

In the Trade

# Bill Hamel, Hamel20, Red Hook, New York

by Frank Donegan

If you want mid-century modern furniture for your home, you'll have no trouble finding it. It's all over the place. Dealers who once upon a time sneered at anything made after 1840 are now eager to show off their Finn Juhl chairs or their Harvey Probbler sectionals.

Acquiring the basic furnishings isn't a problem. But what if you want to put together a legitimate 1973 period interior? Where do you find all the accessories that would provide an authentic ambiance? One answer would be to get in touch with Bill Hamel, who owns Hamel20 in Red Hook, New York. He specializes in all the stuff—ashtrays, vases, flatware, teapots and coffeepots, candlesticks, salad sets, letter openers, cheese boards, fondue sets, staplers, nutcrackers, bookends, and bottle openers—you would need to create your own *Mad Men* fantasy.

Hamel has been assembling his inventory for decades but has been a dealer only for a couple of years. He's one of the few dealers in the country who specialize in these things at a high level of sophistication, but he deals across a broad price range. He'll sell you a colorful sandstone ashtray, circa 1950, by Fong Chow for \$30 or a rare Carl Auböck 6" vase for \$1650.

Best of all, being a fanatical researcher, Hamel usually knows who designed a piece, who made it, and when it was marketed. And he maintains contacts with some of the folks who oversee the archives for such important design firms as Swid Powell and Carl Auböck, which often allows him to supply buyers with information that may not be easily available elsewhere.

Hamel describes his affinity for the material he sells: "I've lived with good modern design my whole life. My parents bought it in 1968 and 1972. I was raised with Nakashima [furniture]. It's in my DNA."

Why does Hamel limit himself to selling smalls? "You can only have so much furniture," he explained. "With smalls, if I get tired of a thing, I could put it away in a drawer and swap it out for something else." And, indeed, he does have drawers full of stuff. At any given time, he shows only a small portion of what he's got.

As we noted above, Hamel is not a snob when it comes to prices. "I sold a nutcracker for twelve dollars and fifty cents," he said. "Good design is good design. It doesn't matter that it costs ten dollars. I'm delighted that I can sell things that are well researched but that people can afford. I lived in a loft with my brother for two years with no heat, and we shared a bicycle. I know what it's like to not have a lot of money. I'm grateful for every sale."

Of course, not everything sells for \$12.50. Lots of his objects sell in the mid-hundreds of dollars, and his best stuff brings well over \$1000.

Hamel orchestrates different venues for objects in different price ranges. "I sort of tier the way I sell things," he said. He has an online Etsy store; he has a case in the group shop section of Kingston Consignments; he has a good-looking website; and he exhibits at both the spring and autumn Rhinebeck shows.

He said, "My Etsy shop is the most vibrant. It's low dollars but high volume." The pieces he posts on Etsy run between \$10 and \$200. "The average sale is about a hundred and twenty-five," he noted.

Hamel particularly likes the fee structure at Etsy. "They charge me around four percent," he said. "If I sell something for a hundred dollars, I'm going to get ninety-six. I don't know how they'll stay in business."

Objects in the \$50 to \$400 range go to his Kingston Consignments space. Hamel's trips across the Hudson River from Red Hook to update his Kingston display yield a side benefit. "Gas is twenty-five cents a gallon cheaper," he said, "And there's a Goodwill across the street from the gas station." He sometimes finds things there. "It's mostly Etsy stuff, and it's three dollars and ninety-nine cents, but maybe I can sell it for twenty dollars on Etsy."

His more expensive items go on the Hamel20 website and to his Rhinebeck booth. "Rhinebeck has been very good to me. It's a sweet spot. I sell a lot at Rhinebeck." He figures his average sale there is somewhere between \$400 and \$600.

Hamel noted, however, that exhibiting at Rhinebeck is not cheap. He said he has one of the less expensive booths, but when booth rental, lights, and cases are totaled up, it costs him between \$1200 and \$1300, and that's for a guy who lives six miles away, meaning that he

**"I'm delighted that I can sell things that are well researched but that people can afford."**

doesn't have to pay for hotel, meals, or much gas. He said, "I always bring some things that I bought dirt cheap and that'll cover my rent."

