

NEW ORLEANS NOSTALGIA

Remembering New Orleans History, Culture and Traditions

By Ned Hémard

Royal Antiquities

The antique business in the Crescent City began after the Civil War, when old families were short of cash and were in desperate need of it. People borrowed by pledging their belongings to pawnbrokers and second-hand stores. There were also rag-and-bone men (the recyclers of their day) for the smaller items.

“Any rags, any bones, any bottles today?”

Rags were used for paper, while bones were used for oil and soap.

John Armand Hawkins had a loan business, the Armand Hawkins Company, at 194 Canal Street, but he decided to move his operations to 222 Royal Street to be closer to his “clientele”. His book and curio shop (which Hawkins called “The Oldest Antique House in the South”) was located where the Monteleone Hotel now stands, and this auspicious move to the French Quarter was the catalyst for making Royal Street one of greatest antique centers in the nation.

The author Lafcadio Hearn visited this ancient book seller and purveyor of curiosities almost every day, and it was Hawkins who enabled this literary genius to build the personal library about which there has been so much discussion since the author’s death. Hearn conversed with acquaintances and wrote articles for the *New Orleans Times-Democrat* in that very shop (while smoking pipes of every make and description). And it was there that he cultivated his obsession for collecting old books.

Besides books, Armand Hawkins handled a full array of artwork and antiques. When the legendary Storyville madam Lulu White took down her magnificent cut-glass chandelier to make way for gas, she visited Royal Street. She had first paid a whopping \$200 for the fixture, but passed it on to Mr. Hawkins for considerably less.

The Creole population of the Vieux Carré was but the first stop on

Hawkins' collecting spree. Plantations and fine homes from Natchez to the Gulf Coast and westward as far as San Antonio were "emptied", according to this antique impresario. An 1894 advertisement boasted the many medals won at expositions over the previous eighteen years for his incomparable collection of Creole Antiques".

For all his boasting, he was not a dapper shopkeeper. One well-known antique authority, Carl W. Dreppard, described him as "unwashed, unbelievably shabby and yet rakishly devil-may-care". This eccentric appearance may have helped him sell a few overbought or slow-moving items. He had purchased a dozen dueling swords exactly alike, as well as a large painting of Napoleon that nobody wanted to buy. A devious plan unfolded. He commissioned a local artist to paint a perfect replica of one of the swords at the side of the Emperor. Whenever a wealthy out-of-towner visited the shop, Hawkins swore up and down that he couldn't possibly part with Bonaparte's sword (since it added to the value of his painting). But parting was such sweet sorrow. A \$1200 sale (followed by the necessary interval of time) and once again "the French leader's sword" appeared on the shop floor. Eventually Hawkins hawked the entire dozen.

A New York Times article of May 6, 1899, hailed Armand Hawkins as "one of the most prominent art connoisseurs and collectors of articles in virtu in New Orleans". This comment was in connection with the article's headline: "Paintings for George Gould – Nineteen Old Masters Said to Have Been Bought for \$600,000". This was big news up in New York, for George Jay Gould was a financier and son of Jay Gould (long vilified as a robber baron who tried to corner the gold market in 1869). The son himself was a railroad executive, leading both the Western Pacific and Denver and Rio Grande Railroads.

The cornering of the gold market attempt had been an effort to increase the price of wheat so that western farmers would sell, thereby increasing the shipment of breadstuffs eastward, thereby creating extra freight business for Gould's Erie Railroad. Seems as if everyone had an angle.

And Armand Hawkins wasn't the only New Orleans curiosity dealer with an angle. A black shopkeeper named Marcel ran a junk shop on Chartres Street "since war times" with a "heterogeneous collection of prints, engravings, and oils". According to the New York Times article, Marcel contracted to sell those nineteen paintings to H. M. Earle (on behalf of Mr. Gould). Old Marcel claimed that the paintings came into his possession many years previously "through the impoverishment of several rich Louisiana families" and he further averred that he had "a knowledge of the work of Rubens and of Raphael".

But competitor Armand Hawkins opined, "I have known those pictures for the last forty years. If the New York experts pronounce them to be

old masters I will be the most astonished man in Louisiana.”

Another New Orleans resident remarked that he had heard of the paintings before. “Some forty years ago, an Italian artist, Torriani, made quite a comfortable income by copying pictures by the old masters, and selling them to wealthy families. Almost all the old houses in New Orleans contain some of these Torriani canvases. I imagine Torriani had something to do with these ‘old masters’ of Marcel.”

A week later, the New York Times was still wondering about the \$600,000 “remarkable find” by Mr. Earle. The paper reported that the *New Orleans Times-Democrat* (Hearn’s old paper – he was then in Japan) had “devoted nearly two columns” to the story with interviews by various ‘connoisseurs’ of the art world”. But in New York Gould “denied all knowledge of the matter”, Mr. Earle was nowhere to be found, and “the Manhattan Trust Company, to which the pictures were said by the New Orleans paper to have been consigned” also knew nothing and had no receipt. The Times ultimately deemed “the New Orleans story” to be “on its face, absurd”. But some money must have changed hands.

It seems as if Old Marcel was an “Old Master” himself.

Don’t know how much Marcel ended up with, but when Hawkins died on May 5, 1910, his estate was valued at \$66, 095.94. The four biggest items were \$40,000 for his Royal Street store with about \$18,600 in inventory, his Cleveland Avenue residence at \$4,000 and almost \$3,000 cash in the bank.

As for Lafcadio Hearn, whose best-known Louisiana works are his dictionary of Creole proverbs entitled “*Gombo Zhèbes*” and “*La Cuisine Créole*”, he left for to Japan in 1890. There he became a Japanese citizen known as Koizumi Yakumo. He authored many books on that country (especially collections of Japanese ghost stories and legends, such as “*Kwaidan: Stories and Studies of Strange Things*”).

None could be stranger than the beginning of the antique business in New Orleans.

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