

# ANTIQUUE COLLECTING

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# Seriously Folks

Robert Young, one of the UK's leading dealers in folk art and Christie's Mark Stephen discuss why they both embrace the common touch

**I HAVE KNOWN ROBERT AND HIS WIFE** Josyane for the last 30 years. My wife was the first to discover him, disappearing into his shop on Battersea Bridge Road. She invariably emerged with a woven basket, sometimes green painted, sometimes small for eggs, and sometimes larger for garden produce. In those days Robert would make buying runs to Wales and Sussex, and always come back with a loaded van, with dealers from around London waiting to pick through the latest buys. It is harder now to source good objects, and prices have increased as a result, I am sure there are things he sold back then that he wishes he had kept. While my career has been as an object specialist in Christie's and Sotheby's, valuing and cataloguing a wide range of assorted works of art, my personal preference has always been folk art and British naïve art, so I always enjoy a trip to his shop or seeing his stand at a fair.

While Young is one of the leading dealers in folk art, his collection is far from 'folksy'. His pieces might be primitive or naïve, but they have been chosen for having individuality and aesthetic.

He said: "It is not about collecting, but about texture and form. What we do is incredibly subjective; the objects need to be different or a bit quirky. Normally this is about texture or eccentricity."

Young defines the term 'folk art' as: "Objects that don't have an authorship, are not part of the main art-stream narrative. Pieces that were made for use and not decoration, by tradesmen, by unknown makers."

His priority is 'strength of image', something that stands out; that you can read from a distance. This applies not only to painting, but to needlework, stick chairs, tavern tables, treen and ceramics. Coupled with this, the object has to have what he calls an 'integrity of surface'. It also needs to have retained original colour, the layers of old paint and polish we describe as patina, that document its wear and faults through use and time. Folk art was made for use, so the history of an object should be preserved. He hates anything over-restored or stripped.

## UNVARNISHED TRUTH

Young explains that classical antiques such as fine French furniture, silver, bronzes, and marquetry, are often restored to how they



looked when they were made. This is what the market dictates. Robert, however, values objects for their history – you must be able to see what's happened to them. An old sign writer's tavern sign, for example, had no value when it became surplus to requirements. But the fact it survived meant it must have been valued by someone. How it survived in the first place remains a mystery. As he said: "Basically, someone in the past did not want to scrap it."

Young celebrates the object and its history but not in an academic sense. Objects have an aesthetic appeal that he hopes his clients will share.



When it comes to design and how to place objects in interiors, Robert and his wife Josyane, who deals with the decorating side of their business, have some basic rules. They enjoy working with clients who relish the challenge of mixing contemporary architecture and art with the objects they sell.

He said: "Folk art goes perfectly in a contemporary setting, though free-standing furniture one can walk round – such as cricket tables and tavern tables – work better than case-furniture which has to be placed against the walls."

He added: "Great things need space."

Surface is the word Robert uses to epitomise his ethos. "We like texture and natural material." Plaster, stone, brick, raw and polished concrete and slate; Robert prefers textured surfaces over smooth emulsion. He uses light to demonstrate the juxtaposition of texture and colour, or as he put it, 'rough with sophisticated'.

A rule he and Josyane share is to mix rough with fine. A rough tavern table, for example, should have a polished bowl on top. Similarly a modern polished table demands a rough dairy bowl, or a rushlight on a painted wood base for contrast. He



likes clients who have the confidence to mix old pieces in a contemporary setting.

### YOUNG'S GUNS

He cites Jim Ede, of Kettle's Yard, Cambridge, as a formative influence. With very little money Ede created a series of rooms with sensational atmosphere by grouping items that he loved, rather than those with significant monetary value. Ede patronised Alfred Wallace and Ben Nicholson before they were famous and hung their paintings and sketches above compositions of pebbles from a beach, bare floorboards and flowerpots and plants.

Ede added to the atmosphere by letting students browse all day; sketching and reading among the installations. His love for the

objects shines through; some are of limited value but great physical presence. Young encourages grouping of humble things into a great entity, so the collector becomes the curator.

He loves scent: the smell of azaleas in a garden, the smell of cut flowers in a house, the smell that permeates the room from a log fire. He dislikes the trend for painting old furniture with a Gustavian grey colour. He would rather buy a contemporary piece of furniture than one 'tarted-up' to suit the

trend of the market – although he is quite sanguine and realises fashions come and go. He said: "Think of all the painted pine dressers and chests dropped into tanks of paint stripper when we were young."

He is confident regarding the future of the market. He said: "Our clients are getting younger. They are interior designers and contemporary art collectors, as well as traditional collectors of furniture and objects which they 'just get'.

*Robert and Josyane run Robert Young Antiques in Battersea for more details visit [www.robertyoungantiques.com](http://www.robertyoungantiques.com). Mark Stephen is Christie's Associate Director of Furniture and Works of Art.*



I love this generously proportioned and well-detailed figure from Carter Way Tobacconists in Louth, Lincolnshire, c. 1850 it came with documentary and historic photographic provenance, and stands at close to a metre tall. The finely-carved hair, facial features and digits lend it a bold sculptural quality complimented by the decoration of the striped pantaloons and long stemmed curved pipe. Figurative trade signs of this type are increasingly rare and desirable, particularly when in such untouched condition – a terrific example of British folk art sculpture.

### AMONG ROBERT YOUNG'S FAVOURITE PIECES:

This butcher's shop diorama can be considered an icon of the British folk art tradition. Each piece is hand carved and painted and the joints of meat are technically correct in detail. There are two theories as to their original purpose: one that butchers hung them in windows as a trade sign, the other that they were used as teaching aids in the kitchens of large private houses to demonstrate butchery and cuts of meat. Whatever their purpose, there is a small known body of these works, all seemingly created by the same hand and sharing a naive sculptural quality, unique to the British tradition.



This exceptional northern European arch pedimented marriage cupboard is a truly remarkable piece. It is in its original condition retaining its original painted decoration, with a wonderful powdery blue field and boldly stylised faux marble details. Initialed and dated within the arch frame, it also retains the original metalwork. Painted decoration is at the heart of vernacular furniture and folk art, and this example can genuinely be considered as a masterpiece of the genre. It is inscribed and dated 1790.