

TIME WAS when antiques dealers were always found in their shops, boredly polishing a tabletop while 18th-century mahogany chests of drawers were stacked up behind them. Not any longer. Today's smart dealer needs to be a world traveller buying from French peasant and American museum alike, a skilled interior decorator, an entrepreneur and copyist, a sniffer-out of trends – and to be willing to get up regularly at 4am to find the bargains.

Of the seven trend-setting dealers I talked to for this article, four were abroad when I tried to reach them, three regularly employ craftsmen in America and Europe to restore or recreate old pieces, all can spot a trend long before the interior decorators take it up and all have to balance the books of a business which involves buying and selling thousands of pounds worth of stock.

It is not just the recession that has caused a change among today's antiques dealers – the boom in the early Eighties was just as much a catalyst, raising prices and demand sky-high for a diminishing number of pieces.

Until then, most dealers seemed to be involved in a merry-go-round of buying among themselves. But, led by the auction houses who had much earlier discovered a public avid to buy, dealers were forced to change their ways.

The cleverest dealers realise that people who want to fill their houses with beautiful or individual antiques need a bit of help. Some work hard to show how a 16th-century window grille or an 18th-century quilted bed pelmet can be displayed with styled room settings in their shops. Some encourage us in with a whole slew of cheap and chic collectables – old plant pots, bread boards and linen table napkins – to get us hooked.

Much is made easy for the modern buyer: dealers cluster together in markets or antiques centres; they form co-operatives so that one minds the shop while the rest go buying; they take part in fairs, from the grand Grosvenor House fair to flea markets in village halls.

British dealers, too, have turned the tables on the Dutch and Scandinavians who once exported our grandfather clocks and Windsor chairs by the vanload. Though Britain, uninvaded for 900 years, still seems to have an inexhaustible atticfull of treasures, our dealers now bring us back the best of Europe, from Russian malachite urns to bags of pearl buttons from French haberdashers. Even America, once a one-way street for imports only, now has British dealers knocking on its doors. London may be challenged by New York as centre of the art market, but a trip down Portobello Road or a visit to a country house auction will confirm that Britain is still very much at the centre of the antiques business.



THE COUNTRY COMES TO TOWN

THE LOGS in the basket grate in Robert Young's antiques showroom burn brightly all winter and, even in summer, dozens of candles flicker from candelabra on the walls and tables. Fresh cauliflowers and carrots sit in old iron buckets; country flowers are bunched in early earthenware pots. And this is in Battersea.

Robert and his French wife, Josyane, began the now-established trend of selling antiques with a stylist's flair while showing customers how to treat difficult pieces of furniture or fabric. 'It was a conscious decision,' says Robert. 'We made this shop as un-shoplike as possible, more like a house.'

The Youngs sell country furniture – most of it to young city dwellers who get passionate about its nobbly charms. Their wares may cost thousands of pounds – the 'very butch' Provençal monk's bed in iron patinated to look like bronze is £3,200, for instance – but old flowerpots, wicker baskets and napkins can cost as little as £10.

Josyane Young is determined to be as unpompous and welcoming as possible, and this means enticing people through the door with everyday objects at everyday prices. 'Most of our best customers started by coming in for a candle or a basket,' she says. 'Like a good restaurant, if people like us they will return and bring their friends.'

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THE NEW DEALERS

Antiques shops are often thought of as dark, dusty and forbidding. But now a new breed of accessible and innovative dealers is leading an arcane trade out of the doldrums. Leslie Geddes-Brown meets some of the trend-setters. Photographs by Robin Matthews