

The Bright Young Face of Today's Antiques Trade

Duncan Phillips meets Sarah Percy-Davis, Chief Executive of LAPADA

The world of antiques is constantly changing. Back in the 1970s, every town and village had one or more antique shops, places crammed with all kinds of treasures, some valuable, waiting to be discovered, other pieces requiring another twenty years before they, too, would suddenly find fame on the Antiques Roadshow. Back then, a distressed pine cupboard, with its paint flaking on the floor, looked ready for the bonfire. Today, in the new millennium, it's a designer piece of retro chic.

For many years very few people knew much about how the antiques trade worked – there was no internet, few people went to London in search of higher priced pieces, indeed, the antiques trade existed on a very local level. Today, so much has changed. TV has done a great deal to give us all hope that somewhere in the loft a fortune is waiting – even Del Boy discovered a watch in his garage that finally made him a 'mill-yon-air'!

Now we understand that if we are going to spend some serious money on antiques, whether for pleasure or with an eye on a long-term investment, we really need to know what we are doing. The antiques trade has been busy, doing its best to shed its Lovejoy image and at the same time dispel the 'men in blue suits' image of Bond Street that makes customers nervous to even open the door of some London galleries.

Step forward LAPADA, The Association of Art & Antiques Dealers, that represents around 600 dealers in the UK and abroad and has a strong presence promoting its members at many fairs, notably the forthcoming The National Fine Art & Antiques, which takes place at the NEC, Birmingham from 16-20 January 2008.

Founded in 1974, LAPADA has sought not only to represent the interests of its members but also to make buying antiques an easier, reassuring and pleasurable experience. Today, the association is run from an office in Chelsea with a non-executive Chairman, The Earl Howe, a Board of Directors, comprising dealers from across the country, a small back-room staff and a dynamic young Chief Executive, Sarah Percy-Davis.

I went along to meet Sarah and to find out more about the current state of the UK antiques market.

Sarah, tell us about LAPADA, why should a collector choose to buy from a LAPADA member first and foremost?

Because a collector can buy with the confidence of knowing that dealers can only become a member of LAPADA if they meet the Association's high standards of experience, quality of stock and knowledge of their subject. Also members must agree to abide by our strict Code of Practice that includes the necessity for correct labelling, including the price and giving information about restoration.

If a collector is looking for something particular, how can LAPADA help?

If you call the association and tell us what you are looking for we can nearly always find a dealer who can help. We can search our database by discipline and location or you can do this yourself on our website www.lapada.org. In addition many of our members have on-line galleries so you can also search for specific objects, there are almost 12,000 works of art on-line. Our website has a lot of other useful information including details members' own in-house exhibitions and information on the best fairs where members will be exhibiting.

I understand you have been in your position for three years. What changes have you noticed to the Art Market in that period?

The trade did have a difficult time following 9/11, which together with a strong pound against the dollar did not help to encourage the Americans, previously big buyers of antiques in the UK, to visit and spend. I think at this point many dealers took a very hard look at the way in which they did business. For example some exhibit more than in the past at fairs in the USA.

I have noticed that like other businesses, antiques dealers are using the internet to market themselves, although nothing beats seeing and touching the object first hand, so although the internet is often the first port of call for research, for the middle and upper market the final purchase is rarely done without first seeing the object.

From surveys of our members we know that the profile of antique buyers has changed over the years, the percentage of traditional collectors to have diminished to account for approximately 28% of buyers and couples buying to decorate their homes now makes up about 77% of buyers. As a result antiques have been swept up with fashion and many dealers have looked at ways to present antiques to appeal to the buyer with interior design in mind. Many combine antiques with modern upholstery or fabrics and mix periods eclectically juxtaposing a contemporary picture with a 17th century piece of furniture.

What changes to the Art Market would you like to see in the next ten years?

I would like to see a greater revival and appreciation for antiques and a reaction against the mass produced and unexciting. I think the tide is turning, already more people are looking for the bespoke, the unique, the beautiful, people want to own something that will last and has some historical value and as green issues become more important I hope that this disposable society will look harder at the gems of the past. It is after all the ultimate form of recycling!

What are your thoughts on the current antique and collecting programmes on TV? Do you think they influence people's view of the antiques trade?

There is a wide variety of programmes on antiques, some of which are very informative and others fall in to the category of cheap reality TV which does not give an accurate impression of the trade. 'The Antiques Road Show' is probably the most longstanding and brings together some of the top experts in the country; dealers, specialists from auction houses and museums. The viewer never fails to learn something new and it has become quite an institution.

Another reasonable programme is 'Deal or No Deal', where the public choose to sell their antique either by accepting an offer from a dealer who is prepared to invest his own money in the item or by trying their luck at auction where they may or may not realise a higher price, but after the commission has been taken will they make a larger profit? This programme although aimed at the lower end of the market gives a fair view of both sides of the trade.

Our magazine is always keen to offer advice to people decorating their homes. Is this a service LAPADA or its members offer?

LAPADA members will often give advice to people decorating their homes, most dealers will be happy to deliver a piece of furniture or picture to your home on approval and let you try it in situ before making a final decision. A number of our members also provide interior design services and will always be able to advise for example on the appropriate upholstery for furniture.

Have you a personal preference for a particular period style?

I have quite an eclectic taste and love a wide variety of works of art but my passion is probably for pictures since this was my specialisation when I worked at Sotheby's and Phillips some years ago. My favourite periods are the Renaissance, the Aesthetic and Arts and Crafts movements of the late 19th Century and Modern British art.

Do you collect anything in particular?

In this job you tend to develop a taste beyond your means but I do try to buy one antique or painting a year. I don't collect a specific object such as paperweights or clocks but I do like furniture of all periods and have a mix of Georgian, Arts and Crafts and 20th century design pieces. Similarly with pictures I have a mix of 19th century, modern British and contemporary.

The National Fine Art & Antiques Fair is every January and is run in association with LAPADA. What other events feature LAPADA members?

You will find LAPADA members at most good antiques fairs across the country as well as in their shops, The National Fine Art & Antiques Fair is one of the most important events where some 70 members exhibit and the Winter Fine Art & Antiques Fair at Olympia in London is another important fair held in association with LAPADA.

LAPADA runs two fairs that are exclusively for members, one at the Centaur, Cheltenham Racecourse in October and another at the Royal Academy in May 2008.

I understand LAPADA has been influential in designing a new roadside symbol for antiques dealers. Can you tell our readers what to expect when they see the sign?

The new sign is in the form of a three-branch candelabra. It was chosen by the Department for Transport from a selection of designs that we sent them. These designs were the result of a competition that LAPADA had suggested for students at the Department of Graphic Design of the Buckinghamshire and Chilterns University to come up with a winning design.

It will take several months before these new signs begin to appear on the roadside as the new symbol was only recently approved and you can imagine that there is quite a lot of planning that has to take place in each local area where a sign has been applied for.

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The convenient pocket-sized LAPADA directory of members is available free of charge from the Association and its website www.lapada.org, should be the first port of call for any collector.

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