

Master of antiques

FOR OVER 40 YEARS, SPENCER SWAFFER HAS RUN HIS ANTIQUES SHOP IN ARUNDEL. HE TALKS TO ALEX HOPKINS ABOUT EFFORTLESS GLAMOUR, ENGLISH STYLE AND WHAT IT MEANS TO BE THE WORLD'S AUTHORITY ON ANTIQUES



Clockwise, from top right: green antique pots; spiral staircase in Spencer's shop; scrubbing boards; antique dresser; globes; four statues. All images by Alan Pilkington



Spencer Swaffer barely pauses for breath as he tells me about his weekly schedule. "I was in France on Monday, back in the shop to see a customer on Tuesday, at local auctions all of Wednesday and then up at 4am on Thursday to travel to Yorkshire. I got there for 9am and started a huge tour of the north." He must be utterly exhausted, I remark. "Oh, yes," he replies, with an infectious laugh. "But it's the way I work. I'm simply terrified of missing anything."

The shop Swaffer is referring to is located on Arundel's beautiful High Street. Swaffer has been there since 1971 and is as much a fixture of the quaint market town as the restored and remodelled medieval castle, which he has a stunning view of from the upper floors of his premises.

Swaffer is widely recognised as one of the top antique dealers in Europe. His customer list reads like a who's who of interior decorating. He's travelled all over the world, sourcing antiques from Scotland, France, Italy and Sweden, which he brings back and adds to his treasure trove, nestled in the steep vale of the South Downs.

"It all began as a boyhood obsession," he says. "I was a very strange, solitary child who used to wander the Downs picking up shards of Roman pottery and Neolithic axe heads. That same lonely boy frequented all of Brighton's jumble sales. I was always first in the queue, just as I am now, for most things."

By the time he was 11, Swaffer had created a museum in his bedroom. He was interviewed on BBC Radio 4's *Today* programme. A canny Brighton antiques dealer just happened to be listening and contacted Swaffer, offering him £50 for two Egyptian Scarab beads. It was a turning point: Swaffer realised that he preferred selling to being a museum curator and opened stalls in various antique markets. Aged just 16 he graduated to a small shop outside Brighton station and a weekend stall in London's Camden Passage. But then tragedy struck: his mother died of cancer and

two weeks later his father killed himself.

From the proceeds of the sale of his parents' Saltdean bungalow, Swaffer bought the shop in Arundel High Street and has, he proudly tells me "been open seven days a week ever since." How, at such a young age, did he master his trade?

"The easiest way to learn is to buy something and then listen to why people don't want to buy it," he tells me. "They'll never tell you why they're buying it – and that's whether it's a dealer or a member of the public. Instead, they'll rubbish it and from what they say you'll slowly gleam what's wanted and what isn't."

Swaffer, who describes himself as a "dealer's dealer", believes that every dealer has an innate sense of the value of something: "It's rather like a bookmaker who can always put the price on a horse's back; a dealer can always put the price on a chest of drawers."

The perfect location for an antiques dealer is a building rich with history, and one couldn't get better than Swaffer's Arundel shop, which used to be an inn – the George Tavern – 400 years ago. The main part of the building was a coach house, while the tavern occupied the whole of the street, right up to Arundel Castle's entrance. The enchantment in Swaffer's voice is palpable as he describes his place of work.

"It's a wonderful building. We're spread over four floors and there's a wealth of architectural detail, from stone mullion windows to magnificent Elizabeth Herringbone brickwork. There's a window upstairs with beautiful copper plate graffiti carved into it by English Civil War prisoners, who were brought there via tunnels from the castle, which still exist under the



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huge walled garden at the back. The past history just seeps from the walls.”

Inside, Swaffer has been very precise in how he lays out the antiques, admitting that he suffers from “an acute form of OCD.” Everything he buys is placed as he would see it in somebody’s home.

“It’s not unusual for me to create a setting,” he explains, “but I don’t do very formal room settings. It’s much more a design-led display; however, it’s not uncommon for people to come in and buy the whole thing: chairs, table and the pictures over it.

“It’s a curious business in that it fulfils an equal amount of things to both dealers and to private clients. I’ve a big international following of travelling antique dealers who come to me to buy for their shops, but equally because they’ve taught me what they need, I also understand what the ultimate home owner wants. In that way, what I have is quite an edited collection.”

Swaffer tells me that he has always bought the same thing: items with a very homely, warm feel. He favours a lot of paint and mirrors, and even, he laughs “what is supposedly boring: English brown furniture. This mixes marvellously with great big, flamboyant mirrors and shabby upholstered furniture from Italy.”

After four decades in the business he knows precisely what his customers want. It is, he maintains “about the whole mix – a very English way of decorating. If you walked into my shop, although you’d see a lot of European things, you’d notice that they have

English elegance to them – that English simplicity. I don’t do huge and Rococo. It’s a more restrained feel, which English people are more comfortable with.”

This cosy, effortlessly refined ambience is carried over to Swaffer’s own home, a grade II listed Georgian house, just around the corner from his shop, which is full of English furniture and roaring open fires. You won’t find what he dismissively refers to as “waxy furniture” in Swaffer’s home; he prefers things to have a drier feel – “to be real.”

“For the last seven years there’s been this obsession with bleaching everything and I just can’t understand it,” he says. “Our front room is dominated by this enormous carved 18th century pine Sunburst from a Roman Catholic church in Italy. Underneath is a dry Italian trestle table. We don’t have lots of things on surfaces and favour washed-off floorboards. Yes, they’re cold in winter, but so much better than fitted carpets.”

It sounds like the perfect retreat for this indefatigable man who has lived and breathed antiques since he was no more than a child – and shows no sign at all of slowing down. “What drives me on?” he says. “Again, it’s that fear of missing something. That’s why I’m out there constantly buying and why the shop is always open. I can’t bear to miss an opportunity.”



Clockwise, from left: interior shot of Spencer’s shop; exterior of shop; Spencer Swaffer; antique pots



An expert’s guide: MAKING ANTIQUES WORK FOR YOU

Buy what you really like, whether you know anything about it or not.
Always act on instinct.

Go for something humble and go for something grand and you’ll end up creating a comfortable feel.

Don’t be frightened to mix new with old. We have quite a contemporary kitchen table, with a zinc top and some Conran chairs around it, but beside that is a period dresser with period china.
The whole thing just works.

The marvellous thing about antiques is that the moment you buy them they’re still worth what you paid for them. Go and buy something at a modern furniture store and it’s worth nothing the moment you buy it.

I find English people are more comfortable with.”