

# Memories of Lorenz Antiques

By William Reeve



Fig. 1

Irene and Lorenz Biricz in their beautiful living room

Readers may have noticed that the names of Lorenz and Irene Biricz (Fig. 1) appear on a fairly regular basis in the short acknowledgements at the end of many of my essays. I enjoyed the privilege of being one of their customers for more than thirty years and have always found this most remarkable couple, “superb all-round dealer[s]”,<sup>1</sup> eager to share their considerable knowledge of “Georgian period furniture, china, silver and objects of art” (from an early advertisement). For many collectors of fine antiques, the news that in November 2007 Lorenz Antiques at 701 Mt. Pleasant Road, Toronto was closing its doors permanently after more than half a century in the antiques business constituted a devastating blow.

Lorenz Biricz was born on January 4, 1925 in the little town of Minihof, Austria, near the Hungarian border. His parents traced their roots back to Croats who, in the 16th century, in response to the Turkish invasion of Europe, fled Croatia to settle in the mountains around Vienna. Having attended the local elementary school, Lorenz eventually moved to Munich to enter a technical institute. After the *Anschluss* (Annexation) and the outbreak of World War II, he first found employment, age sixteen, as a mechanic for the German airplane manufacturing company, Messerschmidt, in Wiener Neustadt, Austria, and later, towards the end of the war, he joined the German *Luftwaffe* (air force) as a member of a ground crew. At the conclusion of hostilities in 1945, he returned to Munich to begin an apprenticeship with his uncle, Johann Buczolich, an antique dealer in the Amalienstrasse. The shop specialized in marquetry and parquetry Biedermeier pieces made essentially for the wealthy 19th-century middle class, whereas his home contained only the finest pieces of the baroque style designed with the upper class in mind.

1. Bowen, Lisa Balfour. “Lorenz Biricz. Dealer Profile.” *Canadian Collector* (1986): 10-11.

In 1946 Lorenz joined the *Münchener Altertumsverein* (Munich Antique Club) from which he derived considerable advantage. Members, who included the Bavarian crown prince, Rupprecht von Bayern, would meet on a regular basis, all bringing one item of interest which they would describe and analyze, a show-and-tell performance that the others present would then critique. Lorenz eagerly listened and learned a great deal from some of the leading local experts. One of the fringe benefits was the occasional invitation to inspect great collections in European castles. At this time, he also started to go to auctions where he would bid on damaged items that he would subsequently restore. One should bear in mind that in 1945 allied bombing had almost completely destroyed Munich and money was extremely scarce. Only the well-established families had any capital to speak of, while the younger generation had to rely exclusively on their wits and determination to survive. After two and a half years with Buczolic Antiques and the death of his uncle, Lorenz found himself managing the business for his aunt Elisabeth with little chance of ever achieving any financial independence. As the Cold War descended upon Europe, resulting in greater economic and political instability, North America seemed to offer the best opportunity for a young man anxious to improve his situation. Accordingly, in 1952, Lorenz immigrated to Canada in the footsteps of his sister, Joanne Biricz who had left Europe earlier. He arrived in Toronto with no money, only some silver snuff boxes that he had collected as an apprentice and hoped to sell advantageously. "On the Continent, no matter how bad times were, silver and gold kept us alive: there was and will always be a world market for it".<sup>2</sup> He obtained his first employment as a furniture restorer with Anne Wolfson who conducted a successful business in Toronto for forty-seven years. In 1986 she still retained fond memories of Lorenz as a person who "liked to handle good furniture and asked a lot of questions about antiques. He was very much in love with inlaid marquetry, and eventually his livelihood became his hobby".<sup>3</sup> He remained with Wolfson Antiques till 1957, while simultaneously doing some restoration work for other shops such as Davis of London, situated on Avenue Road near the Park Plaza Hotel.

