

the real dealers

Homeowners are turning to specialist dealer-decorators who not only source stellar antiques but conjure them into modern homescapes.

Katrina Burroughs reports.

Lovers of contemporary interiors who also hanker for a handful of spectacular antiques face a dual challenge. On the one hand, there's a dwindling supply of truly exceptional stock, and on the other, once *in situ* even an antique with real star quality can leave a room looking a wee bit... National Trust. A dozen years ago, antiques collectors were more likely to be connoisseurs for whom *décor* wasn't first priority, but the current generation of buyers with their sights on the very top end of the antique furniture market are a markedly different demographic. As likely to buy a Bugatti Veyron as a Boulle commode, they want to weave their finds into their beautifully styled daily lives. Nowadays, those chasing the prime designs of the past are turning to the



FINANCIAL
TIMES



“When we buy, we’re obsessed with things being right historically; the integrity of the object. But it has to have sex appeal too.”

dealer-decorator - a talented hybrid: part-trader, part interior designer, who not only supplies stellar pieces but also conjures them into fresh, modern homescapes.

“Antiques are coming out of the closet and becoming part of a contemporary language,” says Robert Young. He and his French wife, Josyane, specialise in fine provincial and vernacular furniture, including folk art and Scandinavian painted pieces with - and this is their trademark - sublime surface texture. They re-present their sculptural finds in understated, modern interiors. Sounds rustic, inexpensive? Think again. Many of their discoveries are important historical pieces. One find, an 18th-century painted chest on-stand made in the Channel Islands in the style of Charles Guillam, a much-admired and studied Jersey craftsman who established a tradition of painted furniture in coastal Connecticut, sold for £80,000.

One reason the Youngs' clients (who range from tax barristers to artists) feel this kind of price is worth paying is that they can be certain that what they get is well researched and authentic. “When we buy, we’re obsessed with things being right historically: the integrity of the objects,” says Robert. He began his career at Sotheby's, while Josyane studied at the V&A, and after three decades of experience in the trade, they are often invited to fairs in London, and the US to look out for wrongly dated, misidentified antiques. But both appreciate that scholarly precision is

a small part of the story for their clients: “just because something's right, doesn't make it interesting - it has to have sex appeal too,” says Josyane. “And we care desperately about the juxtaposition of textures,” adds Robert. Asked for an example of

something that has their perfect mix of history, texture and sexiness, he replies: “Early primitive comb-back Windsor chairs, with traces of original paint and wonderful patina. They have a line and form and can be viewed from all angles. Each one is different and has its own personality.” (One pictured below).

The phenomenon of the dealer-decorator is not new. The Youngs' artistic ancestors are a group of 20th-century creatives who specialised in sprucing up grand country



Top: living room of the Lake House in Holland furnished by Robert and Josyane Young (above right). Right: one of Robert's favourite items, an 18th-century Windsor chair



houses with decorative antiques and pretty fabrics in a restrained, colourful palette. Famous examples include Geoffrey Benson, whose name is still attached to a firm turning out lovely vintage-style fabrics, and John Fowler, who founded a decorating and antiques business with Sibyl Colefax in the 1930s. However, the current dealer-decorators represent a clear step away from these forebears. Rather than gently refreshing an interior in Fowler's don't-scare-the-horses style of faded grandeur, they deploy “star” finds in dynamic ways that encourage clients to look anew at each element.

“I'm tempting people to look at antiques differently. If I can do that, I'm happy,” says Rose Uniacke. She combines pieces from all sorts of eras - including midcentury modern Danish, Georgian, art deco - in simple, mostly white-painted rooms and describes her style as “minimal but classical” (pictured on final page). She says: “I don't furnish for the sake of furnishing, and in that respect, it looks quite contemporary.” The daughter of London antiques dealer Hilary Batstone, she first trained as a restorer. After living in Gascony for three years, she returned to London in 1997 and ran her mother's shop with her, until, she says, “customers would come in and ask if I could look at their houses”.

Uniacke's forte is the quietly glamorous interior with a metropolitan flavour, created by the use of natural

fabrics, raw timber and aged finishes. The shape of her furnishings may be classical but she avoids formality. "I like balance, but not always symmetry," she says. "I like rooms that welcome you and draw you in when you enter." Currently in stock at her shop is a brace of macassar ebony armchairs with green leather upholstery, dated 1925-1930 and stamped "Ruhlmann", identifying them with the influential art-deco designer Emile-Jacques Ruhlmann (£45,000 the pair). Uniacke emphasises that she doesn't buy brands ("I don't love everything Ruhlmann did, but these are very elegant with tremendous presence"), but it has to be said that this is the brand every deco fan craves.

