

dealers' diary

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reports

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Portrait prize
for Peabody

KENT dealer **Michael Sim** has recently sold this bronze portrait plaque of the 19th century American philanthropist George Peabody to the Peabody Trust in Washington DC for a four-figure sum, funded by three current generations of the Peabody family.

It will hang in The Peabody Room of Georgetown Public Library in Washington DC, to replace a painting destroyed by fire in 2013.

The portrait is derived from the statue by William Wetmore Story, unveiled at the Royal Exchange in July 1869, and was probably made for sale at the same time.

Set for Stonyhurst

THE *Stonyhurst College Antiques & Fine Art Fair* at Hurst Green, near Clitheroe in Lancashire, runs from August 8-10.

The Elizabethan manor, now a boarding school, plays host to some 30 dealers with newcomers including: **J.C. Fine Art** (North Yorkshire, 17th, 18th and 19th century furniture and art); **Belgraviana Antiques** (Clitheroe, antiquarian books), **Art of the Imagination** (Wiltshire, original illustrations and contemporary bronzes) and **Aire Valley Antiques** (furniture).
www.gallowayfairs.co.uk



Above: *On the Wharfe* by Lancashire-born painter Herbert Royle (1870-1958), oil on canvas, 2ft x 16in (60 x 40cm), £6750 from **Bradley Carnes Fine Art** at Stonyhurst College.

Two 'lousy eyes' but no end of vision...

■ What drives the phenomenon that is Spencer Swaffer?

"YOU cannot expect praise in this business. Don't ever expect anyone to tell you how clever you are."

This was the humbling rebuff of Gretchen Andersen to a young Spencer Swaffer on the opening day of his first shop 40 years ago when, as he helped her load its entire contents into her battered Volvo, he suggested she'd bought some "pretty marvellous stuff".

That day she was his first customer and, although perhaps never one for gushing praise, Gretchen clearly holds Spencer in some esteem as she is still the first person through the door of his Arundel shop every Saturday.

Her gruff words have rung in his ears ever since, one of the greatest truths of antiques dealing – don't ever enter this game if you crave the approval of others.

"The way I deal you're out searching for things in markets in the fields of Europe. Until recently I was fiercely competitive and a bit of an outsider. I didn't tend to talk to the others, I'd stand on my own in doorways miles from home waiting for a fair to open. I suppose I was still rather like the solitary child on the Downs."

But, in the last few years since the recession, he thinks a more friendly atmosphere is developing in the trade and has himself become a bit of a reformed outsider: "The Antiques Young Guns movement, for instance, is completely alien to how we were at that age and it's wonderful. You see their enthusiasm on Twitter when they're getting up at 4am to go buying and then you see what they've bought in the evening.

"The AYGs have alienated some old-school dealers, who are still standing around moaning in the back of salerooms about the price of gateleg tables. I'm not sure about the name, but I would much rather be part of something that is enthusiastic and positive than be yet another of those dealers who moan all the time."

Such a response is typical of Spencer, who frequently admonishes himself for harking back to the old days. Sardonic



Left: Arundel antiques dealer, Spencer Swaffer.

and youthfully mischievous, yet tirelessly driven, the man is something of a legend in the decorative antiques world. After 40 years of dealing, his 'secret' has been his ability to move with the times and adapt to trends, and he remains full of enthusiasm mixed with a hard business head and nose for a deal.

Like many a dyed-in-the-wool dealer, he started early and was only 12 when the local papers picked up on his 'museum'.

"I was a very solitary child. I used to roam the Downs on my own, picking up shards of pottery, fossilised sea urchins, that sort of thing, and put them in cabinets in my bedroom. Then I discovered jumble sales, which in those days happened each weekend in every church hall on every corner of every street in Brighton. I found amazing things, I liked anything that was a bit weird, and everything went back to my museum."

On reading a piece in the paper, a Brighton antiques dealer paid his tuppence to get in and offered Spencer £50 for three scarab beads: "Then I realised that I preferred dealing to being a curator."

