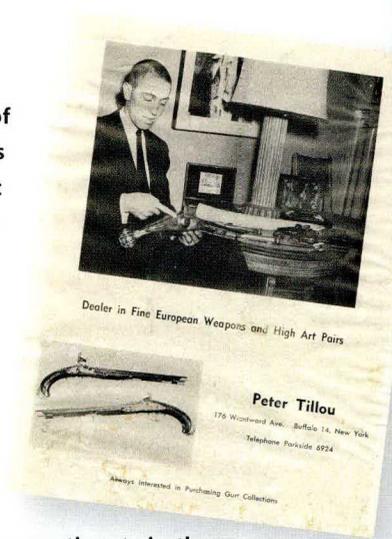


Peter Tillou

Recipient of the Antiques Dealers of America 2013 Award of Merit

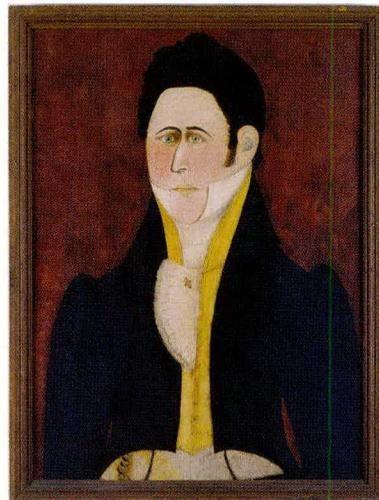
Photograph by Philip Dutton

Every so often a few wise things get said about the passions of people who are collectors (most famously in Walter Benjamin's essay "Unpacking My Library"). Rarely is anything of interest written about dealers, and oddly enough, almost nothing can be found on the nature of that intriguing hybrid, the dealer/collector, which brings us to the pre-eminent example of the type, Peter Tillou of Litchfield, Connecticut—and, more importantly, the world. Much has been said and written about Tillou over the years, but taking the measure of this phenom (an appropriate baseball expression for those with prodigious talent exhibited at an early age) requires going beyond the well-worn facts—his fifty-plus years in the trade, his pushing the American folk art market into the commercial stratosphere, his galleries on two continents in the 1990s, and his omnivorous taste—before raising a glass in astonishment. How does he do it?



Like any great dealer, only more so, Peter Tillou is a serial seducer who casts an aura over the marvels at his command. When he takes you through his house, where he has brought together much of the world both manmade and natural, there are charms and mystifications at work. Some of the objects here can be purchased and some are emphatically not for sale. But which are which? Asking questions like that is about as inelegant as shouting to a bird.

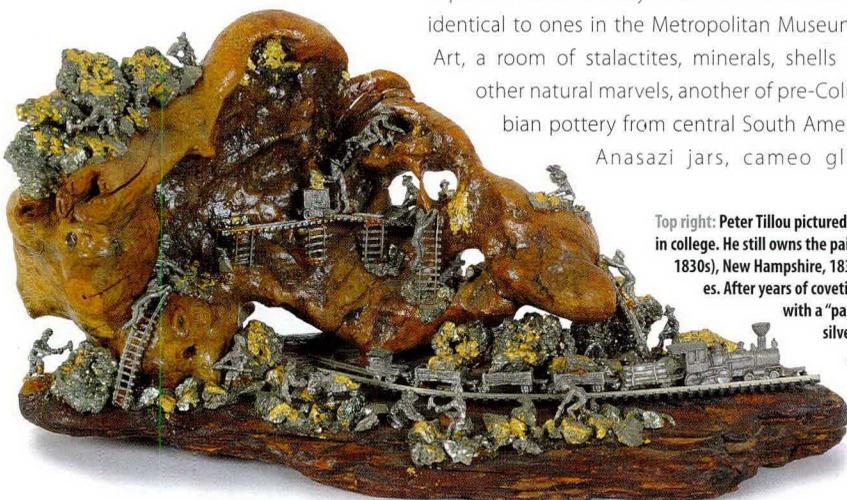
Imagine this: A fifteenth-century Venetian reliquary, a cunning little Northwest Coast dog made of horn and assembled as a kind of jigsaw puzzle, a pair of sixth-century Etruscan vases virtually identical to ones in the Metropolitan Museum of Art, a room of stalactites, minerals, shells and other natural marvels, another of pre-Columbian pottery from central South America, Anasazi jars, cameo glass,



American folk art, the paintings of our contemporary Stephen Scott Young. These and many more things are burnished by the blessings of their owner, and it is his enthusiastic laying of hands that transfers his enthusiasm and confidence to you. This is the performance of a natural shaman. No wander collectors succumb.

Take for instance the curious little burl, gold, and silver piece depicting a working gold mine he recently purchased at a gun show (bottom left). Apart from the fact that it was probably made during the Gold Rush nothing much is known about it, but it has the distinction of having attracted Tillou, who has often explained that things speak first to his soul and that connoisseurship and scholarship follow from there. "I will actually buy anything," Tillou says, radiating the kind of insouciant confidence that may make you want to buy it as well.

Obsessive collecting may have a whiff of the



Top right: Peter Tillou pictured in a 1956 advertisement for his early gun-collecting business, which he started while in college. He still owns the pair of flintlock pistols. Center: *Portrait of Albert G. Gilman* by A. Ellis (active c. 1820s–1830s), New Hampshire, 1831. Signed, dated, and inscribed with the title on the back. Oil on wood, 27 by 20 inches. After years of coveting the portrait, owned by a couple in rural New Hampshire, Tillou paid them for it with a "paper bag full of money." Bottom: California mining sculpture, 1875–1900. Gold and silver figures on a burl wood mount on a California redwood bark base; height 9 inches. Dutton photograph.