When he enrolled in a night-school English course at a cost of \$5.<sup>00</sup> for three months at the Holy Rosary Church, it turned out to be the best decision of his life, for there he met his future wife Irene Gersonde. She was taking the same course over the fall/winter terms of 1953/54. With her French-sounding maiden name, Irene, born on 1 August 1931, traces her origins to a Huguenot community in Berlin founded through the tolerant measures of the Great Elector, Friedrich Wilhelm of Brandenburg (1640-1688) after Louis XIV revoked the Edict of Nantes (1685). When she grew up in the capital, she became what the Germans refer to as a *Kriegskind*, i.e., a child of war. In order to escape the bombing of Berlin which by 1945 was 95% annihilated, her family sent her to Posen in Poland and later to the Baltic region to stay with a German family. In the harsh and desperate economic times of the post-war years, there was no possibility of learning a trade (Irene had wanted to become a dressmaker) and thus no hope for advancement in Germany. Since Canada made it easier than the U.S. to immigrate to North America and even paid the cost of the sea voyage, Irene arrived in Toronto in 1953, seeking work as a domestic. Having a full year in which to reimburse her host country for her one-way fare, she immediately found full-time employment with Torontonians families for which she worked until her marriage to Lorenz in 1959. To this day she has remained in touch with these kind people,

2. Bowen, *ibid*, p. 9

3. Bowen, *ibid*, p. 11

considers them among her friends and has benefited from their generosity: one family (Taylor) even lent the couple money to help them go into business for themselves. In the years following her wedding, Irene was kept busy with raising their two children, Diane and Larry, and, whenever possible, helping in the business. As she reminisces about this stage in her career, she now concedes, "I have cleaned enough silver in my life!" Although her parents had no knowledge or appreciation of antiques, she quickly developed a genuine interest in beautiful paintings, silver and especially porcelain for which she has an amazing eye.

After a return to Munich in 1956 that confirmed Lorenz's lack of future prospects in Germany, he made a firm commitment to seek his living in Canada and commenced his own Toronto business working out of a basement at 16 Tauton Road. His sister who owned the house generously allowed her brother to live there rent free, thus enabling him to save money and eventually to raise the necessary funds to open his own shop. At this crucial stage in his career, Lorenz counts himself particularly blessed in the person of antique dealer Bob Patterson who owned and operated Adam House in Yorkville, at that time a choice location for many fine antique shops. Originally a banker from an old Toronto family, he became bored with his profession and, retiring early, resolved to pursue his passion for silver and crystal. Since he had little familiarity with furniture, he came to depend on Lorenz to advise him at sales on what to buy. Lorenz supplied much of the furniture sold at Adam House, carefully restored in his basement. As a mark of the man, Lorenz remembers how on one occasion he brought him a piece for which he asked \$1200. "No," said Bob, "I'll get you \$1500." He referred many customers and dealers to Lorenz in the early years. When Bob retired to Nova Scotia in 1964 and Lorenz wanted to buy his name, he refused, declaring: "No, the name dies with me." In Granville Ferry, N.S., he put together an outstanding collection in his home, a circa 1764 farmhouse overlooking the Annapolis Basin. Calling it North Hills he later bequeathed it and its contents to the Nova Scotia Museum. "His collection of 18th-century paintings, ceramics, glassware and furniture is one of the finest in Canada".<sup>4</sup> The North Hills Museum, as it is now known, forms an integral part of the province's home museum system.

In 1959 Lorenz and Irene purchased a house on Albertus Avenue. Its basement again served as the workshop for restoring furniture most of which they consigned to Toronto stores such as the Slimon Studio on Bloor Street. When they sold this property in 1964, the accumulated equity enabled them to purchase a property at 701 Mt. Pleasant Road just south of Eglinton Avenue, what became a Mecca for many collectors of high-end antiques. It proved to be a wisely chosen location since it provided easy access to customers from both the Lawrence Park area to the north and Rosedale to the south. They also managed to live and raise their two children in the small second-floor apartment above the store which in later years, once the family could move to their new home in North Toronto, allowed for expansion of the business onto an additional level.

Another dealer whose name evokes fond memories is Don McLeish of the Chelsea Shop, a specialist in porcelain. The Biriczcs recall an evening when he invited them to come and examine an array of china he had recently acquired from a large Montréal estate. He spent much time with his guests, generously sharing the benefits of his own considerable knowledge and offering valuable advice. He also allowed them to purchase wholesale some of the great examples of porcelain he had on display that evening. Another time, while he was visiting the Mt. Pleasant store, Lorenz enquired about the function of a glass item in his showcase. Don responded: "If you'll sell it to me, I'll tell you what it is." It turned out to be a toddy lifter (Fig. 2). At the beginning of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, people employed a toddy lifter to transfer toddy (whiskey, rum or brandy mixed with



honey, lemon, tea or hot water) from a bowl to a glass. The handy tool consists of a long-necked tube with a flat flange on top and a hollow bulb at the opposite end. The drinker would place the bulb into a bowl filled with toddy until the ball filled up through an opening in its bottom. Then he/she would put a finger over the hole in the flange to create a vacuum and release the liquid into a glass by removing the finger. An honest and helpful colleague, Don was one of the many dealers who actively encouraged new arrivals on the scene, such as the Biriczkes, and made it a principle to cooperate with one another in the business.

