

NOT JUST FOLK



*Josyane and
Robert Young
at home in
London*

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Fig. 1. Josyane and Robert Young in their garden with a pair of French wrought-iron folding garden chairs, c. 1880, and a Provençal iron and zinc folding wine-tasting table, c. 1870.

Fig. 2. This English folk art money box in the form of a bow-fronted house, c. 1800, retains its original paint.

Fig. 3. The French provincial limestone fireplace in the sitting room dates from c. 1790. Among the objects on the mantel are a treenware wine goblet, c. 1660; a carved and painted zebra pull toy, English, c. 1880; a massive English earthenware harvest jug, c. 1800; and an early sycamore dairy bowl, c. 1770. The portrait of Josyane above the mantel is by the Irish artist Colin Watson.



The brick exterior of the house appears virtually identical to others on its street and to much of the neighborhood of Wandsworth in southwest London. Built in the 1840s by a philanthropic charity as part of a subsidized housing project for uniformed workers (mostly from the nearby railway but also policemen and soldiers), its conformity to the rows that surround it ends at the front door.

Beyond the threshold, important objects, others simply engaging, and much just the stuff of everyday life fill the view up the stairwell and through the sitting room door. The layering of textures, shapes, and lines evinces an understated sophistication and wit that is intuitive rather than forced. Each piece asserts its individuality while sitting easily with its neighbors. A neat jumble of coats, hats, boots, and scarves lining the hallway makes clear that this is a vibrant and informal home, brimming with activity.

The house is the private residence of Robert and Josyane Young. Although they are respected dealers of British and European folk art and also run a separate design company, Rivière Interiors, Robert explains that their home has been, “almost intentionally *not* designed.” After spending the first twelve years to-