He went into partnership with a rather

"He went into partnership with a girl from school who quite quickly became a man, grew a handlebar moustache and started driving a shooting break"

odd girl from his school who "quite quickly became a man, grew a handlebar moustache and started driving an old-fashioned shooting break. We made quite a strange pair, I was 14, she/he was 17".

Every Saturday, they would drive to sell their wares on a stall in Camden Passage, where the older dealers took him under their wing.

At 16 Spencer left school and worked in a second-hand bookshop in Brighton, while still dealing with his moustachioed partner, but, owing to his parents' pleas for him to have a proper career, he went to journalism school in Portsmouth.

This opened another wonderland of junk shops and jumble sales, and he would buy all week before getting a taxi back to Brighton on Friday and selling from the Chapel Royal Hall antiques market on Saturday.

That first 'proper' job was on the *Brighton Evening Argus*, although of course this didn't stop him dealing and he had the paper's only Ford Escort with a roof rack permanently full of furniture.

But when both of his parents died unexpectedly when he was only 20, he used his inheritance to buy a shop



Left: Spencer Swaffer's trusty Volvo outside his Arundel shop after returning from a West Country buying trip in the 1980s.

Below: recent interiors of the Arundel shop.



in Arundel and there it started, with Gretchen's first visit.

In those early days in the '70s, Spencer's main customers were Dutch and German trade who would buy "shockingly repetitive things like pairs of candlesticks, copper kettles and dreadful trios of vaseline glass vases".

It was only when Michael Davis, who "almost invented shipping antiques to America", started bringing over US dealers to the UK on buying trips that Spencer started selling to the American trade, which has remained his bread and butter.

At that point, he did a gruelling buying run every single week. Monday morning would see him drive the Volvo estate (what else?) to Plymouth, then on to Newton Abbott market on Tuesday

morning, followed by the whole of Devon, Somerset and then Bath.

He remembers parking the Volvo overnight in the middle of Bath with a good oak dresser and a pile of brass fenders strapped to the roof without anyone touching it. Although you could argue, with that on board, no one would touch it now...

He would do Bath's Guinea Lane on a Wednesday morning and drive to Arundel by nightfall where he would be met by a gaggle of London dealers eager to see what he had found.

At this point Spencer was still buying predominantly traditional English antiques but slowly, led by interiors magazines and demand from American dealers, there started to be an interest in the French and

European wares for which he is largely now known.

So began his frequenting of the Parisian flea markets, namely St Ouen where, after 25 years of weekly attendance, the stall holders simply called him 'Le Fleaman'.

"Then, the market would start at 2am, so I would leave the shop on Thursday at 6pm, fly from Gatwick to Paris, sleep in a hotel for three hours, do the market and then fly back to be in the shop again by 12.30 on Friday. I never bought less than 100 things, often it would be 150 or 160."

Times have changed and, he says, the Paris markets have declined shockingly in recent years, so he only visits twice a year and buys only a handful of things.

The reason? "The lack of American customers and the French tendency, when

something has not sold, not to replace it or reduce the price but to increase the price because they haven't made any money!

"It has also been taken over by the mid-century material – OK in moderation but it has swamped the market to such an extent that there are very few real dealers left with interesting things."

Now the fairs in the south of France are his hunting ground, combined with a network of dealers in the countryside of northern France, Holland and Belgium.

Occasionally he goes to Sweden, but this too is a difficult market: "There are no interesting collections of things."

"Despite that, the Swedish look remains enormously fashionable, but

DAVE TURPIN

Dealer in general antiques, curios and collectables, Eling, Southampton
www.turpinantiques.co.uk



