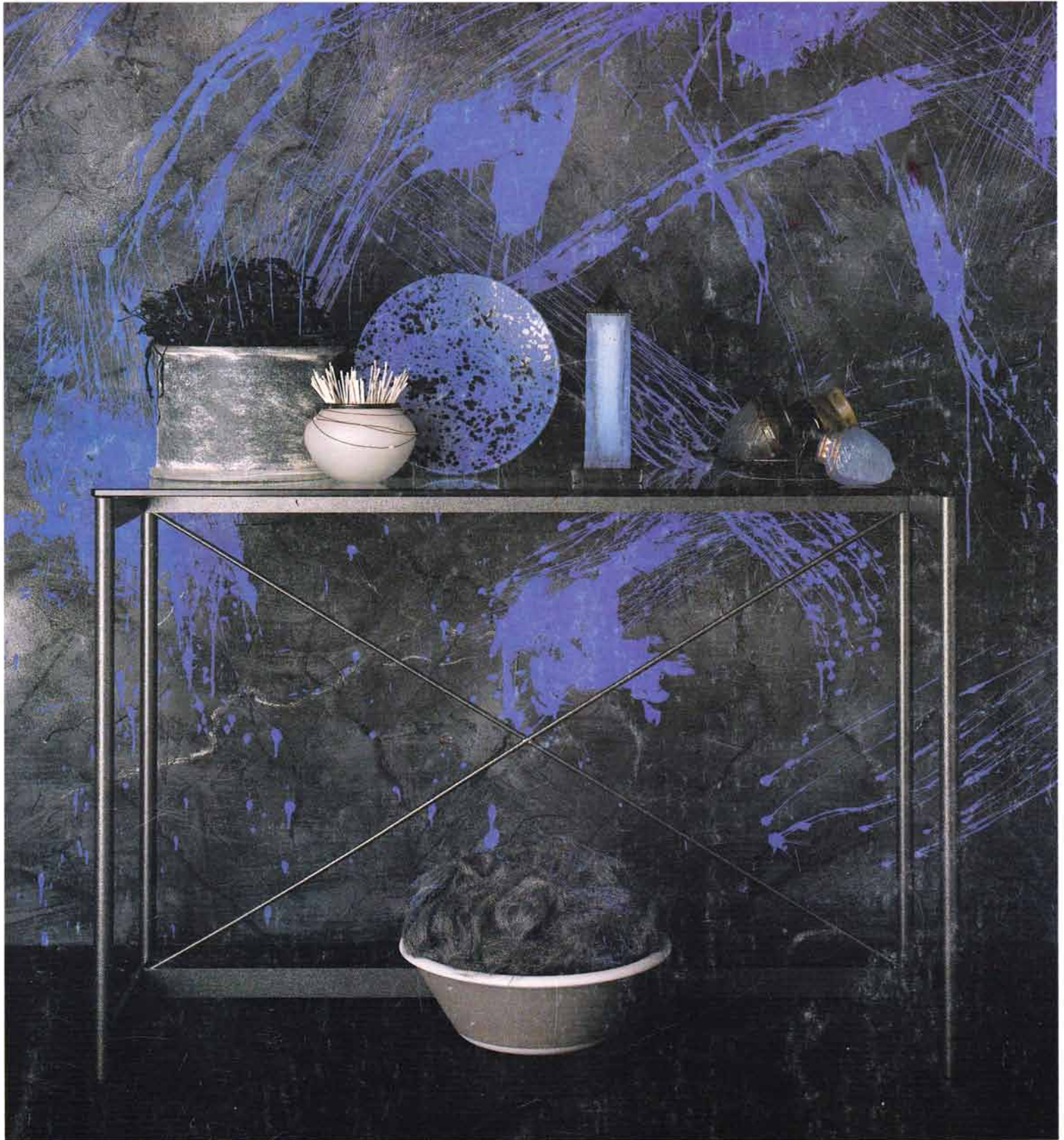

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TAKEN TO HEART

Robert and Josyane Young are living under an illusion - and opposite a bus garage. As the tide of London commuter traffic sweeps past the door of their tiny house, they see only the countryside. For they have filled their home with the things of country living: furniture, kitchen tools, clocks, pottery, paintings. Everything they have bought on their travels as antique dealers has passed one simple test: it has touched a chord in their hearts. Text: Dinah Hall. Photography: James Mortimer

Antique dealers Robert and Josyane Young - together with dog Balloo - in the ground-floor workshop of the tiny Battersea house into which they have squeezed both shop and living quarters

Peace and Plenty. A good Conscience. A Table well furnished with plenty of good Provisions. What is better than That?' This inscription on a small plate in Robert and Josyane Young's kitchen could not be more apt - though the plenty, in the case of antique dealers, tends necessarily to fluctuate. A good conscience, it must be said, is not often seen hand in hand with dealing in antiques, but when you have heard the stories behind Robert and Josyane's best pieces theirs does indeed seem unblemished. And the table well furnished? Josyane is French. Not that that alone is explanation enough, for it's hard to be French (ie fussy) in the food shops of Battersea. But this is where the famous Gallic nose comes in - it smells out good things. So Josyane can tell you where to find the *best* Cheddar - a small post office somewhere in Devon; the best jams - Knutsford in Cheshire; the best *religieuses* (small cakes) - Munster Road, Fulham; and the best fish - conveniently, Battersea.