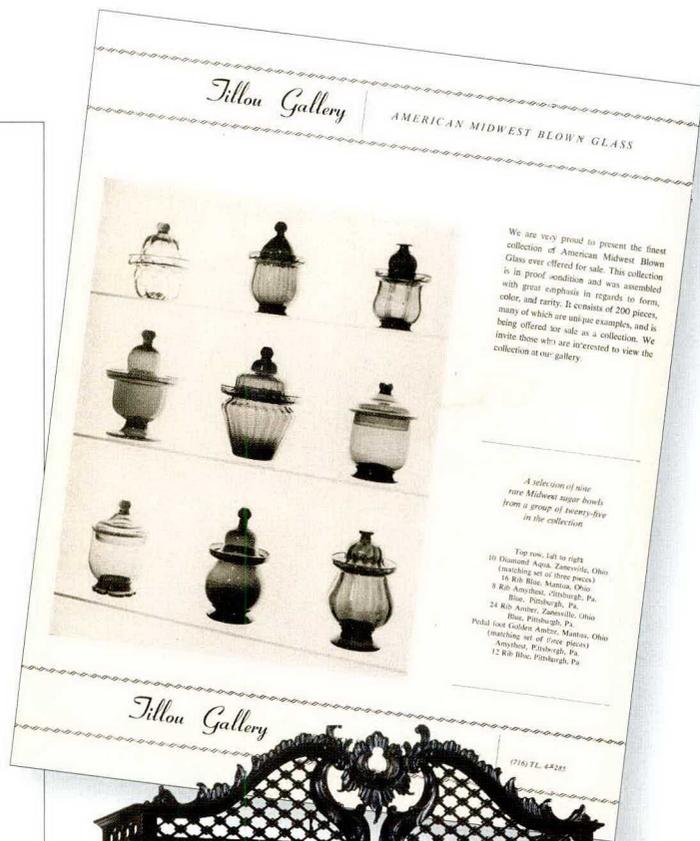
Hexagonal casket by the Embriachi Workshop, Venice, 1450–1500. Bone, wood, horn; diameter 10 inches. Dutton photograph.

Tillou's advertisement in *The Magazine ANTIQUES*, October 1963, included this "selection of nine rare Midwest sugar bowls."

Dressing chest and bookcase, London, c. 1760. Mahogany; height 98, width 54, depth 24 inches.

irrational but Tillou has made his obsession rational by coupling it with his enterprise as a dealer. At his gallery in a former bank building in Torrington, Connecticut, the wonders unfold again: aboriginal art, Dutch paintings, art deco furniture, coins and medals of many centuries, a single skull, marbles, eighteenth-century American portraits, Chinese bi-disks—to list a few things at random. But even here there are mysteries. What about the paintings of a certain deceased Russian émigré painter from the middle of the last century? Tillou has a number of them in the vault but he is not selling them just now; he's not even especially eager to show them to you or to talk about this artist. When he is ready there will be an exhibition and the man's career will be remade on a big stage. The strategy is sound, but however canny, it actually derives from Tillou's love of this artist's work and his insistence on giving it its due.

A friend describes Peter Tillou as the Energizer Bunny of the art and antiques world, which is probably accurate, though if we want to extend the metaphor we might also say he is the field's Crusader Rabbit. For the last few years he has been crusading





Picking Both Ways by Winfred Rembert (1946–), 2010. Dye on carved and tooled leather, 30 ½ by 34 ½ inches.

In the Ditch by Rembert, 2005. Dye on carved and tooled leather, 36 ¾ by 30 ¾ inches.

on behalf of Winfred Rembert, the African American artist who tools leather and paints on it with dye. If he had done nothing else in his life, Tillou should be remembered for building this artist's career. Rembert was first discovered by Jock Reynolds, director of the Yale University Art Gallery, and collected by a few New Haven enthusiasts. An excellent documentary, *All Me: The Life and Times of Winfred Rembert* tells the story: Rembert was raised in Cuthbert, Georgia, deep in the Jim Crow South, where he spent more days picking cotton than attending school; when he joined a Civil Rights protest in Americus he was arrested, strung up by his heels but not lynched, and eventually sentenced to twenty-seven years in prison, of which he served seven. While there he worked on a chain gang but also learned to tool leather. Many years later, after he had moved to New Haven, his wife Patsy suggested that he paint his stories about Cuthbert using large pieces of leather as his canvas. When Peter Tillou enters the documentary his enthusiasm for the work is almost tangible. He tells Rembert that he will buy his paintings, support him financially, and launch his

career. All of which he has done and continues to do. "Peter Tillou helped me live," Rembert has said, "and he doesn't look for anything in return."

The 2010 exhibition of Rembert's work that Tillou organized at Adelson Galleries in New York was a revelation. The depth of feeling in the work is unmistakable but restrained; although vivid in pictorial anecdotes of juke joints, lynchings, chain gangs, and cotton picking it is neither agitprop nor sentimental. The use of color, the composition, the rhythmic flow are all vigorous and accomplished. Strangely enough given their subject matter, the pieces express hope and confidence, something Rembert has in abundance and certainly part of what makes him an unexpected soul mate of Peter Tillou.