- 1. How long have you been dealing?**
Full-time for two years after retiring from the police force.
- 2. Do you do any fairs?**
My wife Lesley and I are always at the *Bath Vintage & Antiques Market* on the first and last Sunday in the month.
- 3. What was your first job?**
First job was a cabinetmaker, then a firearms dealer, then policeman, now antiques dealer.
- 4. Best and worst thing about dealing?**
Best, the thrill of the hunt and the prospect of finding a sleeper. Worst, the current attitude of customers trying to cut you to the bone on prices – thanks to TV antiques shows.
- 5. Best buy and biggest mistake?**
Best buy, some very large rock crystal skulls sold to a lady in Munich for lots of euros. Biggest mistake, buying clocks that need repairing.
- 6. Dream object?**
A Martin Brothers tobacco jar in mint condition.
- 7. Guiltiest pleasure?**
Lying in the spa waters of Bath's Thermae spring after a hard day at the market.
- 8. Any advice for those starting out?**
Do your research. It's important.
- 9. Real ale or espresso martini?**
Real ale. As a long-standing member of CAMRA what else – and it has to be Bellringer or London Pride.
- 10. Tell us a secret?**
I recently advertised to buy antique Russian dolls, the wooden, carved, nesting type. I had a picture emailed to me showing a load that a guy wanted to sell. I cannot show the picture in *ATG* but suffice to say they were not made from wood but rubber. Enough said...

If you are a dealer and would like to be featured in 10 Questions
email annabradylatgmedia.com

dealers' diary

SWAFFER ON... THE FUTURE OF THE TRADE

"I really think that we are on the edge of another golden era for dealing. There are lots of young dealers pitching out stands at fairs and really developing their own look. Even if some people who have been in the trade for a long time don't necessarily understand some of those looks, they're still popular.

"The greatest threat to the trade is not owning your own freehold, as more and more people are being forced out of their shops through rents and rates. We dealers also need to get better at talking to customers. It's something we've generally all been rather bad at, because we're loners by nature.

"My advice for young dealers comes again from Gretchen Andersen, who once said to me 'If you don't turn up, you don't get'. That was the reason I went to Kempton and bought a fossilised rubber pig – that fear of missing something!"

the spencer swaffer interview

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there are many fakes and pieces being misrepresented."

The most frequent are those ever-popular pairs of Gustavian drawers, which Spencer sells but points out there was originally no such thing – they are seven-drawer chests, sawn in half to create two, but are endlessly labelled as original.

In 1983 his current shop, a huge and beautifully rambling place dating to 1590 when it was the George Tavern, came onto the market. He scraped together £83,000 to buy it.

The shop and its garden, where we sit to conduct this interview, have become indelibly linked with his brand. It's easy to see why visitors come here and buy the whole Swaffer look.

He admits it would be easier to have a black box on an industrial estate. The small doorways here restrict the size of what he can buy and the elderly floors won't take very heavy items. He once bought six marble urns in Nice which broke every joist under the floor as they were rolled through.

Every joist had to be replaced and the urns stayed in the garden until a German decorator bought them and they were rolled back out (over the now strengthened floor) to reside in Tina Turner's villa at Villefranche-sur-Mer.

In financial terms the 'golden' period for the business was in the boom years of the late 1990s, when there were two

shops in Arundel, a warehouse and 16 staff. In 1999, the turnover was £6.1m, entirely earned from the US.

But the American trade dropped off in November 2000 when the financial markets took a downturn and, compounded by 9/11 the year after, has never been the same since.

Following 9/11, a fully booked month of daily appointments with US dealers was wiped out overnight and turnover dropped immediately to £1.6m, a level that now remains the norm.

Only just recently, Spencer has noted some smaller and younger US firms returning to Europe to buy: "In the same way that the trade is regenerating here, it's happening over there, but generally in the small towns."

Seven years ago came a crueler blow – a retinal vein thrombosis in his left eye, caused by a sudden spike in blood pressure as he bent down to pick up a nail from his office floor.

"Instantly my sight in that eye was massively reduced. I had numerous operations and flew to America to see a surgeon who told me that even if he had been there when it happened, there would have been nothing he could do to help."

Although he could still drive and had peripheral vision, he lived for the next few years in fear that the same might happen in his other eye. Three years ago it did.

