



LOCAL PROFILE:

Robert Young

REBECCA WALLERSTEINER speaks to Robert Young, who believes that “folk art is simply our native art, the fruit of human creativity”



WHEN I ARRIVE to interview folk art dealer Robert Young, he greets me warmly and offers me tea. A delicate blend is served in hand-painted teacups and two hours then flash past as Robert shares his passion for folk art with me in what must surely be the cosiest gallery in London. Sinking into a comfortable chair and sipping tea, being surrounded by walls painted in bright primal colours encourages

one to regress to childhood. “Part of folk art’s allure is that it appeals to the child in us,” agrees Robert, as I admire a whimsical wooden rocking horse and decoy ducks.

Robert goes on to tell me that he became interested in antiques as a schoolboy and his first purchase was a sculptural-looking dugout chair which he saw in a shop window. This was the beginning of his lifelong love affair with folk art. He was just 22 when he started dealing and during the past 40 years he has done much to raise its profile and increase its popularity. Robert has a particular love of weathered wooden pieces such as Welsh love spoons, trade signs, toys and painted furniture, which were often made as gifts, or simple tokens of love. “We spend much time

looking for unusual, individual, beautifully made pieces that capture our imagination,” Robert says, “and it is the imperfections that make something sexy.”

In 1978, Robert founded Robert Young Antiques in Battersea with his French wife Josyane, who shares his passion. They both love the area for its little shops and businesses and the nearby river. Staying put for so long helped their business to grow thanks to clients who like to return to a familiar place and develop their collections over decades. “Even in the early years we always looked for original pieces, with quality, detail and patinated surfaces caused by the passing of time, and most importantly, soul,” explains Robert, who trained at Sotheby’s and La Sorbonne. In their cracks and marks, these pieces embody the history of how they were used. “When we began dealing in the 70s, there was little demand for rustic art and painted furniture and we toured the country looking for unusual, well-made pieces.” At that time, some dealers and collectors felt that folk art was not refined enough for the major fairs but this has now changed with pieces often selling for several thousands of pounds at art and antique fairs, like Chelsea’s prestigious Masterpiece London, held in the grounds of the Royal Hospital.

“One of our highlights at Masterpiece this year is a hand-carved Noah’s Ark, with a complete set of pairs of miniature carved wooden animals. Part of the timeless appeal of this Ark is the evidence of the years of enjoyment it has evidently given.” Its original paintwork

is faded and worn, bearing witness to the countless hours children have spent playing with it. “Models of Noah’s Ark were amongst the few toys that children were allowed to play with on Sundays, partly because of their obvious biblical reference and partly because they were considered educational. As a result they are often still found in good condition, with their original paintwork and a complete quota of animals,” explains Robert.

Other striking gems for Masterpiece include a hand-painted, cast-iron dog-breeder’s trade sign in the form of a fox-terrier and a Victorian tobacconist’s wooden sign depicting a Highlander in a feathered cap and kilt, taking snuff. This sign would have hung in the street outside the tobacconist’s shop to help passers-by to identify his premises. Many shop signs took the form of giant, oversized objects, which were symbolic of various trades, including giant spectacles for an optician, a huge key for a locksmiths and an oversized fish for a fishmonger. These symbols could be readily understood by all, even the illiterate.

“In recent years we have been seeing a lot of younger people visiting the gallery and coming up to our stall at fairs like Masterpiece,” says Robert. Many of these people had never previously looked at antiques but were attracted by the originality and power of folk art, which looks terrific when incorporated into either traditional or modern homes and juxtaposed with contemporary design.

With its imaginative, theatrical lighting and hand-painted walls, it isn’t surprising that Robert’s stall often wins awards for best stand design at art fairs and that local interior designers often drop by for inspiration. Robert and Josyane share a self-taught flair for interior design and occasionally undertake individual projects, including a Charles II period townhouse in Highgate and a family house in Notting Hill, as Rivière Interiors. “We are chic in our non-chic-ness,” declares Robert, in a sartorial self-assessment. New pieces can be created by mixing new and old elements: “In the context of the design side of our business, we often re-use interesting and sculptural antique elements in combination with contemporary materials to create unique and stylish objects. However all the folk art in my gallery is old, genuine and original,” says Robert.

It’s hard to think of another dealer as passionate about his field as Robert. His atmospheric gallery, which is open six days a week, has greatly helped raise the international profile of folk art. ■

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Above, from left/ XXXXX, Scot, XXXXX
Opposite, from top/ Terrier, Noah