Hamel doesn't necessarily reach collectors at Rhinebeck, but he said, "You get people who are looking to furnish their homes and willing to write bigger checks. In spring you're opening your summer house, and in the fall you're up from the city for the leaves. They like to decorate their homes with really nice things."

Hamel would like to do other shows, but so far he hasn't found any that he feels suit his material. "I always planned to do the Pier shows [in Manhattan], and then they dried up."

He's thinking about adding Frank Gaglio's Greenwich, Connecticut, show or perhaps the Baltimore show. He said, "I lived in D.C. for fifteen years, and I always shopped the Baltimore show. I have people down there I can stay with."

Hamel doesn't do Facebook, but he likes Instagram.



Bill Hamel at home.



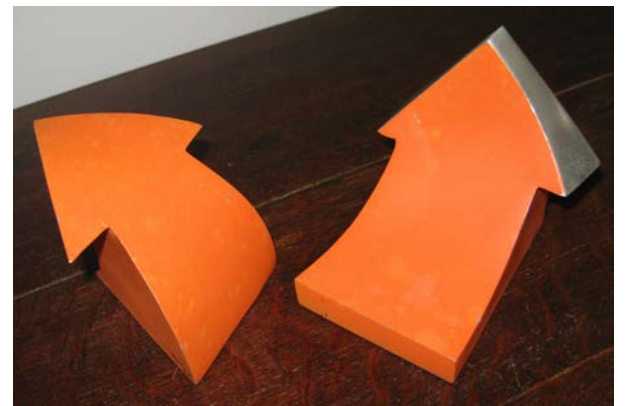
Two silver-plated pieces from the late 1950s, designed by Lino Sabattini for Christofle. The gravy boat in the foreground is \$450; the juicer is \$350.



Two letter openers. The one in front, with the spiral end, is a combination ruler and opener. Originally sold by Hermès in Paris, it's \$700. The other piece was designed by architect Richard Meier for Swid Powell in about 1986. It has a little rotating brass block at the top end. It's priced at \$275. Hamel said, "One of the deepest ironies is that letter openers and bookends are among my favorites, and they're now obsolete."



"Big Dripper" porcelain ensemble designed by Michael Graves in the mid-1980s, \$350. The piece on the left is not a large cup: it's the holder for a drip coffee filter. Hamel said a "Little Dripper" version is more common than this larger form.



Pair of bright orange bookends, circa 1970, C. Jeré by Artisan House, \$600. "These are really rare," Hamel said. "The ones you normally see are gold leafed."

He said, "I have an Instagram account, and I'm gaining followers every single day. It drives people to my website."

He occasionally posts items on eBay, but he's not particularly enthusiastic about the platform. "I treat eBay as more of a yard sale." He prefers the atmosphere of Etsy. "It's a friendly community."

But he does buy on eBay. "I buy a lot. I wish I didn't. I miss the tactile experience," Hamel said. Speaking of tactile experience, he had never been to Brimfield until this past September. "It was the first time in my life," he said. (Mostly because he was busy with his important government work in Washington, D.C., which we'll discuss shortly.)

He's also a regular buyer at auctions and noted that he's conveniently located to take advantage of several Hudson Valley auction houses: JMW Auction Gallery in Kingston, Carlsen Gallery in Greenville, Copake Auction in Copake, and, of course, George Cole Auctions in Red Hook. Hamel said, "I'm 3.7 miles from George Cole's. I'm there every three weeks."

As mid-century objects have become more sought after, Hamel said he runs into more competition than before, but he admitted, "I do find sleepers."

Although he will buy almost any 20th-century object that he considers well designed, he particularly looks for pieces from two firms: Carl Auböck and Swid Powell.

The Werkstatte Auböck in Vienna has been around since 1912 and has been led by four generations of Carl Auböcks. Modernists are drawn to the firm's clean designs. The Auböcks have produced all sorts of household goods, including magazine racks, clothes hangers, silent butlers, watering cans, lamps, vases, dinner bells, wastebaskets, salad servers, nut bowls, bookends, candlesticks, and a vast array of desktop items such as letter openers, ashtrays, cigarette boxes, magnifiers, bookmarks, cigar cutters, pipe rests, corkscrews, and paperweights.

