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Forget stocks and shares - invest in Antiques for Everyone

The huge queues for Britain's biggest 'old curiosity shop' will confirm the appeal of antique spoon-warmers

Richard Morrison

Forget the Harrods sale, the Last Night of the Proms or the disastrous first week of Heathrow Terminal Five. The biggest queue in Britain this year might well be the 2,000-odd people waiting for the doors to open at the Antiques for Everyone Fair at The NEC. And they won't even be scrambling to hear some pop star lip-synch through his latest album. The truth is stranger. These are punters eager to snap up a Victorian spoon-warmer, a Georgian teapot, a Regency clock, an exquisitely stuffed teddy bear, or any of the other 50,000-odd items for sale at Britain's biggest "old curiosity shop" - the gigantic Antiques for Everyone fair.

The show, now in its 23rd year, runs for four days, and has £20 million of upmarket bric-a-brac for sale. So in theory there should be plenty of fine furniture, tantalising trinkets, presumptuous porcelain, roguish rugs and exotic etchings to go round the thousands expected to attend. There will be tougher haggling than in a Casablanca market, shrewder assessments of current and future trends than on the London Stock Exchange (admittedly not too difficult at the moment) - and, in the process, some astonishingly large wads of cash changing hands for what, to untutored eyes, look like ridiculously whimsical items.

That Victorian spoon-warmer, for instance - which is shaped like a grotesque medieval gargoyle - is expected to go for £15,000. You may think that this is a lot to pay to have your spoon warmed. But Victorian whimsicalities are suddenly in vogue, so in two or three years this hideous oddity could well be worth £25,000. Try getting a return like that out of your building society.

And this, of course, is the reason why many of those people will be racing into the NEC. Oh yes, they will also be fascinated by the style, history and craftsmanship of the antiques. But it's the investment potential that is the biggest draw, especially at a time when everything else, from banks to shares to property, seems so precarious a home for your hard-earned dosh.

So should "antique virgins" such as me rush to join in? The good news is that there's little risk of being ripped off at Antiques for Everyone, because 150 experts have already sifted through the 50,000 items and guaranteed their authenticity. It's not like buying at a car boot sale. And if you get talking to dealers you soon pick up a feeling for what may soon be upwardly mobile (Georgian, Regency and Victorian furniture), where the bubble may be bursting (contemporary art), and what's always likely to retain or increase its value (fine antique clocks - with the advantage that, since they are classified as "machinery", you don't pay capital gains tax on resale profits). And with many items priced under £100 it isn't necessary to stake your home on a hunch.

But the golden rule has to be: don't buy anything unless you like it! That way, it will be a joy for ever, even if it turns out to be as valuable as an out-of-date postage stamp. Though of course, if that stamp happens to be an 1840 tuppenny-blue.

Antiques for Everyone, NEC Birmingham, (www.antiquesforeveryone.co.uk)

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