He had decided to do the Battersea Decorative fair for the first time – although



Left: "Folk art at its most earthy. Part English primitive, part Easter Island with a bit of Joe Bugner about him. He has such presence. He towers over me. He sold immediately." Spencer considers this 19th century scarecrow to be one of the best objects he has ever found in 40 years of dealing. Made from elm, it was unearthed by his long-time associate, Paul Farnham, who has been finding great objects for his shop for three decades. It came from a collector in Cavendish, Suffolk, who had bought it from a local farmer in the 1950s, and had probably never left the village in 150 years.

SWAFFER ON... CURRENT TRENDS

"Since the distressed, pared-back and industrial looks have been ripped off so much, there has been a recent reversion to very plain English country furniture, in oak and elm but with wonderful patina that cannot be mimicked. It hasn't spread through into mahogany yet at all but everyone is coming in asking for the country furniture and folky look."

"My sight has improved a lot but only recently I picked up a plastic waste paper basket and started examining it in great detail"

he had briefly done Olympia many years ago, he is not a fan of doing fairs, but at the time he needed the money to pay some hefty legal fees.

During the set-up, he bought a collection of "fantastic white turtle carapaces" which formed the centrepiece of his stand, along with a collection of carved wooden angel wings. He admits to allowing himself to feel rather proud.

On the morning of the opening, he squeezed in a visit to Kempton: "I couldn't sleep with excitement. But all I found was a perished rubber pig from a butcher's display stand. It was £220 and I sold it for £240."

On arrival at Battersea, he found that the turtle carapaces had failed vetting and he threw a "monumental hissy fit" before being allowed to keep them on the stand.

"For 20 minutes after the opening, no one came near the stand and I wanted to run away and hide, it felt awful."

Suddenly they were inundated and sold almost everything on the stand.

"I allowed myself to stand back and feel quite pleased with myself," he says. "And at that moment, it happened in the other eye. I couldn't see a thing. I knew what had happened."

Spencer went to hospital where they confirmed another retinal vein thrombosis. He found a specialist and in two weeks had seven operations but nothing worked: "I came home to Arundel and couldn't see a thing."

But gradually the mists have cleared: "I still have peripheral vision in the left eye and in the wrecked one, a small blob of vision. It has slowly improved, although I didn't see [my wife] Freya's face for two years, but now I can see, albeit blurrily."

Although he cannot read or drive, he can write and use an iPad: "Freya and some very good friends drive me everywhere"

Despite being registered blind, I should point out that on meeting Spencer, you would never guess that there was anything wrong with his eyesight.

He says faces appear a little blurry but there is nothing in his manner that would suggest that his sight is any different to yours or mine.

With energy undiminished, he thinks Swaffer stock has, if anything, improved because he is constantly questioning his judgement: "The really marvellous things still stick out and my hands have become much more important. My sense of touch is much more acute."

"My sight has improved a lot but only recently I was at Woolley & Wallis, learnedly examining things, when I picked up a plastic waste paper basket and started inspecting it in great detail before realising what it was and put it back hastily hoping no one saw!"

Suddenly more reliant upon the honesty of others in the trade, he has found his handicap has brought out the true colours of other dealers: "The majority have been fantastic and really helped me out. But a few have persistently tried it on."

Come hell or high water, antiques are his lifeblood and I suspect this man will be dealing for many years to come – aided by that wry, boyish humour: "They always said I had a good eye, and now I've got two lousy ones!"

SWAFFER ON... TRADE HEROES

"Dermot and Jill Palmer who dealt in marvellous things before anyone else realised they were wonderful. We travelled together on early buying trips."

"Gretchen Andersen, my first customer on the day I opened and still the first person through the door every Saturday. Her shop, Lacquer Chest on Kensington High Street, is legendary."

"Robin Coleman who was so generous to a generation of young dealers who sold to him at his shop in Bath. Genial organiser of the best antiques fair ever and the only one I ever failed to wangle my way into during set up,"

"Keith Skeel, maybe not everyone's idea of a hero, but his Camden Passage showrooms were an education in the weird, the wonderful and the vulgar."

"Axel Vervoodt who set the tone for zen interiors with restrained use of the best most simple of antiques."