
ROBERT YOUNG

Mark Stephen, Christie's specialist, talks to his old friend, Robert Young on their favourite subject; British folk art

Robert Young is one of the leading dealers in folk art. However, Young's folk art is not "folksy". His pieces might be primitive or naïve, but have been chosen for having individuality and an aesthetic. 'It is not about collecting, but about texture and form. What we do is incredibly subjective; the objects need to be different or a bit quirky. Normally this is about texture or eccentricity.'

Young defines the term folk art as 'Objects that don't have an authorship, are not part of the main art-stream narrative. Pieces that were made for use and not decoration, by tradesmen, by unknown makers.' His priority is 'Strength of image', something that stands out; that you can 'read from a distance'. This applies not only to a painting, but needleworks, stick chairs, tavern tables, treen and ceramics. Coupled to this, it has to have an 'integrity of surface'. It needs to have retained original colour, the layers of old paint and polish we describe as patina, retaining its wear and faults through use and time. Folk Art was made for use, so he believes the history of an object needs to be preserved and hates anything over-restored or stripped.

Young explains that classical antiques such as fine French furniture, silver, bronzes, marquetry, are put back and restored to how they looked when they were made. This is what the market dictates. Robert, however, values objects for their history – you must be able to see what's happened to them. An old sign writers tavern sign for example had no value when it became surplus to requirements, but the fact it survived, meant it must have been valued by someone. How it survived in the first place is always a mystery to him; basically 'someone in the past did not want to scrap it'. What he does is a celebration of the object and its history, but not in an academic sense. These things have an aesthetic, an appeal that he hopes his clients will share.

When it comes to Design and how to place objects in Interiors, Robert and his wife, Josyane, who deals with the

decorating side of their business, have some basic rules. They love to work with clients who enjoy the challenge of mixing contemporary architecture and art with the objects they sell. Folk art 'goes perfectly in a contemporary setting, though free-standing furniture one can walk round such as cricket tables and tavern tables work better than case- furniture which has to be placed against the walls'. 'Great things need space', he says.

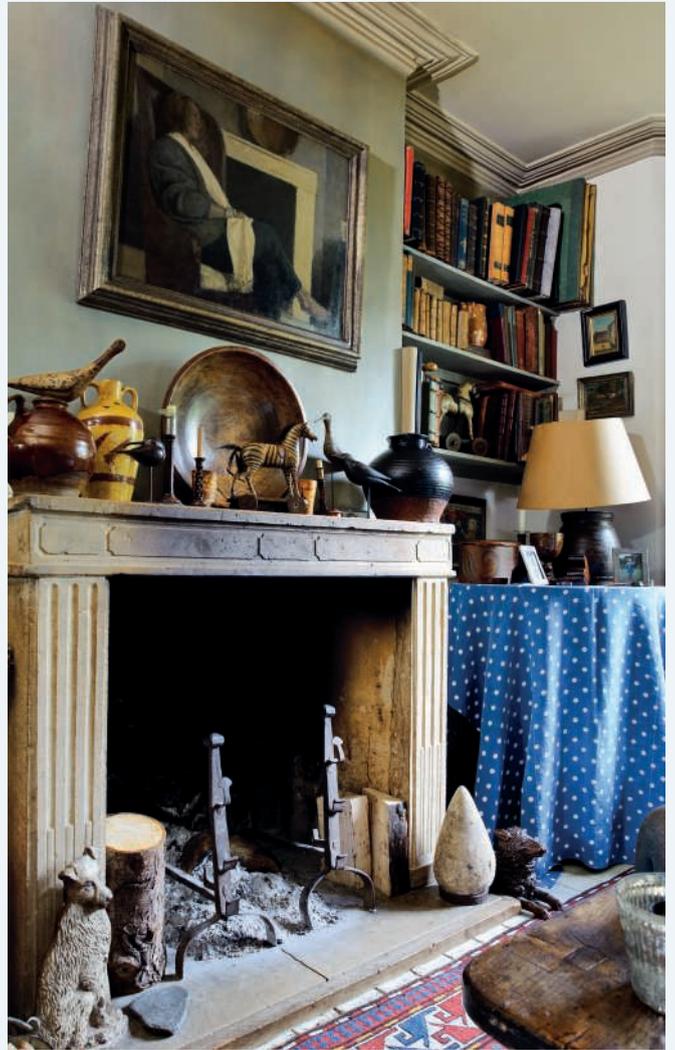
Surface is the word Robert uses to epitomise his ethos; 'We like texture and natural material'. Plaster, stone, brick, raw and polished concrete and slate, which all have texture and surface are important to him. He prefers this to smooth emulsion and uses light to highlight 'the juxtaposition of texture and colour, rough with classy'.

Such contrast is important, and a rule he and Josyane share is to mix rough with fine. A rough tavern table, for example, should have a polished bowl on top. A modern polished table, demands a rough dairy bowl or a rushlight on a painted wood base for contrast. He likes clients who have the confidence to 'Use old things as accents in a contemporary setting'

Young names Jim Ede, of Kettle's Yard, Cambridge, as a formative influence. He explains that Jim had no money but created a series of rooms with sensational atmosphere by grouping items that he loved, rather than those with significant monetary value. He patronised Alfred Wallace and Ben Nicholson "before they were anyone". These paintings and sketches were hung with no pretension and mixed with compositions of pebbles from a beach, bare floorboards and flower pots and plants. Ede added to the atmosphere by letting students browse all day; sketching and reading. The love for the objects is what comes through, and Young identifies a confidence in putting together things with limited value but great physical presence. Young encourages creating groups of humble things that make a great entity so the collector becomes the curator.



GET THE LOOK



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He loves scent, the smell of azaleas in a garden, the smell of cut flowers in a house, and the smell that permeates the room from a log fire. He dislikes the trend for painting old furniture with a Gustavian grey colour. He would rather buy a contemporary piece of furniture than one 'tarted-up' to suit the trend of the market. Though he is quite sanguine and realises fashions come and go. When we were young, 'think of all the painted pine dressers and chests dropped into tanks of paint stripper'

On the future of the market he ends on a confident note; 'Our clients are getting younger. They are Interior Designers, contemporary art collectors as well as traditional collectors of Furniture and objects; 'they just get it'.

Robert and Josyane own and run Robert Young Antiques in Battersea and Riviere Interiors. Robert will be exhibiting at Masterpiece fair, London 25 June - 1 July.

www.robertyoungantiques.com



Robert and Josyane's London home