

Dean Failey

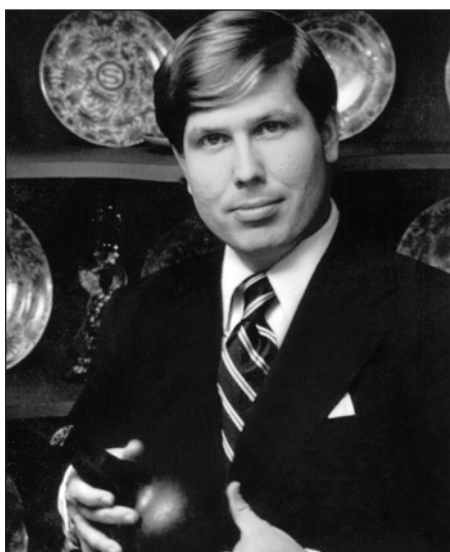
2007 ADA Merit Award Recipient

by Lauren Byrne

It was a biology professor who pointed Dean Failey, this year's ADA Award of Merit recipient, in the direction of his decorative arts career. Dean, senior vice president and senior director of American furniture and decorative arts at Christie's auction house, New York, earned his Bachelor of Science degree at Case Western Reserve University, but he remembers how he had already taken a stab at six or seven majors when his biology teacher, an Englishman with a taste for the arts, took him to an opening at the Cleveland Museum of Art. There, Dean was introduced to the curator of decorative arts. "Gee, how do you get to be a museum curator?" he blurted out, in awe of the tuxedoed figure standing before him. The answer involved a reference to Winterthur. Wasting no time, Dean raced across the street to the library and found what he needed to know to earn a place in the Winterthur program. When he talks about his time there, where he obtained a Master of Arts in early American culture, his description comes close to a definition of perfect happiness. "It wasn't like being at school," he says. "It was wonderful."

"Dean is a natural choice," Arthur Liverant, the ADA's vice president, says of this year's recipient of the award established in 2002 to honor exemplary members of the antiques community. "He has been a leader over the last decades in many fields of Americana. He has participated as an academic, as a curator, as a researcher, and most recently at Christie's. Dean has been a great friend to the dealers; always willing to share his knowledge. He is well thought of by those in the industry."

The Long Islander would have stayed on at Winterthur to get a PhD, except for the pressing matter of needing to earn a living. So, in 1971, when he was offered the position of associate curator of the Bayou Bend Collection of the Museum of Fine Arts,



Houston, he accepted; though with some hesitation about moving so far from home. He was soon thriving; working with a staff

of five, among whom was a young man also destined to make his mark in the art world, the Met's current director, Philippe de Montebello. "Geographically, we were relatively isolated," Dean remembers, "but we were constantly inviting scholars to visit, and coming to Houston was always a unique visit for them."

Dean's wife, Marie, attests to her husband's passion for his field. "We spent our 'courtship' with the photographer photographing the Bayou Bend collection for a book," she told us in an e-mail exchange. "Then we spent our 'honeymoon' in New York and New England so that Dean could do research on the Gothic taste in America and seventeenth-century William and Mary furniture. Bottom line," she joked, "you cannot live

LONG ISLAND IS MY NATION

The Decorative Arts and Craftsmen 1640 - 1830



Dean, his wife, Marie, and the late Susan Stitt (left), director of the museums at Stony Brook, stand proudly in front of the entrance to the 1976 exhibition "Long Island is My Nation," which Dean organized while curator of the Society for the Preservation of Long Island Antiquities (SPLIA). Courtesy of Wendy Cooper.



Dean examining a New York side chair with Ralph Carpenter (Christie's International Representative) in 1981 at the Lindens, Washington D.C. Christie's sold the contents of the historic house in 1983. Courtesy of Wendy Cooper.



Dean stands beside the Nicholas Brown desk and bookcase, which he helped secure for Christie's. The piece, sold in 1989, still holds the record — \$12.1 million — for American furniture at auction. Courtesy of Marie Failey.



