

*The Magazine*

# ANTIQUES

themagazineantiques.com

MARCH 2009



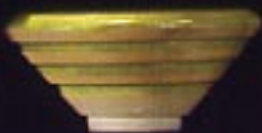
TIFFANY



CLOCKS



WEDGWOOD



CERAMICS

MASSACHUSETTS

FURNITURE



\$5.00



The Magazine  
**ANTIQUES**  
**Dealer profile**

By Paul O'Donnell



*James Elkind*

In 1979 a Barnard College student named Grace Gold was walking down Broadway on Manhattan's Upper West Side when she was struck and killed by a falling piece of a terracotta window lintel that had broken loose from the Regnor, a sixty-seven-year-old apartment house. The next year, in reaction to Gold's death, New York City passed Local Law 10 requiring an inspection of the facades of any building six stories and taller. Building owners had

been quietly removing stone carvings and other decorations for years, but many used Local Law 10 to justify the wholesale "scalping" of cornices, balconies, parapets, and other architectural details.

By 1985 an army of engineers and architects specializing in preserving and securing exterior decorations had mobilized to quell the rash of scalpings. But those five years were enough to jumpstart the peripatetic career of James Elkind.

Elkind, owner of Lost City Arts on Cooper Square in Manhattan, is widely known as an authority on mid-

only become plentiful, it had become chic. By the time he had moved his store to Lafayette Street in 1985, Lost City Arts shared the budding Soho neighborhood with shops like Urban Archaeology, Secondhand Rose, and 280 Modern, all capitalizing on the vogue for cast-off bathroom fixtures and other detritus then classified as "anti-antiques."

Part of what set Elkind apart was his flair for publicity. "I had a girlfriend who worked at the *New York Post* who taught me that journalists were always looking for a story," he says. In 1992 he bought the topiary frames that had played a starring role in the film *Edward Scissorhands*, and invited ABC and CBS to cover their arrival at Lost City Arts. He bought and sold with the spirit of a collector, not just a dealer—at one point he owned sixteen of Mobil Oil's enameled red Pegasus signs—in a way that caught the imagination of editors at *Metropolitan Home*, the *New York Times*, and other influential design publications.

**Fig. 1.** James Elkind shown seated in a model 670 lounge chair designed by Charles (1907–1978) and Ray (1912–1988) Eames, made by Herman Miller, 1970s. Behind him is a plaster maquette for the eagle capitals on the Empire State Building, designed by Shreve, Lamb and Harmon, 1929. Photographs are by Ben Ritter.

**Fig. 2.** Spill cast sculpture, 1965 (foreground), and split gong, 1976 (background), both by Harry Bertoia (1915–1978); and two "Sonambient" sculptures of 2007 by Val Bertoia, (1949–).

