Globe Review

Inside

THE PAGES OF REVIEW

Firefighters are brave, but they're not macho angels, writes John Doyle, R2

The famous wearer of those boots, Nancy Sinatra, is back, R3

Somehow zombies got into the COC's production of Lucia di Lammermoor, R3

Outside

ACROSS THE COUNTRY

CD: The four-CD anthology *Can't You Hear Me Callin: Bluegrass, 80 Years of American Music* comes down from the mountain today.

DVD: It lives again — the complete first season of Showtime series *Dead Like Me*, starring Mandy Patinkin, is now available.

Radio: Tariq Ali, editor of The New Left Review, discusses the political ideas that shaped his life as an activist. (CBC Radio One's *Ideas*, 9 p.m.)

THE GLOBE AND MAIL ■ CANADA'S NATIONAL NEWSPAPER ■ GLOBEANDMAIL.COM ■ TUESDAY, SEPTEMBER 28, 2004

TV's happy hunting ground

The only Canadian expert on PBS's The Antiques Roadshow also holds the record for the show's highest appraisal

BY JENNY MANZER

Having just unpacked from a weekend jaunt to Memphis, Tenn., Donald Ellis is spending a rare morning at his home near Dundas, Ont., an airy A-frame on a winding country road.

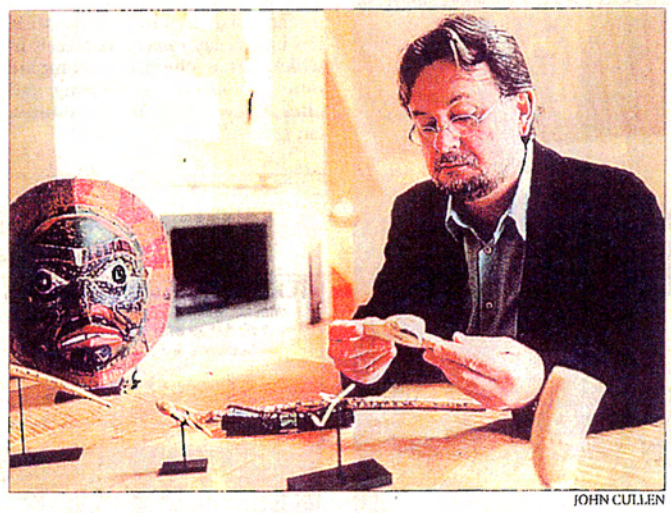
He shares his breakfast table with three historic works of art, including two masks, which he lovingly lifts as he describes them.

There is a Tsimshian shaman's mask, circa 1820-1840; and a Kwakwaka'wakw (or Kwakiutl) sun mask, both shipped from the United States, as well as an "extraordinarily rare" 18th-century Iroquoian quilled pouch. Recently couriered from Scotland, the pouch, says Ellis, is "arguably the finest example of its type."

Born to a blue-collar Hamilton family, the 46-year-old dealer, appraiser and curator is a world authority on 18th-and 19th-century North American native art. His salt-and-pepper beard and round glasses will be familiar to fans of the PBS version of *The Antiques Roadshow*, where he is the sole Canadian. He is also on board for the new *Canadian Antiques Roadshow*, which has finished taping and is slated to debut on CBC Newsworld in January.

His duties on the PBS show involve showing up at 7 a.m., facing 7,000 people and judging which objects crossing the tribal arts table are treasures.

See ANTIQUES on page R3



JOHN CULLEN

Donald Ellis appraised an 1840s Navaho blanket at $500,000 (U.S.).

People have tried to trip him up

ANTIQUES *from page R1*

"This is all about hunting, and the excitement. . . . Normally I'm out there beating the bushes to find things. To just sit at a table and watch people bring things to you, and the anticipation as each object is unwrapped, is fun."

A landmark moment for Ellis, and the *Roadshow*, came at a taping in Tucson, Ariz., in 2002. A couple brought in a massive Navaho blanket with a simple striped pattern of indigo, brown and white yarns, in perfect condition. Ellis determined it to be an 1840s Navaho chief's blanket, once a prestigious trading item. He valued it at up to $500,000 (U.S.), marking the largest appraisal ever recorded on the *Roadshow*. With Ellis's assistance, the blanket later found a home at the Detroit Institute of Arts.

Following that show, Ellis fielded thousands of messages from hopeful blanket-owners. One was from a man living on the Mexico-Texas border who had purchased a similar blanket. It languished in a closet, until his wife decided to sell it at a yard sale. No one paid the $5 asking price. Upon returning home, the husband was dismayed at the sum, since he had paid $15.

At a family barbecue that night, the man jokingly razzed his wife about the incident. Fortunately for them, another family member, who had seen the now-famous *Roadshow*, asked about the object. It, too, turned out to be the real thing.

"This was a very humble family, not well-to-do, and it potentially went from $5 or $10 to hundreds of thousands of dollars because of the power of television."

The story illustrates the importance of *The Antiques Roadshow* in educating the public, Ellis says, and he hopes the new Canadian version, hosted by Valerie Pringle, will serve the same purpose.

Critics of the PBS show, particularly disciples of the original BBC program of the same name, might say the story also exemplifies the American version's focus on greenbacks. Ellis, who has also appeared on the British show, dismisses naysayers, noting that PBS surveys suggest viewers tune in to hear about an object's history, not its price tag.

He does, however, become frustrated when owners are callous or ambivalent about an important object.

Self-taught, he started his private gallery in 1976, a time when North American native art was still locked in the academic world, and not yet embraced for its artistic qualities. Today, the Donald Ellis Gallery is run from his home, shared with wife Mary Ann Bastien, a former lawyer who now acts as his business partner.

Dennis Reid, chief curator for the Art Gallery of Ontario in Toronto, says Ellis, who is helping them build a North American native-art collection, is clearly the leader in his field. "He finds remarkable material, time after time after time. I don't know how he does it."

Ellis is known for his keen eye, scholarly approach and for dealing only in the best, whether it is a pipe bowl, bandolier bag, or war club. His wares typically cost thousands of dollars and frequently run into six figures, such as the Sioux hide shirt and leggings he sold for $450,000 (U.S.).

He counts the country's top institutions as clients, but these days his bread and butter is U.S. collectors, as well as "three or four major Canadian customers."

People have tried to trip him up, but he almost never misjudges an object. He has occasionally overvalued one, when emotion clouded his judgment. His passion for native art was sparked as a child, when he began collecting pottery shards and arrowheads, buying objects at the yearly Six Nations Reserve powwow with his paper-route money.

As both an art lover and a businessman, he perceives no conflict in putting culturally important works into private hands. "There's this cartoon that exists of some corpulent Swiss banker, sitting in a vault with a Cognac and a cigar eyeing some stolen masterpiece for his pleasure alone." In reality, he says, private collectors are the backbone of public institutions, whether by lending objects, donating funds, or bequeathing collections.

His *Roadshow* appearances bring him a taste of fame, and he is often stopped on the street by autograph seekers or sellers. It is, he says, nearly impossible to go out for dinner with Leigh and Leslie Keno, the PBS show's exuberant twin appraisers, while on the road.

The Canadian Antiques Roadshow debuts on CBC Newsworld on Jan. 12.

Special to The Globe and Mail