"I probably have a hundred and fifty pieces of Auböck," Hamel said.

And then there's Swid Powell. In the early 1980s, Nan Swid and Addie Powell, two veterans of the esteemed





Two Art Deco Hotchkiss "Jewel" staplers, circa 1935, designed by Fridolin Polzer, \$175 each. The one in front is green and black; the one in back is red and black.



A sample of Hamel's Carl Auböck collection.

Modernist furniture giant Knoll International, rounded up a group of celebrity postmodern architects and convinced them to create everyday home furnishings, especially tabletop goods: porcelain dining sets, teapots, flatware, salad bowls, and candlesticks. The line included works by such stars as Michael Graves, Robert Venturi, Stanley Tigerman, Zaha Hadid, and Richard Meier. The products were marketed at high-end, style-conscious outlets such as Bloomingdale's.

Hamel said, "Swid Powell has been a big focus for me. I'm always looking for good Swid Powell because they're some of the best designs of the late twentieth century. The stuff is timeless." He estimates that these products account for 15% to 20% of his business. The pieces aren't cheap, but then they never were. "It cost a lot of money to make this stuff," he said and added that back when these pieces were new, people would say, "Who can afford that stuff: a silver-plated candlestick for three hundred and fifty dollars?"

Hamel pointed to a Richard Meier silver-plated bowl on his table. It's in mint condition; he's got the original box, and he's asking \$600 for it (see photo). Its original price was \$250. In terms of constant dollars, it is probably cheaper today than when it was made.

Hamel prides himself on the amount of research he does. He has developed contacts who will check archives for him for both Auböck and Swid Powell. "It's my narrow but deep focus," he said. "I go that extra mile to do the research. I can e-mail Carl Auböck, and they usually get back to me within forty-eight hours."

His deep focus allows him to understand the fine points of production. He noted, for example, that Swid Powell items that were made in Argentina are less desirable. "They're likely not as good quality."

Hamel noted that a distinguishing characteristic of the vintage modern design field is what he calls "decade creep." For many years now, buyers have been shifting their affections to ever more recent eras. Consequently, prices for Art Deco and Machine Age designs from before World War II softened as buyers became infatuated with postwar Modernism of the 1950s. Then people started looking for more excitement in the "fab" designs of the 1960s and '70s. More recently, prices for postmodern, Memphis-style pieces have risen quickly (the Memphis Group was a design collective founded in 1980 that was a leader in postmodern design). Of Swid Powell prices, Hamel said, "In the last eighteen months it's accelerated faster than I expected."

Machine Age bookends designed by Walter von Nessen exemplify the drop in prices for earlier material. The designer's distinctive brass bookends featured simplified animal figures. "Back in the day," Hamel said, "you could get twenty-five, twenty-six hundred [dollars] for them and people still try. But the animals are bringing five or six hundred [dollars]. For super ones, maybe you can get sixteen hundred." He added, "I've got a ton of von Nessen bookends. I think they're still great. They'll always be good." The iconic postwar modern designs of Charles and Ray Eames have also "come down a bit," Hamel said.

In general, Hamel said, "My aim is to buy something when it is just depreciated enough in value so that I can afford it. That means buying things when people still consider them 'used' and before they become 'vintage.'" He added, "The boundaries are cracking.



This 10 1/2" high bronze version of the 1976 Charles Perry *Continuum* sculpture that stands outside the National Air and Space Museum in Washington, D.C., is \$3200. It originally sold in the museum's gift shop and retains its \$950 price tag. Hamel said, "They claim they made a thousand of them," but he doesn't think that's true: "This one is numbered thirteen, and I've only seen two others, and they were numbered below fifty."



This pair of Carl Auböck "Chevron" brass bookends from the 1950s is \$1800.



This 10" diameter "King Richard" reticulated silver-plate bowl was designed by Richard Meier for Swid Powell. It's in unused condition with its original box and is \$600. Meier also designed the flanking serving fork and spoon for Reed & Barton. Hamel said, "These are pretty rare." He has priced them at \$575 for the two.



The Machine Age-looking blender, "Hollywood Liquefier," from 1942 is \$925. "This is the type of thing that the Brooklyn Museum should buy," Hamel said. His website notes that the Cooper Hewitt museum in New York City has one; so does the Minneapolis Institute of Art.