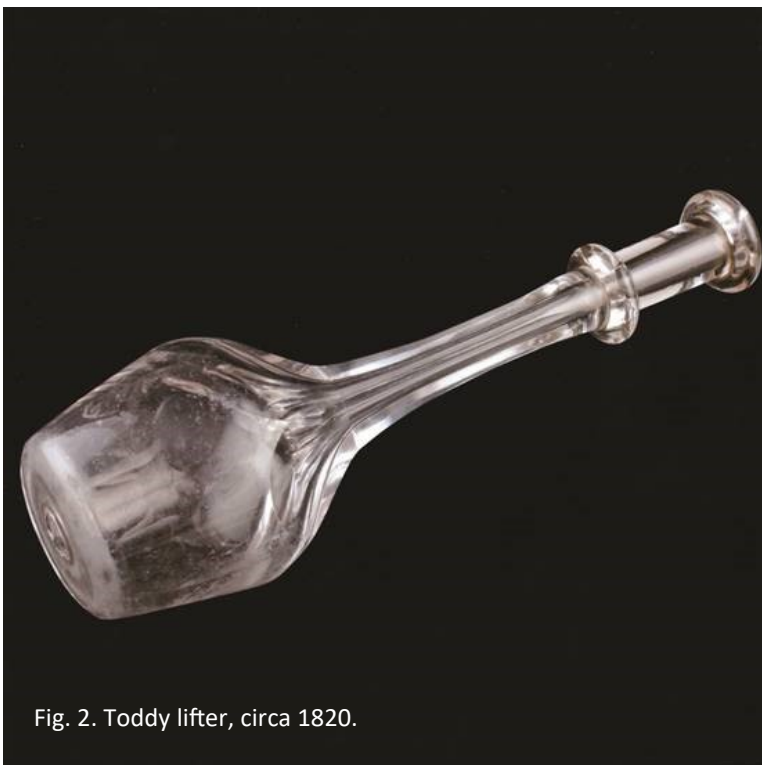


Fig. 2. Toddy lifter, circa 1820.

This sense of good will and comradeship led eventually to the establishment in the centennial year 1967 of the Canadian Antique Dealers Association (C.A.D.A.) of which Lorenz remains one of the few surviving charter members. In its early years C.A.D.A. furnished an excellent forum for like-minded dealers to get together to exchange views and have a good laugh. It also set a high standard for its members. *The Globe and Mail* interviewed the then president of the Association, Capt. Christopher Bashford, during the annual C.A.D.A. Antique Fair held in the historic St. Lawrence Hall, Toronto, on 8 May 1981. "Some people are getting a bit too lackadaisical about standards," Bashford explained. "To belong to the organization, dealers have to have 75 per cent of their stock listed as dating prior to 1870. The balance of the stock should be of high standards. Three members resigned once these qualifications were determined." Lorenz and Irene particularly remember one annual C.A.D.A. meeting held this time in Victoria, B.C. and attended by colleagues from all over Canada. Because Victoria, a major retirement community, has more than its share of antique shops, the members resolved to spread out on a treasure hunt to the local businesses and then to meet back later for a show and tell at lunch. Lorenz, who did especially well as a scavenger, relates how the ever popular Bashford interrupted him in mid-sentence with a bantering dictatorial determination, demanding, "Don't tell me what you paid for it; tell me what you want for it!"

Concerned with educating the public, Lorenz agreed to do an interview with *The Sunday Star* published 13 April 1986. "Virtually every type of antique has been reproduced or downright faked at one time or another," Lorenz warned. "It isn't easy for novice collectors to tell the difference between an old piece and a good forgery or reproduction, which is why so many of them get burned." As a case in point he went on to illustrate how even hallmarked silver can pose a danger since in "some cases, dishonest people cut marks from old pieces and include them on new ones. That's why you'll sometimes see dealers and experienced collectors blow gently on the base of a piece of silver, at the portion where it's hallmarked. Heat from their breath can help detect lines or marks where the new piece of metal has been joined to the old."

Offered the presidency of the Association several times, Lorenz, a modest, shy and self-effacing man, always refused. However, he did do his share, for he agreed to serve on the Canadian Cultural Property



Fig. 3. Continental commode with cupboard, circa 1730.

