

JUST TINS

The Byun Building
613 Cheltenham Ave.
Philadelphia, PA 19126

(215) 635-7170
Telex: 834747
Cable: "Youngbyun"

Phillips N.Y. and the '83 Convention

New Money in Old Tin Cans

by Dorothy S. Gelatt

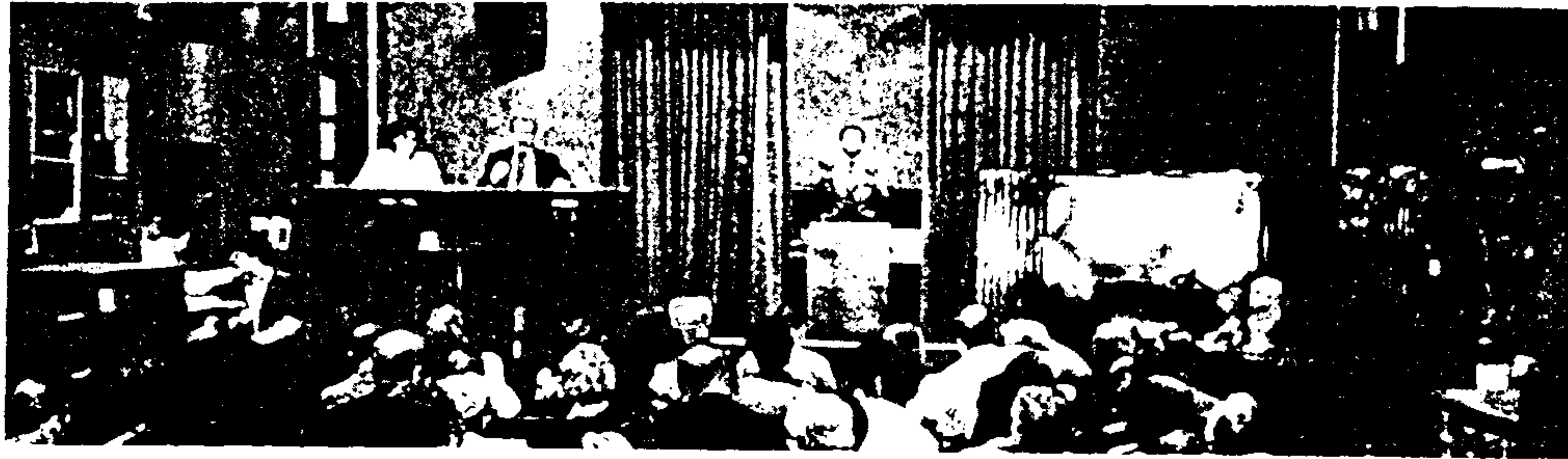
The old tin can, it ain't what it used to be. On June 29, Phillips New York filled the house with several hundred buyers bidding all over each other to snatch 98 lots of—would you believe—British Biscuit Tins, from about 1849 to 1939.

High estimates went out the window and some boxes sold for as much as double or triple the top "guesstimates" on some of the more rare and unusual examples from this "Golden Ages of Printed Tin Packaging," which is how David Griffith describes the period in England from about 1860 to the 1930's in his beautiful little reference book, *Decorative Printed Tins*.

One "regular" in British biscuit tin collecting said the prices Phillips got were "out of sight," considering that most Americans collect American tin boxes, and few Americans have an interest in biscuit tins, British or otherwise.

A noted exception is Lorna Sarrel who seeks "Lorna Doone" tins, and with her husband, Phil, does collect British biscuit tins. The Sarrels, both doctors who specialize professionally in research on sex, are sometimes referred to as "The Masters and Johnson of Yale," which tickles their fellow tin box collectors.

Phillips, in a stroke of auction marketing genius, attracted such a large crowd to their British biscuit tin bing by scheduling it a day before the 1983 "Convention," a biennial gathering of the Tin Container Collectors Association, which took place this year close to New York, at Parsippany, New Jersey, from June 30 to July 3.



The auction at Phillips.

TCCA members came to New York a day early and swelled the crowd at Phillips, who kept the tins on view for them up to two hours before the sale as a convenience. The group was in a holiday mood, and a clutch of determined bidders surfaced to do battle in a field where few Americans have ventured until now.

Gossip had it that some of the unfamiliar heavy bidders were decorators spotting a new trend, and not primarily tin collectors themselves. This was especially so of the unique "figural tins," containers of elaborate shapes and colors, not just square or rectangular traditional boxes.

