

OUT & ABOUT

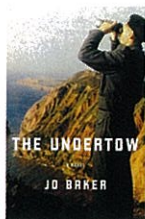
CULTURE



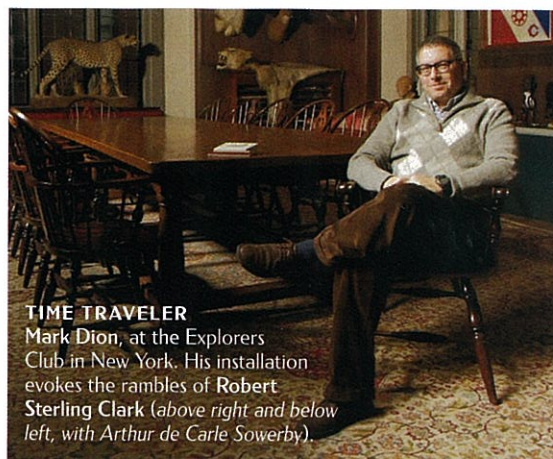
shortlist

BOOKS

CLASS ACTION



On the heels of the runaway success of PBS's *Downton Abbey* come two novels that draw on the golden era of titled nobility. *The Undertow* (Knopf; \$26), by Jo Baker, follows the Hastings family for four generations, from World War I to contemporary London, as the aristocracy crumbles around them. Sadie Jones's *The Uninvited Guests* (HarperCollins; \$25) takes place over a far shorter time span. In 24 hours the Torrington-Swifts prepare for a dinner party, find themselves emergency hosts to train crash survivors, and try desperately to save the family manse—their very own *Downton*.



TIME TRAVELER

Mark Dion, at the Explorers Club in New York. His installation evokes the rambles of Robert Sterling Clark (above right and below left, with Arthur de Carle Sowerby).

ART

China Syndrome

Paying homage to the Far East explorations of a legendary art collector.

THERE ARE THINGS MOST PEOPLE DON'T know about the late **Robert Sterling Clark**. An heir to the Singer sewing machine fortune and founder, along with his wife, of the Sterling and Francine Clark Art Institute in Williamstown, Massachusetts, he is probably best remembered for his insatiable appetite for top-drawer 19th-century European paintings. But he also purposely led a much less glamorous life—as an explorer in the remote, inhospitable reaches of northern China.

In 1912, Clark, with naturalist Arthur de Carle Sowerby, published *Through Shên-kan*, an account of the 16-month scientific expedition he mounted in the area in 1908–09. “This China story had been lost,” says Michael Conforti, director of the Clark Art Institute, who keeps Clark’s handwritten journals in a walk-in safe in the institute’s archives. Noting that the Clarks were “a family that didn’t want to tell their stories,” he says the institution has been belatedly fleshing out Sterling’s personal history in recent years.

To tease out the ghosts of the expedition, which ended abruptly after its chief surveyor was murdered by bandits, the Clark Art Institute has commissioned

artist Mark Dion to infiltrate and adorn the Trophy Room of New York’s Explorers Club with a collection of fantastical creations. Dion’s installation, “Phantoms of the Clark Expedition,” on view from May 9 to August 3, commemorates the 100th anniversary of *Through Shên-kan* and features what the artist calls “a landscape of bleached bones”: white papier-mâché recreations of the bewildering range of gear that Clark and his team of 36 men carried, with the help of 44 mules, five donkeys, and eight ponies, through northern China.

Curator Lisa Corrin believes that Dion, who has a history of creating works that resemble eccentric cabinets of curiosities, was the ideal artist to play off of the Explorers Club’s collections of artifacts and taxidermy from all corners of the globe. “His installations link to the biographies of famous explorers and naturalists, but they’re poetic evocations,” Corrin says. Even better, Dion is “an Indiana Jones–type figure,” she says, pointing out that he regularly travels to remote parts of the world, risking life and limb to make art. (She mentions one trip during which he was nearly devoured by a Komodo dragon.)

“One of the things that fascinated me about the Clark expedition is that it’s big, with a huge number of men and pack horses and a vast amount of equipment,” Dion says. “I wondered where all of Clark’s stuff was, but it doesn’t exist.” In its absence, Dion made his own, taking liberties with form and scale. Among the dozens of papier-mâché objects he created to litter the Trophy Room are storage drums, butterfly nets, compasses, pistols, cameras, helmets, boots, and mess kits.

Of particular note is an eight-foot-long Chinese rock squirrel modeled on one of the many animal specimens Clark’s team brought back.

The Clark Art Institute, meanwhile, has recently opened a satellite office inside the Explorers Club. The building, it turns out, was previously the home of Sterling Clark’s brother Stephen. The project ties

into three more expedition-themed exhibitions in Williamstown this summer. (The Clark will open an expanded campus in June 2014.)

For Dion, working inside the Explorers Club has been something of a gift. “The interiors are constructed as a kind of dark fantasy of some past gentlemen’s club,” he says. “It’s very theatrical. And that’s good material for me to play with.”

TIM McKEOUGH

