exotic cat is way more uncommon."



New England hearth rug, mid-19th century, with an urn and flowers. It bears the name Myra V. Skinner in a baby-blue band. It's 34" x 46" and \$4500.



Navajo flag weaving, probably from the 1940's, \$3800. Fisher said, "It's pretty uncommon."



A blue, white, and black denim quilt that bears the shadows (or, as Fisher said, "pentimenti") of pockets torn off old jeans. It may not look like much in this photo, but hung on a big white wall it could look like major art. Fisher said it came with a note saying it had been made by an African-American woman, Anna Wesley, in Conecuh County, southern Alabama. Graphic but sometimes crudely made quilts by African-American women have become extremely collectible. Among the best-known examples are those made in the Gee's Bend area of Alabama. Fisher said, "Some quilt dealers despise these. With their irregularly shaped pieces and crude construction, they're completely different from what we were used to looking at." This quilt is slated to be included in Fisher's New England Quilt Museum exhibit and hasn't been priced yet. She noted that in Japan there are treasured futon covers made of indigo fabrics that have been repeatedly patched over several hundred years. "We're expanding our knowledge and our eye because of all the textiles coming in from all over the world."



Stunning and pristine English petit point carpet, probably from the 1860's, each square like an exquisite sampler, \$5500.



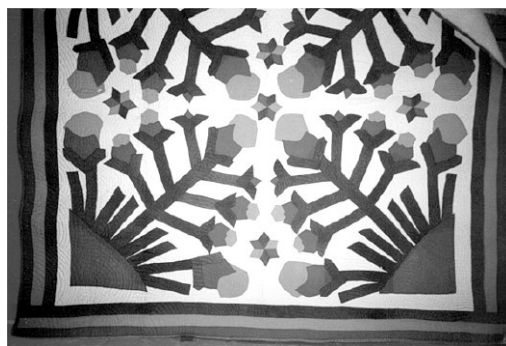
Vibrant crib-size silk quilt, 30" x 24", with a tiny design in the Courthouse Steps variation of Log Cabin, circa 1880, \$1650.



A very modern-looking double-sided Roman Stripe quilt made of wool suiting in striking shades of black, white, gray, red, brown, and blue. It was made circa 1920 and is \$975. Fisher said, "I've been pushing people to spare, abstract designs. You get a lot of wall coverage for not a lot of money."



A coverlet attributed to Harry Tyler, made for Maria Russell, St. Lawrence County in northern New York state. Fisher said Tyler is known for his eagle corner blocks with "E. Pluribus Unum" written in the banner held in the eagle's beak. The background is a very dark blue pinstripe ("Perfect for a Wall Street person who still has money," she quipped). This one is \$5800. Fisher noted that such prices are unusual for coverlets, which have never appreciated drastically. Most cost from \$500 to \$2500, she said. "Architects seem to appreciate them but not the general public."



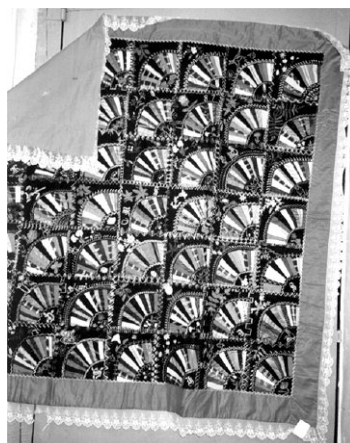
A stylized four-quadrant quilt in green, red, white, and "cheddar." It has beautiful quilting in repetitive arcs, which, along with its overall design, suggests southern origin, probably the Carolinas, said Fisher. It's \$3500.



Intricate cut-paper family record from Pennsylvania that has never been filled in, \$1450.



A red, white, and blue quilt made from long johns. Fisher said it dates to about 1900 and was made in the Amish settlement of New Holland, Pennsylvania. It's definitely not what you picture when you think of an Amish quilt. It's \$2150.



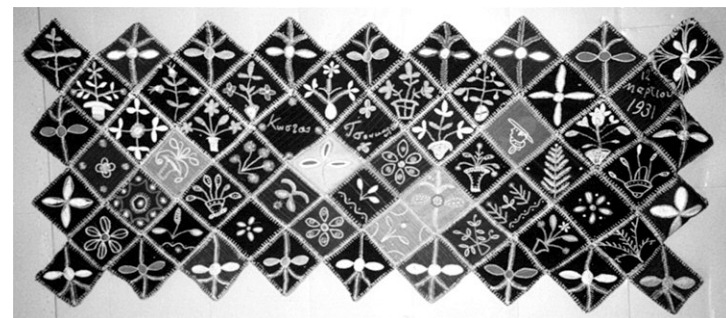
Fan-pattern crazy quilt in silks and satins with figures of children and animals embroidered in chenille and metallic thread, with a red fabric border trimmed in lace, \$4800. "This has every bell and whistle. It's the best of its kind," Fisher said.



A pleasant, atmospheric landscape made more interesting by the fact that there are lots of flowering cacti in the foreground, suggesting that it's a Western painting. It is signed "Pauline Thweatt" and is \$1450.



A bin full of tramp-art frames. Fisher always carries a sampling of folky stuff along with her textiles. Interestingly, much of this material—such as these frames or various pieces of homemade parquetry she has in stock—requires the same careful piece-on-piece construction that goes into quilt making. "I like funky handwork, probably because I have no patience to do anything like that myself," she said.



An embroidered table rug that looks Victorian but is dated 1931, which shows how 19th-century influences persisted well into the following century. It's \$1575.



A selection of Beacon and Pendleton blankets. Fisher said the Beacon blankets sell in the \$225 to \$575 range; Pendletons go up to \$850.



A corner of Fisher's quilt room where she stores approximately 500 quilts. "I have a big inventory," she said. "If I'd become a psychologist I would have known what this represents. It certainly isn't good business practice."

