

# “Entering Robert Young Antiques is like going into a good friend’s kitchen.”

## British folk hero

With his patterned sleeveless sweater and bed-head hair do, Robert Young does not immediately strike you as a man of fashion. But then again, writes **Kerry Jackson**, sometimes it just takes a little time for the rest of us to catch on.



**A**s he pours from a sponge-ware teapot, Robert Young says he never set out to be an antique dealer. He wanted to be an artist.

In pursuit of his first love he spent a year in France with canvas and brush, followed by thoughts of dealing in con-

temporary art but instead, at the age of 20, he found himself at Alexander & Berendt, London dealers in fine 18th century French furniture.

The surroundings were less than bohemian but Frank Berendt proved an unlikely ally. “For some reason he liked

me, although he shouldn’t have,” Young recalls. “Frank was the kind of man who was always immaculate. I struggled to get into a suit, I still do, and my hair was all over the place.” It still is.

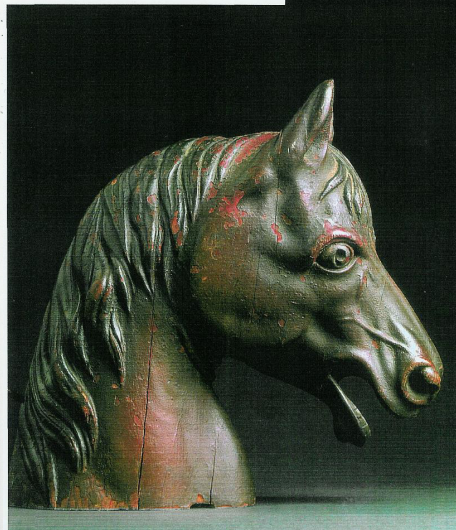
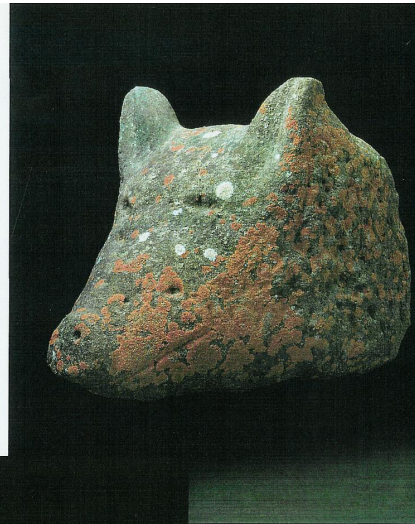
Berendt found the unkempt youth a placement at Sotheby’s with a view to employing him the following year but the apprentice never went back. “Although I adored Frank, I just didn’t like what he dealt in. My hippy sensibilities meant I always had an inclination towards folk art and, because there was absolutely no market for it then, it meant it was accessible to me. I wanted to be able to buy things without having to take a loan from the bank first.” On the strength of his inclinations he bid farewell to the West End and opened his own shop, first in Fulham Broadway and then in Battersea.

In 1978, just after Young moved to his

current premises on Battersea Bridge Road, he met his French wife Josyane. He credits her with giving his shop the look and feel it has today. “When I met my wife I was dealing in a mishmash of everything. She was the aggressive one who told me to get rid of all the general stuff and only keep what I, we, really loved. She was the one who made it really special.”

And special it is. Entering Robert Young Antiques is like going into a good friend’s kitchen. For want of a better

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word, it’s cosy. “Some people walk in and wonder if they are in a shop at all and I love that,” he says.

But when he was first in business the welcome mat in the mainstream dealing arena proved more difficult to find. “We’ve been exhibiting at Olympia for 26 years now but back when we started I was very much the *enfant terrible*. In those days the antiques trade was incredibly pedestrian but we came in and we decorated the stand and painted canvases and they hated us for it,” he admits.

Nevertheless the Youngs did find customers prepared to ignore the aesthetic snobbery of the day and buy on instinct. “People would normally buy things which had an established market, things that would be good investments. Our things had no track record at all. Our

customers then were medical people, professionals, business people ... and it took great invention in their mindset.”

But Britain did begin to appreciate its indigenous art and there has been a sea change. One of Young’s biggest joys is the number of young buyers now flocking to his shop to admire scarred painted surfaces and handle the objects of carved and polished wood which prove irresistibly tactile.

Perhaps they come because there are plenty of items in this eclectic stock for under £100 (\$160). Or more likely it’s because most folk art works incredibly

well with contemporary pieces and today’s decorating trends. “People want to see that everything is interchangeable, they don’t want to decorate their homes in just one style any more,” says Young, who has also operated an interior decorating service, Riviere, since 1983. The business has never been advertised, interest has spread solely by word of mouth and it remains small-scale, never taking on more than three projects at once. That’s the way Young likes it.

So how does such a modest and quietly spoken gent respond to the claim that he is responsible for bringing the

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**Far Left Top:** Recently sold by Robert Young Antiques was the charming carved sandstone snail, pig, 19in (47cm) high, Northern European, 18th century or earlier.

**Far Left Bottom:** A 14in (36cm) high carved and painted pine horse head trade sign, circa 1870, regularly hung in an English tack and harness supply store.

**Left:** This double dome love token pine wall shelf with original paint, circa 1900, is possibly of Welsh origin. Standing 27in high by 20 1/2in wide (69 x 52cm), it is priced in the region of £1,200 (\$1,700).

European folk art tradition to the USA? “That is something I’m really proud of because they said it could never be done. Everyone told me that Americans want American things but my attitude is that if it wasn’t for European folk art, American folk art wouldn’t exist.”

Young’s 1999 book *Folk Art* helped give European material credibility in America, and his convictions were supported by his willingness to travel to both the Winter Show in New York and the San Francisco Fall Antiques Show.

“European and American pieces interrelate so closely and Americans love it when I show them something that relates directly to their heritage,” he explains.

The breaking of America was a huge risk – last year’s experience of the West Coast dock strike, when his stock failed to arrive in time for a show, is not one he would like to repeat – but it worked. European folk art is now accepted at the highest levels, including the new Museum of American Folk Art in New York. In fact, Young now finds himself in the unusual but happy position of being fashionable.

“I’ve been out of fashion for most of my working life and I’m quite happy to accept my good time. I’ve done my years of penance,” he says. ●

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