

dealers' diary



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reports

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Strong after sales boost Blenheim event

The third Cotswolds Art & Antiques Association Fair at Blenheim Palace, from April 3-6, proved itself to be a really good little fair outside London, attracting 4000 visitors and helped by a new sponsorship deal with US website company Totipot.

"It is the perfect showcase for the CAGA and one of the most gratifying aspects of the event is the joint co-operation and support the exhibiting members provide to each other," said CAGA chairman and fair organiser John Howard. "The ambience is warm and friendly and it is a very uplifting aspect of the association."

The fair, held in the Orangery and the Marlborough Rooms at Blenheim, adjoining the main Street, had 31 exhibitors (all CAGA members) and post-fair deals were reportedly good.

Sales included a c.1700 salt-glaze beer jug (over £11,000) from John Howard of Heritage, first-time exhibitors Temple Rare Books sold a 19th century Chaucer illustrated by Eric Gill (2000) and garden antiques specialists Architectural Heritage sold a bronze of Henry with an asking price of £28,000.

Finally, local dealer W.B. Harvey & Co (Antiques) Ltd of Witney sold two 17th century oak coffers on the same day, one locally and one to a couple in Cambridge.

Next year's CAGA Fair at Blenheim Palace runs from April 16-19.



Above: a 17th-century oak coffer sold at the CAGA fair by W.B. Harvey & Co (Antiques) Ltd of Witney with an asking price of £1750.

Words of wisdom from a folk hero of the trade

IT took a while to convince the folk art and vernacular furniture dealer Robert Young to do an interview. He agreed with one proviso – that I should not ask him to define folk art.

As Robert says, the problem inherent in pinning down 'folk art' has made it a slippery subject for the British academic world to grasp. "There's no chronology, no formal literature, no established measures of quality, barely any maker's names. You can't cross refer or contextualise. Its appeal and worth are entirely subjective."

But explaining what attracts him to objects is not such a struggle. "Perfection lacks character, it is the imperfections that make something sexy, a kookiness. Something different to what its scale, colour, texture, line, but there must also be individuality, originality, integrity and authenticity."

It's hard to think of a dealer with a more infectious, all-consuming passion for their subject as Robert. After our interview he emails over several pages of musings as an afterthought. Such is his way.

A few epiphanic moments led him to his love of folk art.

First was as a schoolboy walking down Marlborough High Street, when he saw a dogcart chair in a window. "I didn't know what it was but I thought it was the most extraordinary sculptural thing."

Then in 1972, it was inter-railing round Europe after leaving school when he saw a Henry Moore exhibition at the Forte di Belvedere in Florence. "Downstairs were Moore's monumental bronzes, but then at the top of a tower was a room full of stuff that the Italians had taken out of his studio: bits of driftwood, bird skulls, bones, stones with holes in them. It was absolutely mesmerised because they changed the whole nature of all the sculpture I'd just seen; I understood it in a different way."

All the objects, he remembers, had "great surface".

Finally came a visit to Cambridge's Kettle's Yard gallery, the former home of Jim Ede, the ex-Tate curator who lived there between 1958 and 1973 and filled it with all manner of carefully chosen objects from pebbles to country furniture, and sculpture, paintings and ceramics by neglected 20th century artists. "Little of what Jim Ede had is actually the best; it's mainly works that the artists couldn't sell, but everything relates and works together as a whole."

Robert started his career at Sotheby's in 1974. A frustrated painter, he believes that many folk art enthusiasts, including Ede, are frustrated artists.

"In those days, it was fashionable to be in antiques, people thought it was cool," he remembers. "But the trade was very different – it was aspirational but could also



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be intimidating, snobbish and hierarchical."

When he started dealing in 1976 he was just 22. Since the beginning this has been a joint enterprise with his French wife, Josyane; he says it is she who really has the eye for what is "sexy".

Their cosy emporium sits in a nondescript run of shops on Battersea Bridge Road, a world away from the clusters of antiques galleries in Piccolo Road or the galleries of St James's. They took on the lease in 1978 (living above the shop) and in the same year they started doing the Olympia fair.

It's hard to imagine now, but back then barely anyone was dealing in folk art. "Early walnut, Regency furniture and serious 19th century paintings were the zenith. It would be crazy to talk about a British Folk Art market at all prior to 1980. It strengthened in trade and export terms from 1980-90, as the US market took off."