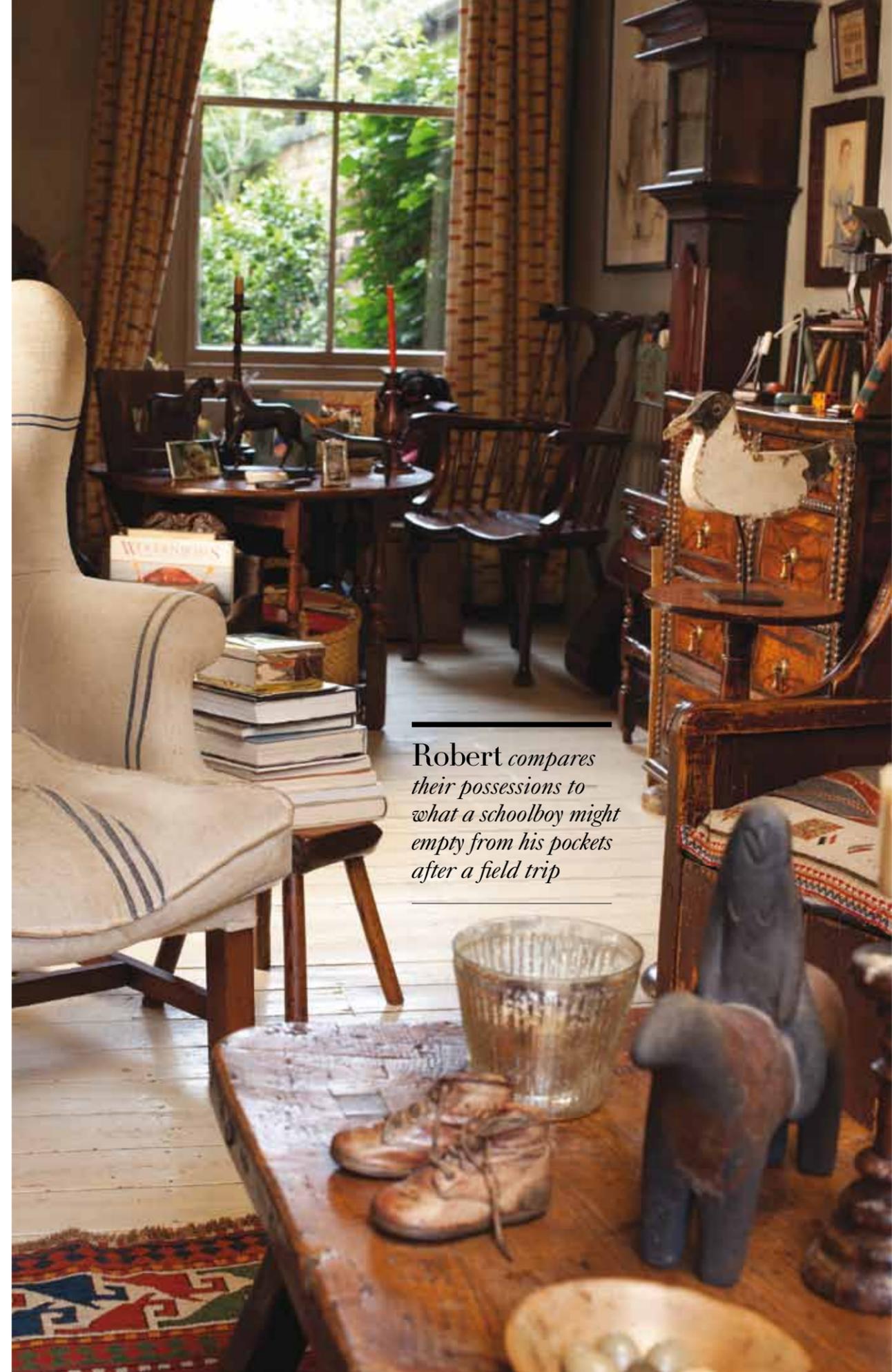
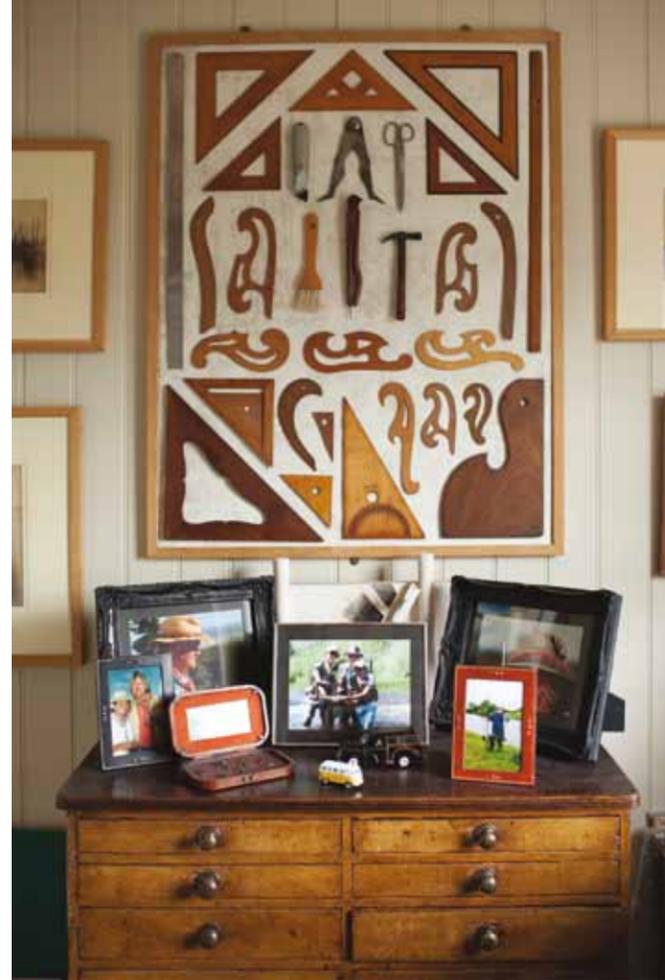
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Fig. 4. Exterior of the house with an Irish Georgian hand-wrought iron gate.

Fig. 5. In the upstairs study a framed canvas-covered panel contains Robert Young's drawing instruments and working tools, most from the nineteenth century. The chest of graduated drawers is English, c. 1840.

Fig. 6. The hand-carved farm trade sign of a cow on the wall of the sitting room is English, c. 1860. Among the objects below it are a spice chest carved with the initials “EH” and dated 1696 and a charming carved folk art figure of a man with an umbrella.

Fig. 7. In the foreground of this view of the sitting room is an eighteenth-century tavern Shove Ha'penny game table. The Georgian easy chair is covered in homespun linen canvas. At the right is an early twentieth-century painted zinc seagull decoy. Beyond it are a William and Mary walnut cushion-molded chest of drawers, c. 1690, and a small tall clock by William Marston of Bishop's Castle near Wales, c. 1775.