Export Review Board established as a body of experts to advise the federal government on matters relating to the Export Review Act of 1977. The latter provision was designed to ensure by export controls, tax incentives and grants that the best examples of our material cultural heritage would remain in Canada rather than being spirited out of this country by major auction houses in England and the States.

Since Lorenz's initial exposure to the antique world occurred in Europe, he naturally first developed an expertise and fondness for continental furniture. In keeping with this tradition, he looks back to the first item he restored after his arrival in Toronto in 1952. It was what the Germans call "eine Kommode mit Aufsatz," roughly translated as a chest of drawers with a cupboard on top (Fig. 3). He did the work for a dealer, Hermann Schönorn, originally from Berlin, but operating a successful antique business in Toronto. Constructed circa 1730, primarily of European cherry, it had walnut columns and legs, engraved ebony inlays and original fire-gilt hardware. Hermann sold the restored piece to a mother and daughter, and Lorenz, having become greatly enamoured of the cupboard, told them that if they should ever wish to part with it, they should contact him. Thirty-five years later after the mother had died, the daughter phoned Lorenz and told him: "Mozart is for sale." Built before Mozart's birth in 1756, its still reflects the elegant sophistication we now associate with the age in which the composer lived. About to move into a seniors home, she offered to sell it back. When with the help of Bob Meiklejohn the Biriczkes drew up plans to build a sizeable addition to their home, they took into consideration the substantial height of this baroque treasure, 92 inches, that now occupies pride of position in their living room.

Lorenz's skill as a restorer had become legendary as revealed by an anecdote involving Mrs. Gundy of the Wood-Gundy family. She owned a desk, and although it was in very rough shape, she was still quite fond of it. Appealing to the Royal Ontario Museum, she

was informed that it could not be restored. Not one to accept defeat, she approached Lorenz who agreed to take on the challenge. Mrs. Gundy was so thrilled with the results that she became a valued customer. In 1960 when Lorenz had acquired a magnificent Chippendale open-arm armchair with claw and ball feet and was asking the then unheard-of Toronto price of \$1500, Mrs. Gundy bought it without hesitation. As a sign of her high regard and confidence in him, she was later instrumental in his being offered the management of Avon Galleries in the downtown Simpsons department store, a proposal that he declined.

Lorenz quickly developed a greater appreciation of English Georgian furniture and soon preferred it to the continental variety of his youth. As he remarked in an interview in 1986, “I love [English pieces] because they are far superior in craftsmanship to middle European furniture”.<sup>5</sup> (Fig. 4) To acquire it he made annual buying trips to England to fill several twenty-foot containers. However, with inflationary rises in the cost of items in the United Kingdom, he eventually could no longer purchase stock at the big London exhibitions such as the Grosvenor House Antique Show and was obliged to seek affordable merchandise from country dealers who catered exclusively to the trade. A pragmatic outlook determined his formula for success: “If I can’t get what I go over to buy, I simply purchase other things. But in every case, I buy for quality and what I can make money on. It’s as simple as that”.<sup>6</sup> Moreover, when he went to the U.K., he frequently bought with specific clients in mind since he could be 95% certain that they would purchase the item in question, such as a piece of Irish or Scottish silver, upon his return to Canada. Some of his Canadian silver discoveries have ended up in the R.O.M., acquired with funds from the estate of the late John Langdon. Lorenz has earned and always enjoyed a great sense of trust between himself and his customers.



Fig. 4



Fig. 5

Fig.4. English flame-mahogany slant-top desk, circa 1780.

Fig. 5. American figured-maple chest of drawers, circa 1750.

5. Bowen, *ibid*, p. 11

6. Bowen, *ibid*, p. 11

7. Sack, Harold and Max Wilk. *American Treasure Hunt*. New York: DKB Publishing, 1986.

In retrospect, Lorenz now estimates that at least 60% of his stock has come from either Canadian or American sources and a few quality finds have been of Canadian provenance. He has gained a very high respect for American furniture, having sold several examples out of his own store (Fig. 5) and feels that it is just as good, if not superior, to its English counterparts or prototypes. Some of his American merchandise was the by-product of trips to the U.S.A. As Irene is quick to point out, they always had “holidays with a mission,” i.e., every pleasure vacation had an ulterior motive of making what Harold Sack has fittingly described as a “remarkable discovery”.<sup>7</sup> In this regard Florida has revealed itself to be a veritable treasure trove since well-to-do people go there to retire and, once they pass on, frequently leave behind some great “objects of desire” for the inveterate collector.

