

Decoys and Folk Art since 1977

A conversation with Russ and Karen Goldberger

All images courtesy of Russ & Karen Goldberger, RJG Antiques.

By Randall Decoteau

A visit to New Hampshire for Antiques Week in August initiated a thought process about antiques dealers who have elevated the art of selling antiques to an art form of its own. One of the highlights of our visit was this conversation with Russ and Karen Goldberger. Working under the business name of RJG Antiques and masters at marketing on the web, Russ and Karen have been outstanding members of the antiques community for more than 30 years.

NORTHEAST: I note that you've been in business since 1977. Did you start as a collector?

RUSS GOLDBERGER: Yes. I grew up on Long Island on the water, subsequently completing college and serving as an officer in the Air Force. I started work in consumer marketing with Procter & Gamble in Cincinnati and lived in an apartment overlooking the Ohio River. One day I attended an auction and bought a pair of decoys as decorative objects without any idea of collecting.

Back in the early '70s there were virtually no reference books about decoys. I didn't live in a flyway with many native ducks (or duck hunters) and I wasn't aware of any decoy associations to consult. Somehow, I started the hobby of collecting decoys and was taking \$100 per month out of my salary to feed my habit. When my wife advised me that we couldn't afford the luxury of collecting, I decided that I'd sell some of the things that I no longer wanted.

I got my toe in the water by peddling decoys and soon became a resource for nearby antiques dealers. When I sold out, I began importing them from Michigan.

As Karen and I became more involved in selling, we began to publish printed lists, and then illustrated catalogues to reach collectors as well as dealers. The quality of the material available at the time was unbelievable. It's much more of a battle to find good merchandise today.

Our business grew and we were able to send our son to college with the profits from the decoy business. In 1983, I left Procter & Gamble and we moved to another company in Pittsburgh. By this time we were using early personal computers to support our direct mail decoy business which was at a national level. When I left the corporate world seven years later, we comfortably expanded our focus from decoys to another related interest of ours: American folk art and high country painted furniture. Our background of selling

to the trade, then directly to customers, and our love of original painted surfaces was a great fit.

NORTHEAST: When did you move your business to New Hampshire?

RUSS GOLDBERGER: When we decided to relocate, New Hampshire was our initial target. I had been stationed at Pease AFB in Portsmouth 25 years earlier, we always vacationed along coast of Maine and knew many of the antiques dealers in the Seacoast NH/Maine area. It was a comfortable move, and we have been here now for 20 years, first in Hampton and then in Rye for the past 10 years. Within a few years, the size of our antiques business grew to the size of the decoy operation. It was a good move!

NORTHEAST: Why wood and paint, and not one of the dozens of other categories of antiques?

RUSS GOLDBERGER: There is something about the warmth of an old object in original paint. There's the patina, almost a sensuality, and a character to these old surfaces that is very pleasing. We find old paint to be uplifting, even in a modern home, and I have to tell you that our customers feel the same way.

We've shaped our business around the best original quality that we can obtain. We tolerate minimal restoration at best, and we specialize in the best makers when known. In decoys, we want superb examples by the most highly regarded makers – A. Elmer Crowell from East Harwich, Mass., George



Russ & Karen Goldberger.

Boyd from Seabrook, N.H., Charles Perdew from Henry, Ill., and the Mason Decoy Company in Detroit whose work rivals some of the best decoys ever made. I've written two books on Mason decoys. Both are available on our website.

My wife, Karen, is very active in our business. We've been married for 27 years now. We both like to buy things that transcend their functionality. The basic blanket chest in original brown paint is no longer a hot item for us. We want one today

that speaks to us. We look for color explosion, and decorative aspects that are exciting. We have become a resource for collectors who seek a wide selection of weathervanes, game boards, trade signs and other folk art.

NORTHEAST: So are all of your customers dedicated collectors?

RUSS GOLDBERGER: Not necessarily. We often find that less committed collectors can be reached with an occasional object that might work well with their décor. We love this customer. Sometimes we never see them again; sometimes they come back to us for another hit. They use old paint as an accent. We enjoy customer relations. We love to sell to the same customer again and again and we try to give them a sense of focus for collecting.

NORTHEAST: Let's talk a bit about how you reach your audience.