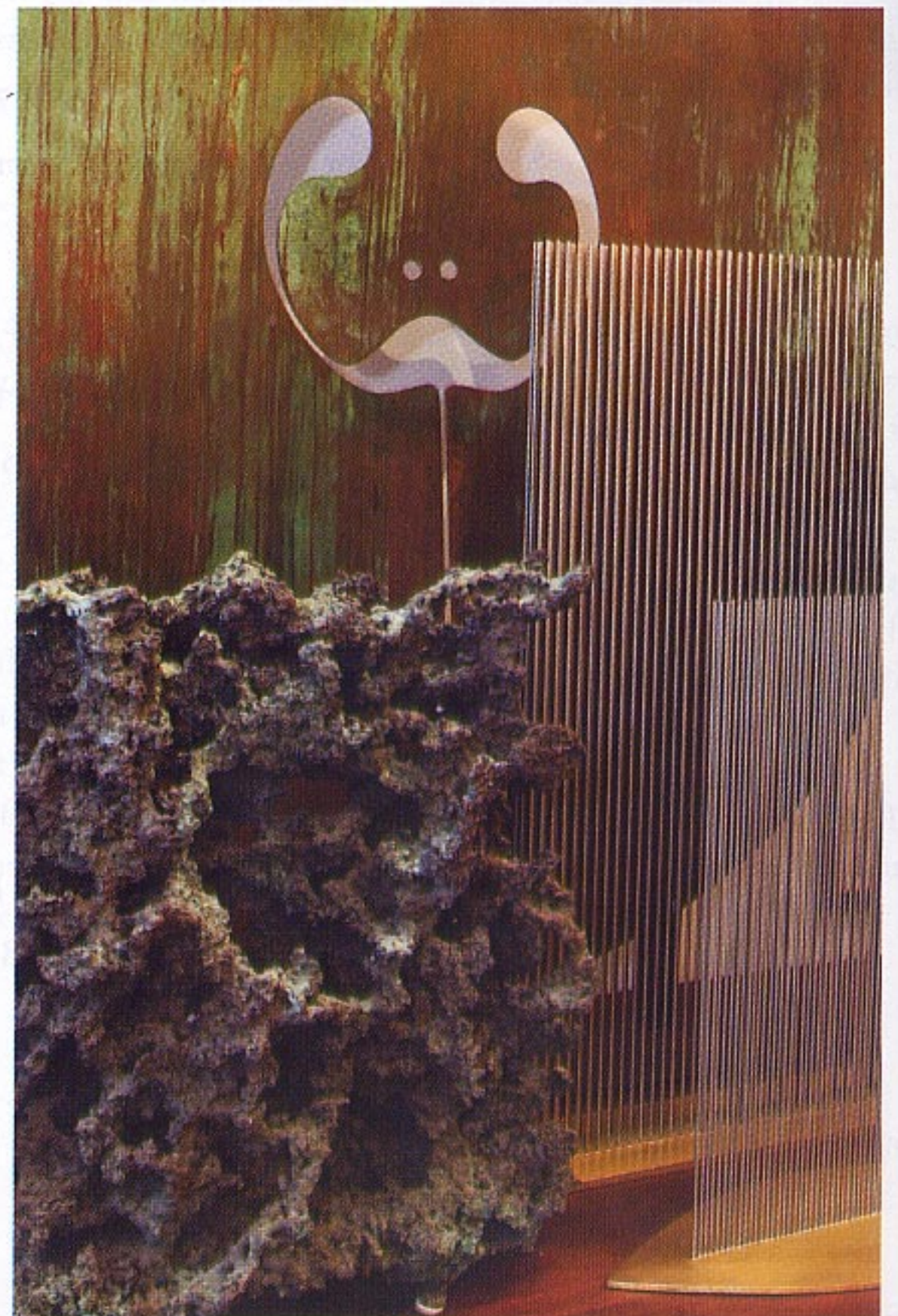
---

**He convinced building managers at landmarks like the Chrysler Building and the Cities Service Building to show him storerooms full of lighting fixtures and screens**

---

century decorative arts and design. Recently he has positioned himself as an expert on the work of the idiosyncratic sculptor and furniture designer Harry Bertoia. In 1981 Elkind was doing business out of the basement of a town house on West Tenth Street in Greenwich Village, stocking architectural and industrial relics just as the city's ornamental details were coming down around him. "I went around to the big buildings, handing my card to the supers," he recalls. "I'd get a call, go up on a roof and buy up 300 feet of copper cornice." These deals led in turn to his first purchases. He convinced building managers at landmarks like the Chrysler Building and the Cities Service Building to show him storerooms full of lighting fixtures and screens.

He was not the only one. Architectural salvage had not





# Dealer profile

ANTIQUES

Elkind is also distinguished by his restlessness. "I moved from one type of collecting to another out of boredom and economic need," he recalls. He began to collect what he describes as "pop-culture icons"—gas pumps and vintage jukeboxes—artifacts that hip young New Yorkers, now marrying and having children, could fit into their everyday lives. Meanwhile, he had married too, and visits to his wife's native Denmark opened his eyes and his store to classic mid-century design. "Every time I adapted, people responded," he says.

But in the mid-1990s, the market began to change dramatically. Elkind's weekend foot traffic was seeded with movie stars and directors besotted with the streamlined furniture of such designers as Warren McArthur. "For Machine Age furniture," Elkind says, "Brad Pitt was my best customer." The astonishing run of twentieth-century furniture was dramatically punctuated three years ago by the sale, at a Christie's auction, of a 1949 oak and glass table by Carlo Mollino for nearly \$4 million.

The boom has forced Elkind to adapt more nimbly than ever before. Lost City Arts' success—and the success of the modernist furniture market—once depended on its accessibility and affordability. "Things were less expensive and tangible," Elkind says. "Anyone could come into my store and find something." His steadiest customers for two decades were creative types who bought for themselves. Today, nearly 40 percent of his trade comes through decorators shopping for clients.

Elkind's own wake-up call came a few years ago, when he had the chance to bid on the contents of the house of two elderly collectors in Allentown, Pennsylvania, who had been fans of the furniture of Paul Evans and George Nakashima. Elkind was stunned when his top bid was surpassed by more than \$15,000.

"That changed my whole philosophy," he says. "If you want good things now, you need to pay."