Asked what defines her clients – whose backgrounds include media and banking, and who own properties from a gothic revival mansion to City lofts and smart town houses – Uniacke says: "They love strong design and beautiful furniture, but they don't buy an antique just because it's an antique, they buy because they love the piece." This observation illustrates the fundamental change that has taken place in the antiques market, and partly explains the dealer-decorators' success.

"The difference now is that buyers at the top of the market choose things for aesthetic reasons rather than cultural and historical reasons. They come and they fall in love with something." So says Thomas Woodham-Smith, MD of London antique furniture firm Mallett. It may seem a subtle shift – from a trade based on connoisseurs to one driven by a more intuitive type of purchaser – but it has been the asteroid that has wiped out many of his colleagues and created the climate in which the 21st-century dealer-decorator, who has the skills to source and style extraordinary antiques, can flourish. Woodham-Smith, who launched the Masterpiece art fair event in 2009, adds: "For the new buyers, buying antiques is a sybaritic pleasure like buying a watch or a car. And they appreciate the corollary of paying a high price is that they get something that comes from a great house of design, whether it's Gucci or Meissen."

This trend towards focusing on the best of the best, the luxury brands, so to speak, of the antiques world, may account for dealer-decorator Max Rollitt's services being so sought-after at present. Rollitt, who trained as a cabinet-maker and restorer, now creates comfortable,

Right: the kitchen of the Lake House is furnished with 20th century metal industrial chairs. Below: a bespoke "fisherman's light" hangs over an 1865 Boneshaker bicycle.



"The difference now is that buyers at the top of the market choose things for aesthetic rather than cultural reasons."

calm living spaces incorporating museum-quality 18th-century English furniture. Among his favourite finds is a huge 1750s Palladian-style pedimented bookcase, more architecture than furniture, from Walpole House in Chiswick Mall (yours for £180,000). When Rollitt took over his mother's antiques business in Winchester in 1993, he began to build up a stock of high-quality classical cabinetry and soon had a new set of clients, ranging from Colefax & Fowler in London to Los Angeles-based decorators Michael S Smith and Rose Tarlow. He was on the way to becoming the West Coast decorator's best-kept secret when a customer "asked for help with his house" – the accepted code of the dealer-decorator for an interior design project.

Rollitt's interiors are distinctive for an exaggerated tranquility that's partly achieved with the furnishings: "There's a serenity that comes from having antique objects around you, that feeling of history." It's also due to his clever balance of finishes: the highly polished mahogany, reflective as still water, set against pale, light-absorbing chalky walls. He rejects interior-design clichés with the result that, though heavy on the brown furniture that mainstream decorators generally

despise, his interiors look fresh and original. "For me, it's like composing a picture," he says. "I think of the rooms as still lifes, with the spaces in between the objects as important as the objects. When I photograph my work I want it to look like a Vermeer." And it really does, from the palette of

pigments to the sparse furnishings and graceful light. It's Johannes Vermeer with comely sofas.

Rollitt recently worked on an 18th-century house in Notting Hill, London, owned by an American fund manager and his wife who runs architectural tours. Their brief was: "Something smart and well executed, with architectural interest and pieces of consequence." So he found an 18th-century display cabinet made to a design in *Chippendale's Directory* and a table based on a Chippendale commission for Harewood House, plus a sofa after Thomas Chippendale the Younger (pictured on opening pages). "The wife was a great fan of Sir John Soane [the English neoclassical architect]," continues Rollitt, "and we put some of that architectural detail back into the house, as well as Soane's use of light and that wonderful restraint. We designed doors and architraves, and Soanian walls." Soanian walls? "Soane's walls go straight down to the floor – you have to bring the plaster out to be flush with the skirting."

Just as the objects they hunt down are rarities, decorator-dealers themselves are a scarce commodity, and not entirely straightforward to engage. The Youngs pop up at Masterpiece and some of the smarter US fairs,

"I believe in keeping the context correct – then whatever you do within the room, the space will still feel right."



and one can view their stock in their gallery in London, but they will only work on three interior projects concurrently. Uniacke, based in her shop on the Pimlico Road, also takes on just a handful of projects each year. And Rollitt, who attends (and vets) the twice-yearly Olympia International Fine Arts & Antiques Fair in London, might be spotted at his showroom in Hampshire, but takes on few interiors clients, working on only two major projects in a year. Aside from these three, there are relatively few individuals offering a similar combination of exceptional stock and skills. In the mould of Rollitt there is dealer and interior consultant Edward Hurst, based in Wiltshire, who specialises in "balancing furniture, paintings and objects to create harmonious spaces". Along Youngian lines there is Spencer Swaffer, another preferred source for the American interior designers, whose style combines architectural antiques and painted furniture. Fans of Uniacke's modern-antique style will enjoy the work of Paolo Moschino, who mixes 18th-century French pieces with midcentury modern furniture.