Robert compares their possessions to what a schoolboy might empty from his pockets after a field trip

gether living in a one-bedroom flat above their gallery in Battersea, they needed a space of their own in which “to cook and have baths, to smile and cry, and to get away from everything.” Naturally gregarious, they had blurred the lines between their working and personal lives with an endless parade of visitors who arrived at the end of the day and inevitably stayed for a drink or dinner. Once Sam, their first baby, arrived they decided it really was time to create a proper family life.

They chose Wandsworth because it was just far enough away to feel separate from the shop but close enough for an easy commute. Other pioneering young people with abundant imagination but limited budgets had also begun to move there as real estate prices skyrocketed in more central parts of southwest London.

Selecting the house was a different matter. Josyane trudged to about sixty superficially identical terrace houses before they found the right fit. They liked the proportions of the street and the way the building sat on it, as well as the mixture of neighbors: a young couple across the street who belonged to the Chelsea Arts Club and the eccentric old lady next door, who had been born in her house and who would eventually die there after becoming something of an adopted auntie to them.

And they could afford it. The house had been primitively electrified but had no central heating or indoor bathroom. It did have good bones. They spent most of Josyane’s second pregnancy making the place habitable and finally slept there for the first time on the night Josyane was released from the hospital with their second son, Yannick, in August 1989.

After installing the fundamentals (bath, heat, and new wiring), changes to the house were minimal. Most radically, they added a small extension to the kitchen, which allowed them to build a terrace off

their bedroom. Robert initially protested when Josyane suggested that they occupy this small room. However, Josyane had a vision. “That’s the beauty of marrying the right person,” he adds. He now considers lying in bed with a view over the garden or having a coffee on the terrace among his favorite pleasures.

The white walls have been stenciled with airily spaced trees, which give the room a lightness in spite of the books, paintings, decoys, and other treasured objects that have been placed here with the compactness of a ship’s cabin. Even a tiny teddy bear propped on a miniature chair on a bedside table holds a treasured memory. In 1978 Robert’s father gave him £50 with instructions to take Josyane out for a fancy meal. However, while hunting for antiques they bumped into Teddy and, Josyane recounts, “I looked at him and he looked at me and we said okay,” and we bought the bear instead.

The room’s small size did, however, require the couple to store their things in the larger room allocated to Sam. This functional necessity unleashed a whimsical creative burst, which is now one of the house’s most distinctive features. Robert built and painted a wall-length cupboard to resemble the outside of a Georgian town

house, replete with windows and an impressive front door. The sills act as handles and the curtains were painted to match those in the room.

Yannick had his own room next door, with a marvelous antique cabinet painted with cavalry officers. The boys were never forced to stand on ceremony around such rare items. Josyane told them, “we don’t break your toys so don’t break ours,” and that was that. It was only as the boys reached adolescence that their parents renovated the top floor into a thoroughly contemporary space where they could shut themselves off to study or entertain friends.

Downstairs in the sitting room DKT Artworks

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Fig. 8. The terrace outside the bedroom has a nineteenth-century French café table and hand-wrought iron folding chairs. The salvaged wrought-iron English Regency iron railings were fitted to the balcony when the Youngs built it.

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Fig. 9. The cupboard Robert Young built and painted to resemble the exterior of a Georgian town house for one of the bedrooms is flanked by a primitive eighteenth-century child’s Windsor chair to the left, and a mid-eighteenth-century English cabriole-legged comb-back Windsor armchair.

Fig. 10. In the master bedroom the English needlework pastoral scene on the wall dates from c. 1730. The pillows are covered in pieces of antique fabric.

Fig. 11. The primitive Windsor armchair at the left in this view of the master bedroom dates from c. 1740. On the wall behind it hang a mid-eighteenth-century English corner cupboard, along with a collection of family photographs in antique frames. The mid-nineteenth-century English quilt on the bed is made from scraps of velvet.



The house has evolved as a twenty-two-year-long improvisation in furnishing and design





painted the walls the same distinctive duck-egg blue that the Youngs feature at their show stands. Mutable with shifts in the light, the color, which begins with an undercoat of red, “to take the cheapness out,” is pale but never cold. The room features a dramatic stone fireplace, which they had acquired even before they bought the house, and which they love for being exaggeratedly large for the space.

They also brought with them a dugout chair similar to one that had first inspired Robert to go into the antiques business. When it turned up the summer they were getting married, they acquired it for their business because they felt they could not afford to keep it. Josyane’s grandmother heard about it and insisted on buying it for them as their wedding present.