With his reputation for fairness, reliability and expertise, Lorenz has often been called upon to assess, with the option of purchasing, some great estates, with furniture of exceptional quality principally in Toronto but also occasionally in Montréal. As Irene explains, “a beautiful part [of their business is the realization] you can’t own it, but you can handle it” and this awareness has always been a source of great pleasure for both husband and wife. Lorenz has also learned the truth of the old adage: “Never judge a book by its cover” as appearances can be most deceptive. Hence, he has rarely turned down a request to view a collection, however unpromising the prospect of a worthwhile find may be. As a case in point, he received a call from a home in a run-down section of Toronto’s east end. The occupants had some furniture, china and silver they wished to sell and had called the Paisley Shop but were informed that Mr. Paisley was on a buying trip abroad. When Lorenz arrived at the house, he could not believe his eyes: early Georgian silver by prominent makers, a set of very fine Sheraton knife boxes etc. but above all an absolutely stunning pair of Georgian wine coolers (circa



Fig. 6. Pair Georgian wine coolers in mahogany, circa 1800.



Fig. 7



Fig. 12



Fig. 8



Fig. 9



Fig. 10



Fig. 11

Fig. 7. German baroque commode (chest of drawers), circa 1750.

Fig. 8. English flame-birch tall-case clock, circa 1750.

Fig. 9. English ivory and tortoise-shell tea caddy, circa 1820.

Fig. 10. One of a pair of German / Italian candlesticks by Mathias Gaab, circa 1720.

Fig. 11. KPM (Berlin), one half of a garniture featuring birds, circa 1820.

Fig. 12. Two English Regency chairs, circa 1810. One on the left is a reproduction.



1800) (Fig. 6) with tops turned out of a single board of mahogany, original lead liners and cabinet stands. The latter now grace the dining room of their North Toronto home.

In much the same vein, Isobel Biricz, Lorenz's daughter-in-law, tells of an amusing incident where she received a call from a gentleman advising her to visit a house way out on the fringe of the city near the Toronto zoo. Other dealers had been asked to come and all had turned down the invitation because of the "freaky" nature of the residence and its inhabitants. Isobel asked Lorenz what he thought, and he immediately offered to join her since "you have to kiss a lot of frogs to get what you want." When they reached their destination, they were met at the door by the owners wearing only basic hockey equipment and apologetic for the state of the interior. The chickens they raised had gotten loose inside the house and had defecated on every object in sight. In this instance, however, the frog transformed into a handsome prince: they eagerly bought everything offered for sale by these social oddities who turned out to be very kind and easy to deal with. The only drawback was the weeks the Biriczes had to devote to removing the substantial accumulation of bird droppings and, irony of ironies, they easily sold all the items to the very dealers who had refused to go to the house in the first place.

Lorenz has a great deal of respect for what one could term the integrity of a piece and this includes its finish. He reflects with some sadness on the 50s and 60s when he and Irene derived part of their income from stripping furniture and thus participated in the prevalent practice of that period. At one time upon finding it difficult to keep up with the demand, they even contemplated putting a sign in their show window announcing "Stripper Wanted" until the full implications of their proposed ad were pointed out to them. Now Lorenz sees stripping as only a last resort when careful restoring, cleaning and re-polishing are no longer possible, for one can never reproduce the original colour or patina conferred by age and years of polishing. His commitment to proper preservation has even cost him customers. Once when a lady wanted to purchase a beautiful 18th-century table but insisted that it be cut down, he refused to sell it to her.

Over the years, the Biriczes have handled some remarkable artefacts including three original Fabergé, two acquired locally and one in Germany. The best of these was a dance reservation booklet. The pages on which the young lady could record her partners were made of ivory and the pencil featured a ruby on top. It had belonged to a lady-in-waiting at a royal court. Unable to generate any interest in Canada, Lorenz had to sell it in Geneva, Switzerland. Another Fabergé treasure from a Scandinavian family in the diplomatic corps consisted of a little container in green jade with gold mounts. After Lorenz advertised it for sale in the *Canadian Collector* and did not receive a single call, he was again compelled to market it in Europe.