So have the dealer-decorators any tips to share on how to create fresh, modern décor studded with antique furnishings? Very few. Rollitt sees no need to keep abreast of trends: "Fashion comes into your brain all the time. You pick up on it instinctively – it's not necessary to pursue it. A modern style will find its way in." The Youngs say they admire avant-garde dealers and specialists, such as Clarke & Reilly and Ray Azoulay's cult Los Angeles shop *Obsolete Inc*, with whom they frequently collaborate. In a recent project, a lakeside getaway for a Dutch financier and his New Zealander wife (pictured on second and third pages of feature), they incorporated two bespoke sofas upholstered in hand-dyed antique homespun linen by Bridget Dwyer and David Grocott, aka Clarke & Reilly. Uniacke talks about respecting the architecture of a house – unlike many conventional decorators who swear by knocked-through, open-plan living. "I don't like adapting buildings, changing proportions, ripping out corridors or fireplaces. I believe in keeping the context correct. Then, whatever you do within the room, the space will still feel right."

Not all their work is carried out in period houses, and the dealer-decorators are also inspired by the new buildings their clients commission. The Dutch



Left: Rose Uniacke. Top left: a George III sofa and bespoke hurr table in a London house. Above: Uniacke has furnished this house with antique pieces from Hilary Batstone.

financier's lake house, just outside Amsterdam, is a staggering piece of contemporary architecture, a curving boathouse-style timber structure set on stilts, with its lower floor underwater. Inside, the Youngs clad the walls and ceilings with rough-cut narrow boards fitted horizontally, like a clinker-built boat, and treated the surface with dry linewash to throw the irregularities of the timbers into relief. The furnishings were selected for their graphic and sculptural qualities. "There is a wonderful, richly patinated, boarded 18th-century shepherd's chair and an 18th-century circular tavern cricket table with a hand-carved and -painted curlwork on it. These three are all fairly dark with strong graphic lines. Silhouetted against the water in the master bedroom, they are really engaging as a composition." And was their client engaged too? "Like a dog with three tails," says Robert. ☛



PUTTING THE PAST IN ITS PLACE

Clarke & Reilly, 8 Porchester Place, London W2 (020-7262 3500; www.clarkeandreilly.com). **Colefax & Fowler**, G2 Chelsea Design Centre, London SW10 (020-7351 0666; www.colefax.com). **Edward Hurst**, The Battery, Rickbourne Road, Coombe Bissett, Salisbury, Wiltshire SP5 4LP (01722-718 859; www.edwardhurst.com). **Hilary Batstone**, 8 Holbein Place, London SW1 (020-7730 5335; www.hilarybatstone.com). **Mallett**, 141 New Bond Street, London W1 (020-7499 7411; www.mallettantiques.com). **Max Rollitt**, The Old Telephone Exchange, Station Road, Alresford, Hampshire SO2 49J (01962-738-800; www.maxrollitt.co.uk). **Michael S Smith**, 1646 Main Street, Santa Monica, CA 09404 (+1310-315 3018; www.michaelsmithinc.com). **Obsolete Inc**, 222 Main Street, Venice, CA 90291 (+1310-399 2155; www.obsoletetec.com). **Paolo Moschino** for Nicholas Haslam, 12-14 Holbein Place, London SW1 (020-7730 8623; www.nicholashaslam.com). **Robert Young Antiques**, 020-7228 7847; www.robertyoungantiques.com. **Rose Tarlow**, Melrose House, 8540 Melrose Avenue, Los Angeles, CA 90069 (+1323-651 2202; www.rosetarlow.com). **Rose Uniacke**, 76-68 Pimlico Road, London SW1 (020-7730 7050; www.roseuniacke.com). **Spencer Swaffer Antiques**, 30 High Street, Arundel, West Sussex BN18 8AB (01903-882 132; www.spencerswaffer.com). **ART/ANTIQUES FAIRS: Masterpiece London**, June 30-July 5 2013; www.masterpiecefair.com. **Olympia International Fine Arts & Antiques Fair**, www.ifa.com; next fair June 10-19 2011.