RUSS GOLDBERGER: There is a synergy in reaching an audience. Our first marketing approach was direct mail. The natural evolution was to illustrated black and white and then four-color catalogues. But more than 20 years ago we decided that a computer would be helpful in matching merchandise to customers' interests and we established our first website almost 15 years ago.

Today we have a large site that's updated daily from our database. We offer great customer service. The site features four professional quality photographs of every



Hollow Mason Challenge Grade Broadbill Drake and Hen Decoys Rigmates in nearly mint original condition, c. 1910. Exceptionally detailed, thick original paint. See "Mason Decoys," page 138. 14" long.



Feeding Greater Yellowlegs Shorebird Decoy Clarence Hinckley, Beverly, Mass., c. 1900. Bold shorebird in excellent original condition with thickly stippled paint and tack eyes. Professionally replaced bill. Signed. 13" long.



Unusually Large 4-Masted Schooner Weathervane Frank Adams (1871-1944), Martha's Vineyard Carved hull, masts, and lifeboats with cut sheetmetal sails. Excellent original condition, including rigging and paint. 43" long x 25" high.

object and an absolute guarantee that our description is accurate. Our site is secure, we ship instantly and for the past year and a half all shipping is free regardless of size, delicacy or price.

The Internet is customer driven. If I run an ad, I throw it out to thousands of people hoping one will bite. But the Internet is search driven. Customers seek us out through search engines. Our merchandise draws people to us and the educational resource material built into the site brings more traffic to us. We are a full service shopping experience. We supplement with electronic mailings detailing more recent acquisitions or upcoming shows. Every mailing is linked to the site. Our email list is in the 4,000 range.

NORTHEAST: After almost 35 years, you've seen the business evolve. Could you share a few thoughts with us on the changes you've experienced?

RUSS GOLDBERGER: All businesses go through cycles. When we first came to the antiques business, there were too many shows. Collectors could skip a show, knowing that the same dealers would be exhibiting down the road a week or two later. Today, the best events are destination shows like New Hampshire in August where people make an annual pilgrimage to find quality antiques. In these environments dealers and collectors do quite well.

We live in challenging times and we need to be creative in our marketing. We need to provide incentives for people to buy. RJG Antiques has a unique trade-in policy. We'll take back any decoy purchased more than two years ago from us, at the price the customer paid, against another decoy we own that is more expensive. The driving force is that the process of collecting involves upgrading, and this policy provides a comfortable way to

upgrade. At the same time, we are provided with a source for fresh, quality merchandise.

With energy and thought you can have a viable business in any economy. Does that mean it's not challenging? Certainly not— but you can still do business. The keys to our business are: We try to carry the best possible merchandise priced fairly. We provide a perpetual guarantee and a trade-in policy. We get to know our customers and their interests, and we make an effort to build their loyalty.

NORTHEAST: How do you find quality merchandise?

RUSS GOLDBERGER: Many sources, but one of the keys is customer relations. We have been in the business for a long time and have worked with many customers for years. As they upgrade or downsize, merchandise that has been off the market for years sometimes is offered to us, and we love to represent it when we feel we can resell it in today's market. Thus material recycles back to us. It was good when we sold it originally; often it is better now because similar material is harder to find.

NORTHEAST: What keeps you in the business?

RUSS GOLDBERGER: The antiques business is exciting. There is an energy about it. It's fun. The people are wonderful, genuinely nice and often become lifelong friends. We thrive on the objective of seeking out beautiful things and finding buyers for each. It's a sort of chess game. We love that whole aspect of the business. It's been both rewarding and very satisfying for us.

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Patriotic 2-Sided Backgammon Gameboard
New England, c. 1875.

Pine with square nail applied molding in strong original paint. Vibrant red, blue on off-white colors. Good checkerboard on back. 19 1/2" x 20".



**A Delicate and Sophisticated Federal
Candlestand**
Colchester, Conn., c. 1800

Cherry with square top and molded edge above a column raised on elegant legs. Original mellow surface. Untouched original condition. 28 1/2" high; top 17" x 17 1/2".



Rooster on Ball Weathervane
Probably Harris & Co., Waltham, Mass., c. 1880.

Swell-bodied copper with cast zinc feet in untouched original condition, with excellent verdigris patina. 28" high x 16 1/2" wide.

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