

## Louise Ford talks to Paul Nash

Paul Nash shares his insights on the amazing life of an antiques dealer, and what the future holds for the trade

### Personal and family background

At home my mother had a great interest in antiques and interior decoration. She wrote articles for several magazines in the 50s and 60s. Growing up in this environment gave me an inner sense of what was right and what was wrong in design. At school we all collected various decorative interesting items from cheese labels, matchboxes, stamps, marbles, and regrettably much of the natural history living around us. We learnt to look carefully for differences of colour, design, period, material and origin. These early influences have formed the basic instinct behind my work.

### What did you do before art and antiques?

In 1961, when I started in advertising at the London Press Exchange, our chairman advised all new employees to develop a second commercial interest that could one day become our main focus because advertising was a "young man's game". I left advertising as a director of Masius Wynne Williams in St James's Square in 1973 armed with new skills like how to run a business and how to think creatively and of course how to sell. Also our high salaries gave us a lovely lion house in Barnes, which we could not afford to buy today!

### What was the first antique you bought?

After leaving Bradfield College in 1959 I spent a year travelling and working my way around the world. In Nepal I worked in a Christian Mission Hospital outside Pokhara and whilst there I bought some gilt bronze figures from Tibetan refugees who needed the money for food. I would like to think I was more concerned to help others than myself.

### What brought you into the trade?

As already mentioned it was 1961, when alongside my career in advertising I took a stall in Weavers Arcade, Portobello Road. In 1963 I was married to Ana, the perfect partner that a man could hope for, but more importantly she was a Guy's nurse and Guy's was near Bermondsey. Also we had moved to Kensington Park Gardens off Portobello. So as adman and nurse we managed to run a starter antiques business.

The selling consisted of Bermondsey on Friday [5am to 8am in work by 9am] Portobello on Saturday all day, a shop we rented in Merton, South London where friends staffed it in return for space and various antiques fairs – Buxton, Kenilworth, Brighton – instead of holidays.

The buying included our honeymoon in 1963 when we set off for a week in Wales. We ran out of money by the Wednesday and had to return penniless. But working first in St. Martin's Lane and later in St. James's Square I was able to view and leave bids at most London sales in my few free lunch-hours.

### How do you see your role in the trade?

I have had over forty-five years in the trade and almost every day offered me the chance to find the 'holy grail'. A "unicorn's horn", a 16th. Century silver charger painted white, a table cabinet with 20 hidden gold crowns in mint condition, a unique gold figure of Buddha sold as brass and so on. Few antique dealers get the opportunity to give something back to a profession that has offered us such an amazing life. So now if I get the chance to help in any way, I do.

Also I am always interested in trying something different and I have long felt that fossils and minerals should be part of the interior-decorating scene. They are fantastic in every way including value and now with a magnificent gallery run by Harrods on their third floor, a warehouse in Cirencester and June Olympia I seem to be making progress in helping to establish this new/old art form.

## What do you think the impact of the new Internet culture is having on the antiques market?

This is such a big subject that I will only make one point which affects the very basis of our business. Now that knowledge is available to all through the Internet, it has enabled auctioneers to further establish their credentials as 'retailers'. The advantages of dealing through an antique dealer as opposed to an auctioneer are more easily compared yet the differences are harder to see. Even without the Internet we are under pressure. How many negative depictions and descriptions do we see on television and read about in the press? There is a perception of a shady side to the trade and it is time it was eradicated. Add to this the effects of the Internet it can only be another nail in the coffin unless...

## What do you see for the future?

...a typical antique dealer will be an educated and respected member of society. He will have left school and gained a professional qualification in all aspects of antiques which would give him the right to join a professional body relating to antiques – in fact only his specific knowledge would differentiate him from an accountant or a lawyer say. Such a self-regulating body would clear up its own problems without allowing the public to feast upon rare disasters. It would also take the business forward identifying exactly what a customer could expect from an antiques dealer and make sure he got it. It would promote the antique dealer as the best supplier to use and explain the advantages of the trade as a whole – because it would be a whole. Time has passed for the eccentric maverick we all know and love.

For my own future – I will just carry on until the money runs out!

## Do you have a personal collection? If so what?

I have been a collector all my life from the age of 8. Almost everything I have ever bought was bought as a collector-something special about it, something to keep, a keeper. But reality required my treasures to be sold and fortunately there was always enough money left over to buy another winner, which got sold in its turn. So we have a permanently rotating collection. Some people said it was a good insurance to use our specialist knowledge to build a collection for a rainy day. In the early 1990's when it rained on me, others were drowning and no one came to buy my collection now at a knock down price. Again somehow we survived.

## Have you ever broken an antique belonging to someone else?

In the mid. 1970's there was a fabulous collection of Renaissance treasures in Sotheby's. Entering the inner gallery I saw to my right a magnificent 16th. Century Italian walnut table and on it was the most spectacular pottery charger to ever come on the market. Being of a cautious nature I steered well clear by walking up the centre of the room- there was a terrible crash and I froze on the spot. Yes it was the dish now in 20 pieces. Someone before me had not put it back properly and the other end of a loose floorboard I had trodden on was under the table. I smashed a potential world record breaker at ten paces!

## What are your interests outside the world of antiques?

Funnily enough there is a connection because I decided if I was going to be able to lift heavy furniture without damaging myself I needed to keep fit. So I have always played squash and tennis weekly and real tennis, riding and fishing less often. I always think there are many parallels with fishing. ☐

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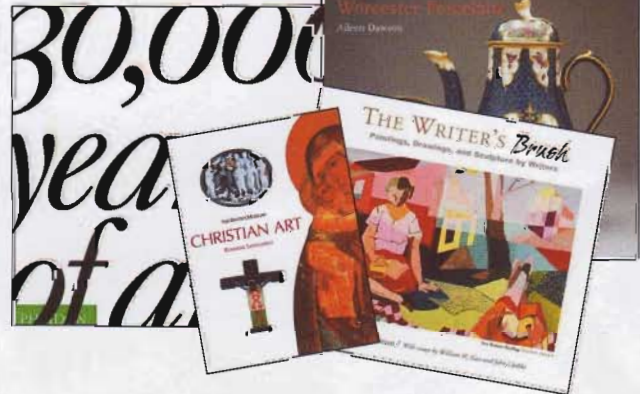
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