Although they do not consider themselves collectors in a traditional sense, over the years the room (and, indeed, the house) has filled up with other objects, decoys and small statues, family photos and old samplers. Robert compares their possessions to “what a schoolboy might empty from his pockets after a field trip”; each object conjures a memory. The more important things have mostly been exchanged as gifts or occasionally mutually agreed upon as a special treat.

The tradition began with a candlestand they purchased at an auction in Wales when they went away for a weekend soon after they met. For one holiday Josyane

Together they hunted down a rare “grandmother” clock made by William Marston in Bishop’s Castle near Wales, which they love for its quirky charm: the contrast of the slender body and proportionally exaggerated hood and cornice, its hand-painted decoration and enchanting inscription: “I labour here with all my might,/To tell the time by day and night.” They had coveted it since it had first been shown to them, years earlier, by an eccentric gypsy in Wales. However, the old man wasn’t selling. When they heard that his son had sold it, they hunted it down.

For all of the sitting room’s treasures and charm, Robert concedes that they live in the kitchen and garden. Brimming with baskets, bottles, and jars, the kitchen betrays the marks of a passionate cook. Josyane, originally from Provence, describes her cooking as “organic” in approach—she cooks by instinct and never repeats dishes the same way twice, just as their house has evolved as a twenty-two-year-long improvisation.

Such is also the case with her collection of spongeware. What began with a few modest pieces purchased almost thirty-five years ago has grown into an abundant assemblage of varying shapes, sizes, and colors stacked in pleasing casualness in an enormous neoclassical wooden dresser, whose original paint has faded to a worn blue.

The design of the kitchen evolved from the placement of a massive ancient butcher’s block worn to a

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gave Robert an oak joint stool charmingly carved with initials and the year 1643, which they have since learned is the only currently known example that is dated.

In another instance Robert surprised Josyane with a striking wooden cow’s head. The couple had it for sale at a fair in the United States and Josyane mentioned how much she adored it. “I’m not usually into cows,” she explains, “but this one was really extraordinary.” She left the booth briefly and when she returned there was a red sticker on it. “I was absolutely furious,” she recalls. Then a month later Robert presented it to her.

Fig. 12. Another view of the sitting room with a “lobster pot” form comb-back windsor chair and an eighteenth-century two-tiered hanging pine candle box. The sofa is covered in hand-dyed vintage homespun linen patchwork.

Fig. 13. The sitting room’s English elm dugout chair with a cupboard below the seat dates from c. 1700 and retains its original butterfly hinges.

Fig. 14. Burl ash bowl with an early sycamore butter print.

Fig. 15. Hand-carved and painted wood clock face with the emblem of a cockerel and dated 1831.





The spongeware has grown into an abundant assemblage stacked in an enormous neoclassical dresser

gloriously uneven surface that the Youngs had purchased in the Welsh Borders four years before they bought their house. The counter across from it features an ancient draining board, originally used as a scrubbing board for washing clothes.

In good weather the Youngs will dine outside among the trees, topiaries, and clusters of potted plants and flowers that make their yard feel larger than its actual size. At the far end a verdant arch surrounds a wooden bench. Other benches, tables, and chairs are tucked here and there between the plants so you can enjoy the garden from many vistas. Hanging metal and glass lanterns by lighting specialist Hector Finch, which are both handsome and practical, allow them to enjoy it late into the evening.

Josyane was touched when Sam, home from university, recently sat down outside with her and remarked, "It [the garden] really is lovely." The Youngs had reached their target audience. They have been more reticent about inviting members of the trade around, fearing that they would be misunderstood. So they were delighted when Bridget Dwyer of the dealer/decorating company Clarke and Reilly, whose style they greatly admire, gushed that the house felt as if it was the English country cottage that she had always dreamed of. Robert confesses, "We both believe in smell; believe in a house being happy. Some you walk into and they're happy." Theirs exudes a delicious sense of well-being.

Fig. 16. In the kitchen the two-part glazed dresser is English, c. 1780. It holds a collection of mostly nineteenth-century British spongeware and slipware. A late eighteenth-century two-bottle copper wine cooler is on top. To the right of the dresser a late eighteenth-century hand-wrought iron pot stand holds additional pieces of spongeware and slipware.

Fig. 17. The English oak gateleg dining table in the kitchen dates from the mid-seventeenth century. The pig form chopping boards are nineteenth century.

Fig. 18. The garden, with a row of catalpa trees and a nineteenth-century wrought-iron rose arbor at the back.