A set of serving pieces along with the original tray in the "Cylinda" series made by Stelton in Denmark, \$1100. There's a coffeepot, a teapot, a warm milk pot, a water pitcher, a cream pitcher, a sugar pot with spoon, a side-handled pourer, and a tray. They were designed by Arne Jacobsen. Hamel said, "This is about the most complete set you're ever going to see." He added, "They're still making them today," but he noted, "This set is from the early to mid-1970s."

I'd buy something from 2010 if it was good."

It's not just how an object looks that captivates Hamel. He is particularly partial to objects designed by architects, explaining that any piece may look good, but those designed by architects tend to feel good in the hand. "After handling so many thousands of architect-designed pieces, I can tell now when I pick up an object if they [the designers] were classically trained."

He gives as an example the flatware designed by Arne Jacobsen that he uses at home: "People come to dinner and say, 'This feels really good in my hands.'"

Hamel grew up surrounded by modern decoration in the Mount Airy neighborhood of Philadelphia. His father taught mechanical engineering at Drexel University. He recalled, "I was seven years old when my parents did a very modern renovation. It even had one of those hanging fireplaces." He still has some of their Scandinavian and Italian furniture in his living room.

After graduating from Bard College with a philosophy degree, he moved in 1985 to that unheated loft in New York City with his brother. He also recalled visiting the pioneering Modernism shop Fifty/50: "We would go to look at the stuff, but I never had the courage to talk to them." (Now, he said, he has on occasion partnered with Mark McDonald to buy a piece. McDonald is the lone survivor of the trio that founded Fifty/50.)

Hamel counts McDonald, along with dealer Harry Greenberger, both of whom live in the Hudson Valley (and who both have been profiled in this space), as mentors. Hamel said, "It's fortuitous for me that they're

in the area."

His fondness for researching modern design was already evident in those early New York City years. He said, "Before the Internet, I'd spend a couple of hours each Sunday at the Brooklyn Public Library. There was this thing called the 'Art Index' that cataloged articles for each year. I'd study it, and then I'd go to the periodicals and Xerox the articles."

Hamel said he would have liked to have been a dealer earlier on, but he also wanted a job that would allow him to raise a family, and he was smart enough to know that those two things don't always go together easily. (He has two sons, Max and Clark, and he's married to Juliet Wolff, a psychotherapist with a practice in town.)

So he opted for the one other thing that he always wanted to do: "I became a federal investigator." He earned his master's degree in criminal justice at John Jay College in New York City and spent the next 25 years working for the feds, mostly in inspector generals' offices at the Department of Health and Human Services, the Treasury Department, the General Accounting Office, and the Department of Education, conducting nationwide fraud and corruption investigations.

Hamel says that researching vintage design objects is not all that different from what he did for the government: "It's the same skill set I used as an investigator."

It was during his Washington, D.C., years that Hamel began collecting with some seriousness. "I'd always go up to New York for the Triple Piers, Modernism, and Works on Paper [shows]." He also liked going to tag

sales in the D.C. area. He said, "It's affluent. If you're an ambassador, you bring home cool stuff."

Having a stable government job gave him the resources to go after what he wanted. He said, "In 2008, when the market crashed, I bought like crazy."

With "retirement" looming, Hamel and his wife faced the dilemma of where to live. Both his sons had also attended Bard College, and when Wolff, who had graduated from Vassar College, visited one of them, she realized that the Hudson Valley might be the place. And so it has been. Their architect-renovated mid-century ranch house is about seven miles from Bard and just over 25 miles from Vassar.

After moving north, Hamel spent four years commuting from Red Hook to Albany, where he worked as director of internal affairs for the state tax department. "I wanted to do five years with New York state," he said. But the weather defeated him. "I did four winters and couldn't do another."

So Hamel "retired" once again and began the career that he didn't choose 35 years ago. But he had been planning it for ages. He explained that he registered the name of his business and website, Hamel20, in the mid-1990s. He said, "People think I was copying Wright20 [a principal player in the Modernist auction field], but I did it before them. They are great, by the way."

For more information, contact Bill Hamel, PO Box 294, Red Hook, NY 12571; phone (301) 922-5608; website (www.hamel20.com).



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