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Taking inventory of the past with 'urban archaeologist'

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Stuart Grannen, proprietor of Architectural Artifacts, 4325 N. Ravenswood, can get you just about anything from a circus freak show poster to a baptismal font.

Just don't ask him for 100 gargoyles.

"For that you can go to some discount store," suggests the self-described "urban archaeologist" who since 1987 has managed to turn an avocation into a way of

life.

Grannen has plenty of the grotesque stone waterpouts on hand. His stock of 85 or 90, in fact, may be the largest such collection in the world.

But they're far more likely to set you back about \$6,000, he warned.

"That would be the average. Of course, they're the genuine article," some dating back to the 14th century, said Grannen, who makes several buying trips a year

to Europe, "where they know what things are worth."

Not surprisingly, he has developed close working relationships with overseas dealers, who for all kinds of reasons would sometimes rather sell to Grannen than to one of their own countrymen.

And after awhile, you find there's not much that's not for sale, if you know who to ask.

"Yeah, I think I know someone who could probably get you a gullotine, for the right price."

laughed Grannen, adding that medieval armor is also "double" — again depending on how badly you want it.

After all, these pieces were made to be works of art as well as protection in battle, said Grannen,

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RIGHT: Stuart Grannen with one of the many gargoyles from what he says could be the largest collection of its kind in the country.



Past

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adding, "You or I wouldn't have been able to afford armor. We're lucky."

Buying trips, however, aren't the dream vacations some customers think they are, said Grannen. "I get all kinds of people asking me if they can join the next time I go to Europe. They don't understand it often means getting up around 4 a.m. and traveling to some pretty out-of-the-way places."

Grannen has bought out Scottish castles and French churches, of course. And he adds that as an Irish-American, he's especially pleased with some of the steals

he's found in England.

"After all, they stole from everyone else, didn't they?" grins Grannen.

Closer to home, he snipped up the ceremonial paraphernalia from an Odd Fellows Lodge, and some equipment from a long-defunct knitting mill on California Avenue.

He even picked up an anatomical model of the human body made decades earlier at DeVoey-co/Seppert when it was based in Ravenswood just a few blocks from Grannen's 30,000-square-foot treasure vault.

He has largess from Paris' Champs Elysees, ironwork from the Mediab Teague, wall panels from the Oriental Theater, granite frogs from Navy Pier, and wood paneling and a walk-in munnel

piece from a mansion outside Pittsburgh.

"Not too many years ago, a lot of this stuff would have ended up as landfill," said Grannen, who has been rescuing pieces of buildings since age 7, when he spent \$35 he earned raking leaves on a stained-glass window festooned with black angels that had been salvaged from a Baptist church.

It's probably something that rubbed off from his antique-collector parents, said Grannen, a New Jersey native who started out majoring in archeology at the University of Tennessee, switched to forensic medicine by his third year, then turned to Black studies.

From there, he headed for New Orleans, began dealing antiques in the Garden District, came to Chicago in 1987 on a buying trip and decided to stay.

Within a few months, he had opened his first store on the 3900 block of North Ravenswood.

Soon after expanding from 3,000 to 15,000 square feet, Grannen had already outgrown his space and in 1991 bought his current building, which he says is also starting to cramp his style.

So much so that he recently bought an adjoining piece of property, where he plans to build a showroom/museum scheduled to open by the end of next year, recession or no recession.