

Ripley would love it

Unusual store fuses old, odd

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The first thing that you see in the outdoor garden is the huge red cast-iron porch from the Elgin Mental Hospital. There are photos of Mary Todd Lincoln standing on it during some of her more stressful times as first lady.

Nearby, a copper church steeple from Buffalo, N.Y., thrusts heavenward. And leaning next to it is the 15-foot-high clock face from the demolished Stewart-Warner building.

Welcome to Stuart Grannen's Architectural Artifacts. The place feels more like the "Ripley's Believe It or Not" of antique objects, however. There are plenty of normal things in this rambling 30,000 square foot showroom at 4325 N. Ravenswood. The upstairs teems with marble and carved-wood fireplace mantles, but in a corner, or on a wall, there's always something strange. It might be a primitive painting of a saint in ecstasy or an art deco coffin stand, but something is lurking.

When he was 10, Grannen cut grass and shoveled snow to earn money to buy stained glass. Later, when he went to college in Knoxville, Tenn., his timing was perfect because he got there just before the ill-fated World's Fair.

"They tore down hundreds and hundreds of houses from the 1860s," Grannen says. "It was a collector's paradise." He rented an old farmhouse for \$175 a month and filled it to the top with things. Soon after, he met a buyer from a New Orleans architectural store called The Bank.

"He not only bought my entire collection," says Grannen, "but he offered me a job." Grannen worked there for three years and crisscrossed the country many times on buying trips.

Then he moved to a similar operation in Minneapolis. "We were right down the street from Prince," Grannen says. "He used to rent a lot of stuff from us. One time he rented a huge iron staircase and it came back purple."

A couple of years later he moved back to Tennessee with a bankroll and began buying for himself again. He had met so many people that he now knew exactly where to go shopping.

He was coming to Chicago on



Stuart Grannen stands amid figures in a 90-foot terra cotta facade pediment rescued from the old Sheridan Theater. (Photos by Jim Matusik)



Contrasting forms of commercial archeology's flotsam and jetsam make for disarming visions at Architectural Artifacts, 4325 N. Ravenswood.

such a regular basis that he decided to open his first store here in 1992. He moved once in order to buy the building that now houses his collection.

Grannen just returned from Bloomington, where he bought a stained-glass dome from a church about to be torn down. "There was a church on every corner of this intersection and one of them with political clout needed a parking lot, so down went the other," he says.

Architectural Artifacts has an amazing network of priests and churches and held a huge religious objects show a year ago. "Churches are the last bastion of architecture," Grannen says. "The excellent craftsmen were all here in the teens and twenties to ensure excellence."

"They spared no expense for the glory of God," says his sister, Sheila.

Oddly enough, a lot of the religious things that are sold wind up going back to other churches. "When we had the religious show, a group of nuns heard about it and flew in a few days

before opening," Grannen says. "They would see a certain piece and drop to their knees in prayer. And they knew just where to look for little compartments behind the altar that held fingernails and other true relics of the saints. But when they got down to business, they were just like used car salesmen. They had me pinned to the wall, but they still spent thousands."

In January, Grannen cut a deal with Landmark Village's developer. He wanted the clock faces from the Stewart Warner building. The plan was that they would each get two, but the demolition schedule meant that they would have to be taken out immediately. Grannen admits that he did it partly for the publicity, and also because he had made another deal with Patagonia, the expedition outfitters, to do a photo shoot of them in Patagoniawear while they dismantled the clock in a howling blizzard. "You always take a chance," says Grannen, "you never know if things will come out or break into a million

pieces."

That was a big question when they recently removed a 90 foot terra cotta facade pediment from the now destroyed Sheridan Theater. It weighed 20 tons and had to be taken down piece by piece. It took 10 days to remove and three weeks to reassemble.

Downstairs, a 15-foot manta ray hovers over an antique mantle. "The fisheries department of the Field Museum was expanding," says Grannen, "and with a donation, we got two semi trucks full of stuffed fish, most of which sailed right out of the store." Nearby is perhaps the strangest object for now. It's a marble slab from a remodeled mortuary in Bucktown. It has blood gutters and a drain at the bottom.

Whether you are looking for ritualistic objects from the Freemasons Society or French doors from the old Playboy mansion, Architectural Artifacts is the place to visit, because what's strange today will inevitably by stranger tomorrow in this fascinating funhouse of the bizarre.