SHOP TALK

A Shop That Sells 'Mistakes'

Richard and Marlene Grabowsky outside Bedlam, with assortment of brass furniture

By JUNE BLUM
Special to The New York Times

FAIR LAWN — Browse is a sort of general store, one where the stock consists of "other people's mistakes."

"We get 90 per cent of our merchandise from bankruptcies," explained the store's owner, Milton Ipp. For the last 20 years, Mr. Ipp has been in the business of buying and liquidating merchandise that somehow was delivered to the wrong place.

"Sometimes, if you wait long enough, things that nobody wanted will find buyers when a new generation grows up," he said. "Fifteen years ago, we bought a load of small plates stamped 'Made in Occupied Japan.'

"Now, they are collectors' items, and some stores sell them for as much as $25 each. We dug them out of the warehouse and put them out at $5—and they're going like wildfire."

Every bit of space at Browse—10,000 square feet of floor, plus walls and ceiling—is covered or hung with merchandise. The bargains include furniture made by Indians of the Northwest. The line is incomplete, but the savings are worthwhile: a massive bar, carved from cedar and complete with totem designs, costs $268.80, although it sells regularly for $675. Crystal bowls from West Germany go for half the normal price, and there are immense stuffed animals from Nepal (the largest is priced at $89.80).

There's even a coat of chain-mail—it is about 125 years old—from Persia (Iran). Each link, Mr. Ipp has been told, bears an inscription from the Koran. Using a magnifying lens, one can see the markings, but it takes someone who reads Arabic to translate them.

The armor, which costs $169.80, is one of the unusual articles that Mr. Ipp has purchased from the United States Customs Office.

"The Customs Office holds things for two years," Mr. Ipp explained. "If nobody claims them, they're sold at auction."

That's where Mr. Ipp got a fantastic mosaic that was shipped from Vatican City; it was intended, he thinks, for an official at the United Nations. A few pieces of tile have loosened from the mural, which shows Romulus and Remus and is about five feet square.

"You couldn't buy it, or anything like it, for less than $5,000," Mr. Ipp said. "I'll probably offer it for sale at about $1,000."

Browse is situated at 23-20 Route 4 (Broadway), and is open from 10 A.M. to 11 P.M., Monday through Saturday. Phone: (201) 791-8280.

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Richard Grabowsky lives in a 200-year-old house full of brass beds and old furniture.

Appropriately, the business he operates there is called "Bedlam," for Mr. Grabowsky is in the business of restoring old — and manufacturing new—brass beds. The new ones are made in a factory in Hawthorne.

It costs about the same to have an old brass bed refinished and stretched to queen size as it does to have a new queen-size brass bed made to order (about $300 to $325 is average). The price depends on the amount of work and the design; the range is between $235 and $535. Cast-iron beds begin at $85 and go up to $385 for one that is stretched to queen size, or king-size, and refinished.

Sometimes, people want old metal headboards and footboards converted into love seats or mirror frames; if it's feasible, the shop will do it. It also offers brass love seats (about $400), end tables ($200 a pair) and étagères ($225). As in all of Bedlam's work, you pick the style you want, designing it yourself if you like.

The most unusual brass bed in the shop ("The most unusual one I've ever seen," Mr. Grabowsky says) is shaped like a swan. Almost 100 years old, it is double-bed size and costs $1,750.

The shop offers a catalogue (it costs $1) and fills mail orders. Delivery is $10 within Bergen County and $15 to nearby counties.

Bedlam is at 19-21 Fair Lawn Avenue, and is open every day except Monday. For the store's hours, which are flexible, call (201) 796-7200.

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Bernard Karlebach opened the Karlebach Gallery 11 years ago because he felt the time had come to do what he wanted to do.

"I decided to do my own thing, the way kids do," Mr. Karlebach said. "I loved art and was trained in art, but during the Depression there was no way to make a living in art. I worked as a lithographer for 25 years until my children grew up and had their own families. Then I opened the gallery."

The gallery shows the works of noted artists, such as Jan De Ruth, Selma Goldwitz, Ethel Greene and others. All were picked because Mr. Karlebach likes what they do.

There is a separate building, called the Mirror Gallery, for the things Mr. Karlebach does, which is making frames —some of his own design, some copied from museum frames—for mirrors.

"I make them to order because I don't have enough time to make a lot of them," Mr. Karlebach explained. "They aren't commercial—I carve and hand-leaf them — but they get bought up very fast by decorators."

A couple of frames are on display. One has a country English look, another is Art Nouveau-inspired. They cost $350 each.

The gallery is situated at 11-18 Saddle River Road. It is open Tuesday through Saturday from 9:30 A.M. to 5 P.M. Phone: (201) SWarthmore 7-3348.

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