As observed earlier, every vacation had not only a pleasure but also a business objective. Once while motoring in British Columbia, they came upon the small town of Salmon Arms and, of course, had to check out the one and only local antique shop. Irene quietly discovered hidden away in the back of the store the only item of interest, a period baroque chest of drawers made of European walnut crossbanded in walnut with serpentine front and original gilt hardware (Fig. 7). It even bore a label from Berlin, Germany, Irene's birthplace. She immediately fetched Lorenz, insisting, "You have to buy me this!" Of such desirable small proportions (39 ½ inches high by 33 inches wide) and workmanship, it now contributes to the elegance of their living room.

Other items of note from their collection include a remarkable repeater tall clock in flame birch with an engraved silver dial and gilded spandrels circa 1750 (Fig. 8), an English tea caddy circa 1820 in ivory and tortoise shell (Fig. 9), or a pair of Venetian silver candlesticks circa 1720 made by the German silversmith Matthias Gaab while working in Venice (Fig. 10). Lorenz obtained them back in 1960 for \$120 the pair, not cheap but considerably less than they would have been, had they had an English pedigree. Since dealers at that time were only interested in English silver, Lorenz enjoyed a virtual monopoly on continental pieces at relatively bargain prices. And finally, a beautifully hand-painted garniture featuring bird motifs and made in Berlin in the 1810-20 period now embellishes the mantle over the fireplace in the dining room (plate 11). Interesting enough it represents a real collection from three sources: the coolers came from a Florida vacation; the plates were found in Toronto; and the oval dishes were acquired from Paul Byington of Greenburnie Antiques in Perth, Ontario.

Reviewing more than fifty years in the antique business, Lorenz and Irene are grateful for the “wonderful” life it has provided and the great clients who frequently became dear friends such as John Langdon who used to drop into the shop on Saturdays to chat and who wrote the book on Canadian silver.<sup>8</sup> As for the future, they remain optimistic despite the competition from e-Bay or the auction houses. The children of their customers from the 60s and 70s tend to have other priorities such as an expensive car or a wide-screen television set. The cyclical ups and down will no doubt persist and decorators, often with little appreciation of real antiques, will continue to set the trends. Lorenz emphasizes, however, that a good reproduction, provided you can find a craftsman skilful enough to take on the task, often costs more than the original. To demonstrate his point, he indicated a set of eight English Regency chairs, one of which, he had had reproduced at a cost well above that of the period example. When he asked me to lift the two chairs (plate 12), the genuine one betrayed its authenticity by its mere weight, being almost twice as heavy as the copy. The original timber, well-aged Spanish mahogany, imported from the West Indies at the beginning of the 19th century, is nearly impossible to duplicate.

Also there are no young people in the business of selling high-end antiques simply because of the initial capital required. Those individuals who have taken early retirement and have enough funds to invest in the necessary merchandise are the most likely candidates to start up a shop specializing in fine furniture. Dealers have a lot of capital tied up in their stock and the turnover can be very slow. Lorenz recollects a golden opportunity that arose some years back. Before the war, a family had brought over from Austria a substantial amount of Biedermeier antiques enough to furnish a whole house. When the parents died and the son moved to Vancouver, he decided to sell the collection. In order to acquire it, Lorenz went to the local bank to ask for \$5000. Once he explained why he needed the money, the bank manager asked incredulously, “Can you make a living out of this old stuff?” Lorenz had to put up his savings—\$10,000 in Bell Canada shares – as collateral to secure his loan. Place this story into a contemporary financial setting where outstanding items can now command six-digit figures and one can readily understand the challenge facing an aspiring

8. Langdon, John. *Canadian Silversmiths 1700-1900*, Toronto: Stinehour P, 1965

9. Webster, Donald. *Canfake*. Toronto: McClelland & Stewart, 1997.

specialist dealer. To compound the problem, one must face the inescapable reality that the market for fine pieces requires a knowledgeable and reasonably wealthy clientele. In 1997 the late Donald Webster, the former curator of the Canadiana collection in the R.O.M., estimated that a \$20,000 Nisbet table would have “a potential market of certainly no more than twenty to thirty collectors in all of Canada.”<sup>9</sup> Much the same argument with somewhat enhanced figures could be made for high-end antiques in general.

With the news of the closure of Lorenz Antiques in 2007, cards, letters, telephone calls and former clients poured into 701 Mt. Pleasant Road, all expressing dismay at the loss of one of Toronto’s very best antique shops. Somehow a trip to Toronto has remained incomplete without a visit to our favourite store and some lively and informative conversation with its proprietors. Lorenz and Irene, respected for their integrity, cosmopolitan knowledge of and enthusiasm for the finer examples of our material culture, a team if there ever was one, continue to be greatly missed by their many grateful clients.

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