At a dinner in 1995 at the Wilmington, Delaware, Country Club, given by Dwight Lanmon, then director of Winterthur Museum, to welcome Wendy Cooper as the new curator of furniture. Pictured left to right: Dwight, Wendy, John Hays of Christie's, Dean, and Brock Jobe, now professor of American decorative arts, Winterthur. Courtesy of Wendy Cooper.

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Dean as a young curator at the Society for the Preservation of Long Island Antiquities (SPLIA) in 1974. Photography by Joseph Adams. Courtesy of Marie Failey.



Since its inception in 1993, Dean (right) has been closely involved with the Christie's-sponsored Newport Symposium. Founded by Newport furniture scholar Ralph Carpenter (left), Christie's International Representative, the April programs focus on topics relating to international art, architecture, and decorative arts. Pictured at center is John Tschirch. Courtesy of Marie Failley.

with someone who loves the eighteenth century and has a passion for objects and gardens and not develop a similar interest.”

Returning to Long Island in 1974, Dean spent a productive five years as curator of the Society for the Preservation of Long Island Antiquities, organizing the bicentennial exhibition *Long Island is My Nation: The Decorative Arts and Craftsmen, 1640–1830*, and writing the accompanying book (updated and reissued in 1998). In 1979, in search of another challenge, he accepted the invitation to put the East Hampton Historical Society on a professional footing; work he'd been engaged in for six months when he received a momentous phone call. The English auction house Christie's was about to open a branch in New York City and had heard from several sources that Dean would be perfect to head up their American furniture department. “I took the plunge,” he says cheerfully, admitting that his initial response had been to decline the offer, fearing that once he had crossed into the commercial world he could never return.

Perhaps for someone with less enthusiasm that might have been the case. While rising steadily in the ranks of Christie's, and raising

two children with Marie, Dean has always found time for extracurricular activities. He has served as a governor of the Pewter Collectors' Club of America and on the board of the Society for the Preservation of Long Island Antiquities. Presently he serves on the board of several museums; is a regular on the PBS series *The Antiques Roadshow*; has conducted appraisals for many museums and historic sites, Mount Vernon and Colonial Williamsburg among them; and has lectured widely.

Dean has also been involved with the prestigious Newport Symposium since its inception in 1993. When its founder Ralph Carpenter first hit on the idea of establishing this annual event for the study and discussion of arts and historical issues, he turned to Dean to enlist the support of Christie's. “Fortunately,” Dean says, “Christie's had the good sense to say yes.” Meeting several times a year, Dean and the other members of the resident committee decide on a theme and speakers. “We're very fortunate,” Dean says, “in having a superb organizer, John Tschirch, who takes our scrambled notes and fashions them into a cohesive shape.” This year's symposium (April 30 to May 2) is “Treasure

Houses: Great Personalities, Exquisite Objects, and Magnificent Architecture.”

Among his current projects is a book about the collections of SPLIA, in which Dean aims to do more than record details, considering instead, the interpretational aspect of objects as large as a house or as small as a spoon, and their ability to reveal something unique about a time and a place. “In the last fifty years America has done so much more than England, for example, to identify regional features of decorative arts,” he says. “But we are now ready to move to the next level, to find ways to present information in new and interesting ways.” @

The ADA Award of Merit is voted on by the membership of the ADA (Antiques Dealers Association of America) and is presented to an individual who has made a significant contribution to the field of American antiques. The Award of Merit dinner will be held at the Philadelphia Antiques Show at 8 p.m. on Saturday, April 14. It will feature cocktails and dinner followed by a variety of guest speakers and friends. The ADA Award of Merit is sponsored in part by Antiques & Fine Art Magazine, Antiques and The Arts Weekly, Flather and Perkins Insurance, and The Magazine, Antiques. Seating is limited; tickets are \$85 per person. For additional information and reservations call the ADA at 203.259.8571 or send your request to: Antiques Dealers' Association of America, Inc., Box 335, Greens Farms, CT 06838.

The ADA is a nonprofit trade association. Its major objective is to further professionalize the business of buying and selling antiques. Its membership is composed of antiques dealers who are dedicated to integrity, honesty, and ethical conduct in the antiques trade. All members are required to guarantee their merchandise in writing on a sales receipt that states approximate age, origin, condition, and any restoration of pieces sold.