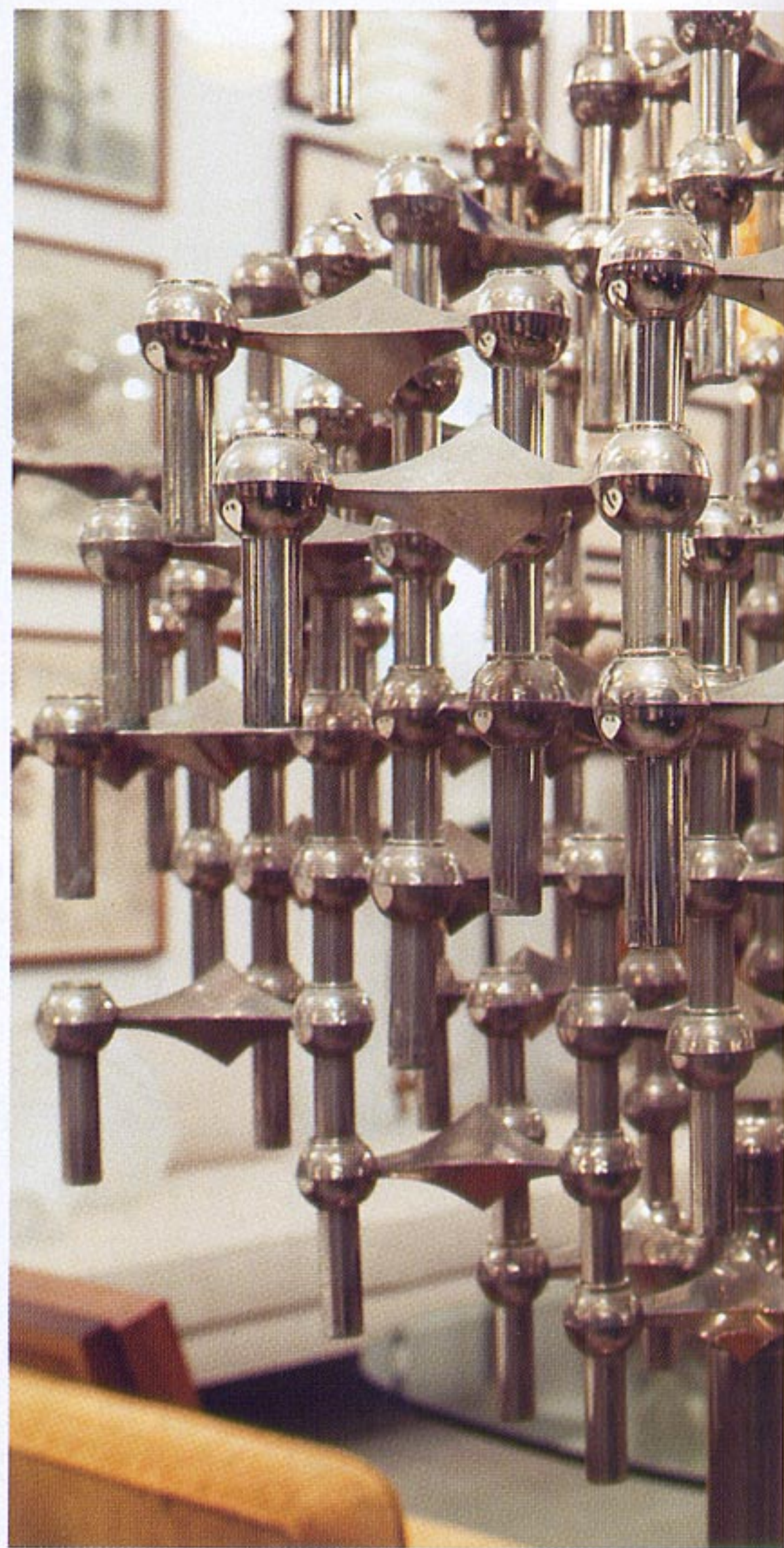
That dictum has guided his plunge into Bertoia. Three years ago, he approached the owner of a six-foot "Willow" sculpture by Harry Bertoia that failed to meet its knock-down at auction at \$40,000, but the owner had decided not to sell. That only whetted his appetite. A year later, when an eight-foot Willow came up, Elkind took it at \$98,000, a record price for any work by Bertoia at the time. He sold it in 2006 at the *Modernism: A Century of Style and*

---

The astonishing run of twentieth-century furniture was dramatically punctuated by the sale, at a Christie's auction, of a 1949 oak and glass table by Carlo Mollino for nearly \$4 million

---

PAUL O'DONNELL is a regular contributor to ANTIQUES.



*Design 1900–2000* show in New York for \$150,000.

With Bertoia, Elkind seems once again to have developed the right passion at the right time. But what looks like prescience, he says, has also involved a lot of hard work. Modern furniture has required dealers like Elkind to create their market as they buy for it. "You have to champion your stuff," he says, "and then you have to move on."

Fig. 3. Stackable chrome-plated steel candleholders designed by Cesar Stoffi and made for BMF Nagel, West Germany, c. 1960s.