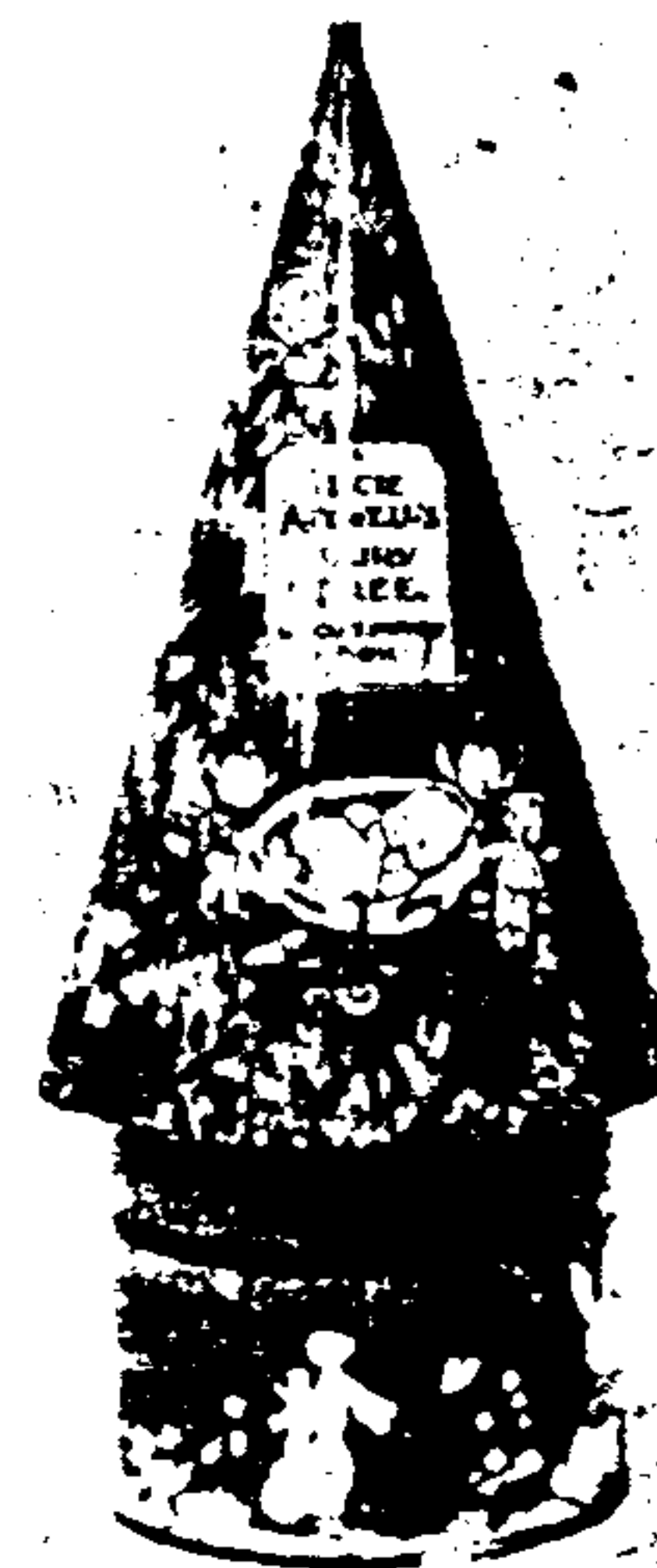
Besides mystery buyers, the seller was also unknown to all but Phillips, who would only say that the tins were from a single collector who did not wish to be identified. He (or she?) appeared to be British, and apparently had presented a collection of antique British biscuit tins to the Victoria and Albert Museum recently. We



"Windmill," 1924, from Huntley & Palmers, brought top price of \$742.50 at Phillips. The blades go around and are detachable from the fanciful and beautifully lithographed tin.



Large 1912 Huntley & Palmers "Locket" at \$352 was more than triple its high estimate and a superb example of the sentimental style of the time.



"Fairy Tree," 1935, from William Crawford and Sons. Two of these went to another anonymous buyer for \$198 each.

could not verify this.

Among the cognoscenti, guesses on the seller ran from a midwest American collector to

two well-known English collectors: M.J. Franklin, whose sumptuous book, *British Biscuit Tins 1863-1939*, was used to identify almost every lot in the Phillips catalogue, or Robert Opie, who had an exhibit of his own wide-ranging tin collection at the Victoria and Albert in 1975. Time will tell.

Top lot at the Phillips British biscuit tin sale was "Windmill" put out by the Huntley & Palmers biscuit company in 1924. Estimated at \$200/250, it was bought for \$742.50 (with the 10%) by an anonymous American man who collects British biscuit tins. The enchanting box, with the cookies long gobbled up, was rated in "Very Good" condition by Phillips ("Excellent" was the best) and came with its original detachable windmill blades, which revolve.

Second highest lot, also estimated at \$200/250, was "Golf Bag," in which Macfarlane, Lang and Co. packed their goodies in 1913. Golf Bag, also in "Very Good" condition, went for \$577.50 to another private New York collector who, by not entire coincidence works at an American can company himself.

Another Macfarlane and Lang tin also made "top lots." "Chippendale," a little chest of drawers with all drawers working, and issued in 1904, went for \$539 to a noted Washington collector husband and wife.

