

A Curious Collection

By **LINDSAY POLLOCK** | April 14, 2005

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CHRISTIE'S AUCTION OF IMPORTANT ENGLISH FURNITURE TOMORROW REFLECTS THE HEIGHT OF FINE TASTE, WITH Chippendale chairs, satinwood games tables, and George I walnut cabinets. The sale is expected to fetch between \$6 million-\$10 million, nearly double the usual total. The sellers are a distinguished group, including the estates of book dealer Dr. Bernard Breslauer; English art historian and editor Denys Suttons; and tobacco heiress Doris Duke. The sale highlights, however - discreetly touted on the cover of the catalog as "A Collection from a New York Townhouse," - come from a less distinguished, very much alive source.

"We can't comment on who our consignors are," said Christie's spokesperson, Andree Coroon. "But all I know is this is great property and we are happy to be selling it."

This collection of 51 lots is expected to sell for \$1.4 million-\$2.2 million. The owner, described as "the English wife," was interviewed by the New York Times for a story that ran last week. She apparently asked to remain anonymous and was interviewed on the phone with the caveat that she remain incognito - and no wonder. About ten years ago her husband admitted to federal prosecutors that for decades his law firm had bribed the mob in exchange for legal work, at just about the time the couple was buying all their splendid furniture.

Tall, blonde ex-pat Brit, 47-year-old Sally Fiona Levin King, and her shorter, bald, and bearded husband, 62-year-old Roger Levin, are celebrated - albeit anonymously - in the Christie's catalog as consummate classy collectors: "The collection under discussion, which has been formed with discerning eyes and careful thought and a taste for fine examples of English Neoclassical furniture has, until recently, graced the 'Miss Emily Trevor's Townhouse' on East 90th Street" writes Chippendale scholar, Anthony Coleridge, in an essay titled "In Praise of Satinwood." It identifies the architect as Mott Schmidt.

The only home designed by Mott Schmidt for an Emily Trevor is located at 15 E. 90th Street, a distinguished 1926 neo-Georgian townhouse pristinely maintained with shiny black shutters and a bright red door. This historic home was described in a book on its architect as having the "finest extant interiors of any Schmidt commission" - though now all its interiors are empty. The Real Estate Board's listings database shows the owners of the townhouse as Ms. King and Mr. Levin. Official title to the building, however, was apparently moved to Ms. King's name in 1995 - a year after all the trouble hit.

In 1994, when Federal prosecutors filed court papers alleging that organized crime had drained millions of dollars from the pension and benefit funds of the Mason Tenders District Council of New York and Long Island, a labor organization that (according to its Website) includes construction workers, asbestos and hazardous materials handlers, Catholic high school teachers, recycling and waste handlers and office and professional personnel.

According to a story in the New York Times that November, the government moved to replace the management of the union after finding that it was controlled by three New York crime families: the Genovese, Lucchese, and Gambino. In November 1995, six of the Mason Tenders funds filed a civil suit to reclaim some of the \$50 million reportedly scammed from the union by lawyers, accountants, healthcare providers, and other vendors accused of taking exorbitant fees. Among the long list of defendants were Roger and Harold Levin, who had earned millions.

By this time, the former head of the union was in prison. Levin, then 53, pleaded guilty to paying off union officials and agreed to cooperate with the justice department.

Following a federal investigation into mob involvement with the Mason Tenders union, a 1995 article in Newsday describes court papers filed by prosecutors that included declarations made by Mr. Levin that his firm, Levin & Weissman, paid kickbacks to the union presidents going back to the 1960s. He named his father Harold as the originator of the kickback scheme. Roger was admitted to the bar in 1970 and Harold L. Levin in 1926. Harold died in 2002.

From 1987 to 1994, according to a March 1997 decision by Judge Robert Sweet in the U.S. District Court for the Southern District, Mr. Levin regularly turned over envelopes filled with up to \$10,000 a month for outside legal fees which amounted to \$15.6 million. After the government began its investigation, he and his wife seem to have gone on a shopping spree. They met Madison Avenue dealer Gerald Bland, then a private dealer, who introduced them to English furniture and acted as their agent on many of their purchases, guiding and advising them and even taking Mr. Levin on a shopping trip to England. The couple also bought at auction, many pieces selected and bid for by Mr. Bland. Their furnishings have a distinguished pedigree, coming from such titled Brits as the fourth Viscount Midleton and the First Viscount Leverhulme, and famed American collectors George Widener and Douglas Dillon.

In July 1994, they bought an elegant 1775 writing box, now estimated at \$5,000-\$8,000, from the Christie's London "Property of a Gentleman" sale. In October 1994, the couple bought a 1775 large demi-lune-shape cabinet with a delicate sunburst design for \$40,250 at Christie's. The appeal was not merely the refined neo-classical form and decoration: The commode had once belonged to George D. Widener Jr., a Philadelphia blue-blood who was a major collector, philanthropist, and horse breeder. The commode sat at the bottom of an elegant staircase at the Levin home. It is now expected to fetch \$50,000-\$80,000.

In January 1994, they snapped up a pair of George III Mahogany armchairs from Grogan and Company, a Boston Auctioneer, chairs now expected to fetch \$20,000-\$40,000. The same year, they chased down six chairs, a set commissioned by the Fourth Viscount Midleton, each with a painted crown; these are now being sold in three lots of two chairs, each expected to sell for \$30,000-\$50,000.

The buying in 1994 and 1995 filled the house, with its ornate silk brocade wall coverings and dainty painted touches on mantels and ceiling. They only seemed to pay attention to the furniture, however: Judging from the

room shots in Christie's auction catalog, the art was an unimpressive mix of cheap posters and prints, all fairly unremarkable and far less expensive than the \$40,000-\$60,000 desks and \$20,000-\$30,000 candlesticks.

Ultimately, it appears, Mr. Levin made a smart deal with the Federal prosecutors. In exchange for cooperation on the matter of the Mason Tenders (and the Carpenters District Council, whom his law firm also represented in exchange for mob kickbacks), he pled guilty to two counts of a misdemeanor involving a conspiracy and failure to report payments to union officials. According to the New York Law Journal, he was sentenced, in 1998 to one year of probation, 250 hours of community service, and payment of \$250,000 to one of the unions.

There was also a settlement in the civil suit brought by the Mason Tenders funds in a effort to re-coup some of bilked millions. Around \$20 million was eventually recovered, according to an attorney involved with the case, but the details of Levin's settlement are confidential. The fund's lawyers did make an effort to assess Levin's assets, and discovered he had a very small mortgage and owned most of the townhouse. When he put it in his wife's name, the court put a restraining order preventing him from selling. It appears the fund's lawyers were unaware of the thousands being spent on fancy brown wood.

As with any material consigned anonymously to auction, Christie's refused to comment on the identity of the seller, but when asked why the seller had chosen to sell, the answer was simple: "A change of lifestyle." With the Levins, that could be mean practically anything.

Levin father and son reportedly made sworn statements to Federal Prosecutors about their mob payments. 91-year-old Harold was not prosecuted because of his age, while Roger was promised more lenient treatment because of his cooperation. According to Newsday, Robert Levin made millions in legal fees from the Mason Tenders "fringe health fund," including \$2.2 million from a health insurance fund.
