

ANTIQUE'S Dealer profile



Robert and Josyane Young

Robert Young's blue eyes brighten as he describes a dug-out chair hollowed from the burned-out trunk of a diseased elm. He points to the graceful arc of its curve, its suggestion of a winged-back, its carved handholds, and its bowfront stretcher, all of which set this chair apart from so many others of its type.

The object reminds him of another dug-out chair, which he saw as a sixteen-year-old in Wiltshire, England. Young describes that experience as something of an epiphany. An aspiring artist at the time, he suddenly saw that a piece of furniture might have the dignity and profundity of a painted or sculpted work of art.

Despite the magic of that encounter, Young's epiphany seemed to separate him from a world that regarded such a chair as the product of a lowly craft. Perhaps it was this sense of separateness that encouraged him to pursue his own vision and let the world catch up with him. He did not immediately abandon his original artistic ambitions. His grandfather

had given him a book on British painters when he was a boy, and for a long while he continued to believe that he must join their ranks. Instead of university, he opted for Paris, taking a course at the Sorbonne and painting in his free time.

The need to earn a living sent him back to England where he knocked on the doors of London's most eminent art dealers in the hope of a job. Leslie Waddington granted him a memorable interview. "Are you gay?" Waddington asked. "Do you drink?" When Young replied "no" and "not excessively," respectively, Waddington advised him not to go into the art business.

Young eventually went to work for Frank Berendt, a fine French furniture dealer of the old school. Every day at teatime his dapper employer tutored him. Berendt also took Young to sales, asking afterward, "Did you see any-

thing?" and introducing him to connoisseurs. Eventually he sponsored his protégé for Sotheby's works of art course, then in its heyday.

Young's furniture tutor, Derek Shrub, became his "inspiration and mentor," encouraging him to follow his instincts in spite of their differences in taste. Although Shrub's interests ran to European grandeur, he allowed his pupil to study the more rustic pieces that captivated him. Under Shrub's rigorous direction at Sotheby's, Young produced the first lecture on the chronology of English Windsor chairs.

Upon completing the course, he went into business on his own, spending eighteen months as a picker before opening a shop in 1975 in the Battersea section of London, where he has remained ever since. He admits that he "made an appalling mess of the business for the first ten years." He had not yet shed the streetwise bravura of the youth-



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ful dealer, buying bits and pieces of this and that if he thought he could turn a small profit.

All that began to change in 1977 when interior designer Josyane Pierard walked into the shop. Born in Provence and raised in Paris and Chantilly by music publishers who collected naïve paintings and works by the school of Nice, Josyane had been exposed to a cul-

Dug-out armchair, English, c. 1760. Ash with elm seat; height 42, width 22, depth 19 inches. Photographs are by courtesy of Robert Young Antiques, London.

Fishing trophy, English, c. 1905. Inscribed "Killed Aug 22nd 1905 on Karkaren Pool/Clare River H[?] by Henry Haynes on/Small double [?]ark [illegible] Banger" on the back. Carved and painted wood; height 12, width 44 inches.



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tivated but atypical aesthetic all her life. After completing the Victoria and Albert's course on the fine and decorative arts, she took a "temporary job" with Young, while hoping to secure a place with one of London's important fine arts galleries. She never left, becoming Young's business partner, wife, and the mother of their two sons. A muse as much as a talent in her own right, Josyane nurtured Robert's creative gene. Weeks after arriving, she advised him to "get rid of all of the junk" and hone in on the objects that exuded integrity. She introduced

spongeware, slipware, and terre jaspée—French ceramics that she had always admired. Together the pair sought out rough-hewn objects with the humble gravitas and dignity of the dug-out chair that Young had seen in his youth.

A wooden money box of about 1800 charmingly carved and painted to resemble a bowfront Georgian house or the sculptured lines and detailing of a pigeon decoy captivate the Youngs. They look for a fetishistic intensity akin to the obsessiveness with which Giorgio Morandi painted everyday bottles and vases. They enjoy the relationships created by juxtaposing disparate pieces—from Scandinavia to Italy—and diverse periods in one space, an interest that led them to open an interior design business, Rivière, as an adjunct to the shop.

Peeling paint, scratches, and nicks speak to the

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places their objects have been and the people who have known them as well as of those who created them. Young suggests that "all of our things stink of their history with all their scars and bruises."

The early years for the gallery were tough going. If American folk art objects have long commanded intense interest (and correspondingly high prices), their English and continental cousins lack a similar prestige. The Youngs describe their first trip to the Winter Antiques Show in New York, where they were introduced to the parallel universe of American folk art, as nothing less than "a revelation." Although the gallery struggled for a time, the owners also had a great deal of fun and plenty of freedom. Eventually they built up a clientele of collectors who "think outside the box and are sure of what they like." In the 1980s magazines began to take an interest in their approach. When Wendy Harrap from the *World of Interiors* came to do an article on spongeware, they took her upstairs to their living quarters. She was astonished not just by the spongeware but by the spirit and look of the whole house, which she featured in the magazine in 1985. Robert Young credits that article with "lifting them out of being trade suppliers."

The world has caught up to them and Robert and Josyane now serve as vetters for some of the most prestigious antiques shows in the business. Robert is co-chair of vetting for New York's Winter Antiques Show and chair of vetting for London's Olympia International Art and Antiques Fair. In 1998 he coauthored *Treen for the Table* with Jonathan Levi, published by the Antiques Collectors Club, and a year later published his book *Folk Art*.

If the Youngs express a certain bemusement at the attention that has come their way in recent years, they also quietly hint at a certain sense of vindication. They have taught a generation of collectors to see the poetry of Robert's dug-out chair.

Pair of Windsor chairs, Northern Europe, c. 1870. Painted beech; height 30 1/2, width 24 1/2, depth 19 1/2 inches.

Trade sign for J. Birdsall, hat manufacturer, English, c. 1860. Painted wood, 27 1/2 by 43 inches.