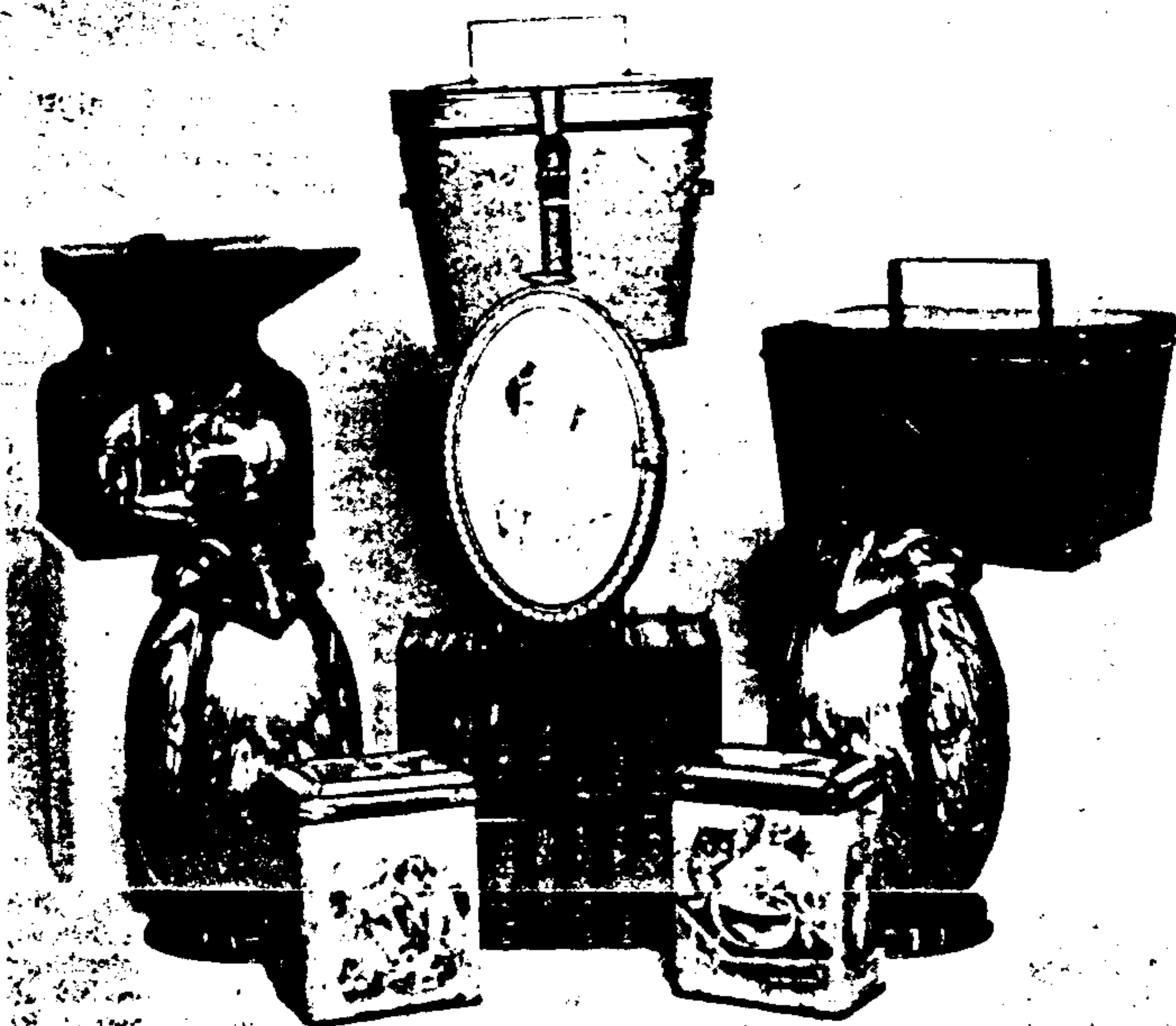
Two identical 1911 "Blue Bird" tins from McVitie &

Price, estimated at \$100 to \$150, went for \$495 and \$522.50 respectively at the start of the bidding. There was no fooling around in this auction.

"Camera," a 1913 box Brownie-type container from Huntley & Palmers, estimated from \$200/250, went for \$495 to the Washington couple after a fierce battle with an anonymous lady in a yellow shirt identified by no one in particular as an agent, a decorator, a pain in the neck, or none of the above. She bought a lot of things, and one miffed bidder called her "bad money driving up good."

Mrs. Sarrel, who was presumably "good money," got one of my favorites in the sale, "India," an 1894 Huntley & Palmers elaborately carved-looking casket with exotic scenes from the British Indian Empire days. Estimated at \$100/150, it went for \$473 and was such a popular shape that Huntley & Palmers brought it out in several other designs over the years.

Printing on tin, or tin-coated metal, was a 19th-century development that evolved most notably in England and France amid a certain amount of patent secrecy. As the techniques improved from transfers to lithography, so did the elegance, opulence, and



In the center: Huntley & Palmers, "Locket," 1912, \$352. Clockwise from top: Huntley & Palmers, "Field Glass Case," 1907, \$176; Huntley & Palmers, "Basket," 1897, \$121; McVitie & Price, "Blue Bird," 1911, \$522.50; Carr & Co., "Juvenile No. 1 (Kittens)," 1897, \$187; Huntley & Palmers, "Dickens," 1911, \$209; Carr & Co., "Juvenile-Nursery Rhymes," 1893, \$110; McVitie & Price, "Blue Bird," 1911, \$495; Macfarlane, Lang & Co., "Anvil," 1910, \$253.