Convincing the establishment – and fair vetting committees – that their stock was of worth was difficult: "It was humiliating at times. Sometimes the vetters would come on the stand and snigger. Items would be taken off the stand or one would ask couldn't I 'just tidy that up a bit?'"

An article on the Youngs' flat above the shop in *World of Interiors* in 1986 provided a major boost to their profile and they

stepped up to American fairs with San Francisco (c.1995) and the New York *Vintages Antiques Show* in 2000. From around 1990 Robert assumed a position on various vetting committees here and abroad – a moment of acceptance and doubtless a small triumph.

Now, although he is bashful about admitting it, such is the following for that 'Robert Young look' that as soon as he does something different or quirky, it is often applauded by countless others.

The much-talked-about group of patinated 18th and 19th century watering cans hung on the front of his stand at Olympia in the late '90s prompted a rash of similar displays at antiques fairs across the country. Robert, of course, had spent many months assembling them. While he doubts he will ever find a comparable group, it henceforth raised the price for any old zinc-plated watering can.

"The public have generally responded positively and enthusiastically to our things. People often become addicted, obsessive, but it takes time to understand the pricing structure," says Robert, although he finds clients do in time understand the difficulty in sourcing the best material and the prices it commands.

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TIMELESS EXHIBITION

A month before the opening of Tate Britain's first exhibition of British Folk Art, Robert Young Antiques host *Timeless*, their 14th annual exhibition from May 9-18 at 68 Battersea Bridge Road.

Included are some 50 items, predominantly European in origin, although with the odd American piece such as the trade sign pictured here and a c.1880 black slave doll. There is furniture, from Windsor chairs and a Quaker longcase clock by John Gilkes of Shipton, c.1770, to a 19th century marble-topped French butcher's shop display table; trees and carvings, a pair of George Smart's felt collage portraits; weathervanes and whirlygigs; rushlights and some naive paintings including a typical painting of a farmer with a prized cow by John Miles of Northleach.

Miles' masterpiece *The Naming of the Animals* (see below) made a record £80,000 at the sale of the late Stanley J. Seeger's collection at Sotheby's in February – with Robert among the underbidders. For a catalogue, available from the beginning of May, contact the gallery, www.robertyoungantiques.com

Far left: a naughty weathervane in the form of a naked lady swimming, in weathered heavy gauge sheet metal, English c.1920, 10in (25cm) high, £1250 from Robert Young.

Above left: an American stationer's trade sign, c.1920, within an Eagle Pencil Company branded frame displaying an arrangement of writing and drawing instruments, 2 1/2in x 7in (3in x 70cm), ex Stanley Seeger Collection, £2500.

Left: an English naive school oils on copper painting of a manor house and grounds, c.1850, 12 x 11in (31 x 44cm), £3500.

WORLDS APART

Prices for American folk art are light years ahead of European material. When there is no firm proof of an object's origin, as is often the case in this market, adding the word American to its description immediately adds a nought or two to the price tag.

This is certainly a murky area – objects bought in Europe as European have been known to reappear at fairs in the US described as American and with a significant mark-up – but it is also big business. We are talking six and seven-figure sums for the best pieces of American folk art, something unfathomable in the UK.

"The US market has historically been enormously influential and probably responsible for globally raising the value bar," says Robert, "but that market got very overheated and is now going through a timely correction."

The state of the US market was tested during New York's January American Week with the sale at Sotheby's New York of the collection of the jeweller Ralph Esmerian.

Esmerian, who is currently serving a six-year jail sentence for fraud, collected the best of American folk art and was once chairman of a generous donor to the American Folk Art Museum.

A US bankruptcy court forced the sale of more than 200 Esmerian items from the troubled museum, including paintings, pottery,



Above: *The Naming of the Animals* by John Miles of Northleach (1781-1849), a large oil on canvas of a biblical scene from the Book of Genesis, sold for £80,000 (plus premium) in the Stanley J. Seeger sale at Sotheby's in March.

weathervanes, wood carvings, painted furniture, textiles and scrimshaw. Sotheby's placed a pre-sale estimate of \$6.4m to \$9.5m on the collection, but it exceeded this, bringing in \$12.9m (including premium), led by a carved figure of Santa Claus at \$875,000.

