



For Estate Sales, Boom Times



Monica Almeida/The New York Times

Diane Mars of Thousand Oaks, Calif., buys vintage collectibles and resells them.

By KATE MURPHY
Published: December 22, 2010

IT took a few years but Rachel Reeves of Long Beach, Calif., found the exact bedside tables she was searching for at an estate sale last month. Made in the 1950s from cherry wood, they had a colonial revival look, with tapered legs and carved ridges in the drawers. And at \$20 for the pair, the price was right.

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“It’s so exciting to have things that don’t look like what everybody else has,” said Ms. Reeves, 30, a stay-at-home mom with a 3-year-old and a baby on the way. She has been shopping at estate sales for affordable furnishings since she and her husband bought a house five years ago. “And I like that the tables had a life before I met them,” she said. “They had meaning for someone else.”

Driven by nostalgia, thrift and the thrill of the hunt, more people like Ms. Reeves are shopping at estate or tag sales, lining up before dawn to be the first to rummage through other people’s discards, hoping to find inexpensive and one-of-a-kind items for their homes or to resell online for extra spending money.

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Stephanie Diani for The New York Times
Rachel Reeves of Long Beach, Calif., found a pair of tables (one can be seen in the background) for \$20.

As the ranks of these shoppers grow, so does the number of sales, both because so many homes are in foreclosure and because baby boomers are downsizing or perhaps selling off the belongings of their infirm or deceased parents.

Professional organizers of estate sales say they cannot keep up with demand and that they are working year-round rather than just in spring and summer, when sales were traditionally held. And the sales days, previously just on weekends, are now anytime from Wednesday to Sunday.

"I can hardly keep up with the calls," said Denise LoSquadro, owner of Sisters in Charge Tag Sale Professionals, which organizes sales on Long Island. For a commission of 25 to 40 percent, organizers like Ms. LoSquadro handle all aspects of a sale, including pricing, staging, crowd control, transactions and cleanup. "We help mostly people going into assisted living or going through foreclosure, but also divorcing people who want to get rid of all the skeletons, if you know what I mean," she said.

Activity on Estatesales.net confirms the rise in both shoppers and sales. The site, which helps people nationwide locate sales in their area, has doubled its business every year over the last five years. It currently lists an average of 75,000 sales a week with more than 150,000 people signed up to receive its e-mail alerts. "The poor economy is primarily what's driving it," said Dan McQuade, an owner of the site, which is based in Jackson, Mo. "It's forcing more people to sell their things and making more people unwilling or unable to buy retail."

Deborah McMahan, 59, a retired Congressional staffer, started shopping at estate sales eight months ago for items to spruce up her four-story town house in Alexandria, Va. "You can find things that make a room, and at a tolerable price," she said. "You go to a furniture store and the prices are so high, you could save I don't how many lives in Haiti." Her latest finds are a brass lamp with a black metallic shade and an antique Oriental bowl.

But Ms. McMahan said it took her some time to learn the protocol of estate-sale shopping. "It's like you are breaking into a clique," she said. "There's this whole subculture with its own set of rules."

For example, the first person to arrive at a sale distributes so-called pre-numbers to others as they drive up and wait in their cars. "You flash your lights to let them know you are there for the sale," said Ms. McMahan, who usually shows up well before dawn for sales that typically start around 8 a.m. When the person running the sale arrives, shoppers exchange their pre-numbers for real numbers, which determine the order in which shoppers are admitted.

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“Even when I get there early and get a good number, I still get shoe prints on my back,” Ms. McMahon said. “It’s fun, but it’s like ants all over an anthill when they first open the doors.”

A version of this article appeared in print on December 23, 2010, on page D1 of the New York edition.

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