There is just one thing that would be better than all that - a house in the country. For that is what they have in everything but location. The Youngs' living quarters are situated above the shop - in style and content they seem almost interchangeable: old country furniture, naïve ironwork, simple wooden implements. The only difference is in quantity - the shop is sparse, the home packed tight. This is the first indication that Robert and Josyane are as much antique lovers as dealers.

Every piece that they have kept in the house has some kind of story behind it, giving them not so much sentimental as emotional value. Where others can trace the course of romance through photographs, Robert and Josyane remember the past through pieces of

furniture they have bought. 'That is our heart,' they say quite unselfconsciously of a small table in the living room.

There have been times when they have been sorely tempted to sell, if not their heart, at least a few arms and legs. Josyane tells of a time when Robert's funds were so low that he took down into the shop a Windsor chair that was his very first buy after leaving the Sotheby's training course. She had a little money at the time, so she bought the chair and carried it upstairs again. 'Even with those things we've bought with no intention of keeping, after we've worked on them, maybe spent weeks dry-scraping a table down to its original paint, it's like selling a bit of yourself.'

They have sometimes bought things simply to stop them getting into less caring dealers' hands. Like the cobbler's bench. It seems like a story line in a soap opera; but it came originally from a funny little museum in Wales - 'just a house really, with a small collection of Welsh country furniture. The owner was crippled by polio and eventually became an alcoholic. His fourteen-year-old daughter, who was blind, used to lead you, feeling her way around the objects. Dealers knew about it and as he sank further into alcoholism, they'd give him a bottle of whisky and a hundred quid for pieces that were worth thousands. He used to offer us things, but we thought it should stay as a museum.' After he had died a dealer rang them about some furniture he thought they would be interested in. 'He was asking too much, but the bench was also from the museum: we bought it without a second thought. It was the memory of this man looking downstairs at you from his wheelchair and the blind girl - we couldn't bear to see it do the



The cat painting above the fireplace is an example of English naïve art, painted by W Herbert in 1880. Robert painted the scene on the mantel as a Christmas gift for Josyane. Following page: The living room contains two of the Youngs' most sentimental (which is not to say valueless) possessions - a cobbler's bench and Welsh candle table





Windsor chairs predominate in the tiny kitchen, as elsewhere in the house. A makeshift dresser, left, displays Josyane's collection of spongewear pottery dating from 1780 to 1800. On the wall hang antique wooden kitchen implements such as a patty cake spoon and cream paddle. To the right is an 18th-century English oak chair. Josyane's nationality is hinted at by the strings of garlic hanging from an old butcher's tray

dealer circuit. So we paid the price.'

It's fascinating how, when an interesting antique comes on to the market, dealers keep track of its progress as it goes from hand to hand. One such item was the particularly beautiful 18th-century ash 'grandmother' clock that Robert and Josyane now own. They were first told about it when on a buying trip in Wales. It belonged to someone called Brian Vaughan, a bit of a gypsy character. When Robert and Josyane asked about the clock, he told them it was not for sale because it was earmarked for his son when he reached eighteen. When they begged him to let them just see it he allowed them to stand on the doorstep of his house and peer round at the clock. It was beautiful.

As the years went by and they got to know Brian better they would always come and look at the clock - by now he allowed them past the doorstep. But when it came to the son's birthday, being a creature of the times, he wanted a stereo instead, and so Brian Vaughan sold the clock to another dealer who gave it to his wife. They then got divorced and the wife sold it to an Irish tinker who then sold it back to the ex-husband. Along this circuitous route it came eventually to Robert...and its final resting place. Will it go to a future son of his? 'No, not necessarily.'

But passing things on to husband or wife...that's different. The only way the Youngs can justify keeping pieces they have bought to sell is to give them as presents to each other. And though cynics amongst us might believe that some antique dealers would sell their grandmother (and lie about her age), only the most hardened business person would actually sell a gift.

Robert and Josyane's customers are attracted to country furniture for the

same reason as themselves: 'Basically they are trying to live a rural life in London.' It is a style that has become increasingly popular over the last few years; consequently the supply has dwindled and the prices rocketed. 'When you go to a customer's house, they might have a Georgian bookcase worth twelve thousand that has been handed down to them, but what they themselves buy is this kind of furniture that's just a few sticks really - the sort of stuff their mothers would think of as old maid's junk.'

Affluent customers seem to enjoy slumming it - they don't want to buy their peasant furniture in Knightsbridge: 'Coming to Battersea is a big journey for them: they put on their hats and coats...' But doubtless the furniture they buy looks less at home in Kensington than it does in Robert and Josyane's house. When they first moved in, it had not been lived in for over thirty years, which meant major renovations - very major, like installing electricity and plumbing. But all the Youngs' additions look as if they have been there for 200 years; kitchen and bathroom cupboards are all made up from doors and panelling found on skips. (It's funny how you can go through life seeing nothing but pieces of mouldy brown patterned carpet and polystyrene ceiling tiles on skips, while people like the Youngs find 18th-century panelled walnut doors...) There's not a modern object to be seen - even the washing-up bowl, battered as it is, looks antique, and coats hang above the treacherous narrow stairs on an enormous hay rake. Every surface, every wide-bottomed Windsor chair cries out to be relocated in a rural setting. So much so that there's something almost sad about this tiny house, oblivious of the cars grazing at its doorstep ■

In the bathroom only the modern blue bath betrays the 20th century, and even it is housed in staircase panelling which the Youngs found in a skip. A rather primitive stickback chair is clearly 19th-century Welsh; the jug beside it is standing on an 18th-century 'leopard spot' painted coffer