On this side of the Atlantic, the recent sale of the collection of the late Stanley J. Seeger (see ATG No 2134) included some great British folk art moments and some strong prices, such as a record £80,000 (plus premium) for the livestock painter John Miles of Northleach and a huge £39,000 for a 17th century dug-out chair.

ON DEALERS HE ADMIRES

Ted Few: "A passionate antiquarian with total integrity."

Christopher Bibby at The Rutland Gallery: "A great visionary who sourced the best British naïve art."

Tony Foster of A&E Foster: "Previously head of graphics at the BBC, he introduced this wonderful modernist aesthetic. He would put sycamore bowls, lignum vessels or apple tea caddies on plain white Habitat shelves at Grosvenor House and somehow made treen sexy."

William Job: "Great country furniture specialist. A perfectionist. We would sell him things occasionally and I would be so thrilled to have his seal of approval. I learnt editing from him. The whole strength of our business is what you don't buy not what you do buy. It's about the things that you leave behind."

Spencer Swaffer: "He has undiminished energy and enthusiasm."

the robert young interview

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"We buy about 40% of our annual inventory through auction. Nine times out of ten we pay multiples of the top estimate. All through the recession, all the great pieces that have turned up at auction have made strong prices."

The appeal, he thinks, lies in the quirky, timeless nature of country furniture and folk art: "The best works of 'folk art' live comfortably with great works of most eras and cultures, which is why I think so many artists have been attracted to it."

Context can be transformational. An old weathervane on a barn is just an old weathervane. But isolated and well lit within an interior, it becomes sculptural, even contemporary.

Historically, when their economy was strong, he had a large Japanese client base. Now his clients are predominantly from the UK, USA, France, Switzerland, Scandinavia, Canada and the Benelux countries, with a handful from Italy and South America and a couple from Thailand and Korea.

He also has some keen young clients: "I hate to say it but folk art probably is 'on trend' at the moment, as is Outsider art etc. I think Mid-century Modern material is reorganising itself in the market and blue chip contemporary art is obviously still hot.

But I honestly think that worthy antiques of almost all disciplines are on the cusp of becoming very cool again."

Robert points to advertisers in fashion and interiors magazines who are gradually including antiques into their styling.

So he is baffled by the fact that so many in the trade are "running scared of the word antiques".

"It's a great word and it's what we do. I really don't understand why people are dropping it. What we deal in is old, it's the one unique selling point we have."

Another worry is the current trend for "up-cycling" and repainting which, like that 1980s fashion for stripping everything, he thinks upsets the integrity of an object. Surface and patination – the impact of human hands, the elements and the passage of time – remain central to his aesthetic.

Despite its growth in popularity in the marketplace, folk art is still woefully under-represented in UK museums, Robert suspects because of the difficulty of contextualising it and lack of any formal language on the subject: "It is very hard to put into words, which makes it a difficult subject for curators and academics to discuss." There's no doubt in the UK it has languished under the umbrella of social rather than art history – the preserve of



Left: a Georgian "T" trestle tavern table, in pine and elm with a metal bound top, English c.1780, 5ft (1.5m) wide, £7000 from Robert Young.

'how we used to live' museums.

Therefore, all the great collections are private – and many of them formed by women.

Robert points out that, curiously, all the great pioneer American folk art collectors were women, very rich women – Adele Earnest and Nina Fletcher Little to name a couple: "They just bought what attracted them and edited by eye, as we try to do."

But, redressing the balance, from June 10 to August 31 Tate Britain will attempt the UK's first major survey of British folk art, curated by Martin Myrone.

Robert has been involved with the project for four years, since Tate hosted a series of seminars entitled *Folk Art and the Art Museum* in 2010, which led to the exhibition. Titled *British Folk Art: The*

House that Jack Built, it includes over 100 paintings, sculptures, textiles and objects.

"It is wonderful that the Tate should feel that the subject warrants a major exhibition. Just think back through our professional history, those fraught early years convincing the sceptical that these things had cultural and artistic merit and deserved to have a place in the overall art historical narrative."

So does he wish he'd done anything differently?

"Yes. I wish I had been braver, that we had done it all better. I wish I had been more creative and painted more, rather than diverting all creative energy into the business and interior design.

"But still there is time to do much more. Or at least I hope so."