

# Swiss trend for antiques

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# SWISS TREND FOR ANTIQUES

The growing interest in antiques is an outstanding phenomena of modern times. Old chattels which the Victorians thought fit to stow away are now being sold at high prices at "Antique Supermarkets". The weekly antique markets in London are always swarming with people and the population of collectors and antique connoisseurs never ceases to grow. Catalogues, silverware, handbooks, auction prospectuses, antiquarian magazines and other publications related to the trade are being snapped up by a constantly expanding public.

This trend has been as marked in Switzerland, if not more so, than Great Britain where Dickens wrote about an "Old Curiosity Shop". The same is true of other countries such as France, where the existence of a moneyed urban society with a traditional liking for refinement kept the commerce of artistic shops going.

Antique shops were very rare in Switzerland before the war. Apart from a few large towns, particularly Geneva, Zurich and Basle, it was unusual to find a shop dealing in antiques, and anybody wishing to open one would have been rather ill-advised.

The situation is different today and antique shops are sprouting up in small towns. To understand how the trend has been set in Switzerland it is perhaps worth analysing the various aspects of the antiques business. It seem that one must make a distinction between "antiques for the poor", "antiques for the prosperous" and "antiques for the very rich".

In the first case, one immediately has in mind London's Portobello Market. It has goods on sale ranging from rag-and-bone, through bric-a-brac to curiosities. Brass Victorian door knobs, fake Chinese pottery, plated silver, old postcards, cast-iron fire poker, war decorations and ancient views of London. Fifty years ago the poor used to buy second hand household articles at Portobello Market. Now the small wage-earners (the successors of the "poor") buy G-Plan furniture while today's poor look at these variegated objects of the past for their romanticism. The chattels sold at Portobello are often useless, meaningless and ugly. This is their charm. They break from the world of mass manufacture and functionalism and spiritually resemble the public one is likely to meet there: Young people disguised as Indians, Hindus, Stuarts and Apostles. The antiques for the new poor have therefore the virtue of breathing "life and freedom" in an increasingly mechanised world.

The second type of antiques of our inventory are those intended for the prosperous. This market should however be divided into three main classes.

First, the tourists. For them antiques are considered as souvenirs. Before they return to America they will stroll along Petticoat Lane, Portobello and Kings Road, Chelsea, looking for something to take home as a present or souvenir. Antiques have basically the same meaning as the innumerable photographs they will take back from their European holiday. Photographs and antiques add an indispensable value to their vacations abroad.

Secondly: The collectors and the lover of old things. He's not necessarily wealthy and is prepared to sacrifice amenities and functional gadgets just to be able to afford a much-desired piece of furniture, or an 18th century china plate. He is either motivated by the collecting instinct, or by the love of tangible beauty. Either way, he is deeply attached to objects which are part of his life.

The previous character is the kind that will make a tour of antique shops every Saturday. He has always existed. The actual growth of the antiques business is primarily due to a third and rather recent human species: The man striving at a particular life-style. The antique object, which he may or may not appreciate, is not an end in itself: it serves to reflect a certain ideal of elegant or trendy existence. This character, imbued with Hugh Hefner's "Playboy" philosophy, has money to spare. He's not compelled to save and make sacrifices to buy a piece of antique furniture—he has enough money to spare and live up to an ideal of elegance and sensuousness. The prosperous young executive, the successful lawyer, the 60,000 dollar a year ad-man, while not yet in the "very rich" category (who go to Sotheby's and Christies) still have a problem in spending their money intelligently. The chosen way is to spend on a "model bachelor's apartment".

Once this person has the classiest furniture and a chromium-plated bar, there is still money left to spare on fancy objects and decorations. A large Ming vase, a rare Chimu statue enhances the beauty of the modern playboy's ideal apartment. Antiques in this case belong to the decorum of life. They need not be "old" and are really synonymous with interior design.

With its unprecedented growth of prosperity and the presence of an increasing number of foreigners, particularly Americans and international officials, the market for this kind of "interior design" antique has probably expanded faster in Switzerland than anywhere else in Europe.

Mallet at Bourdon House Ltd. (London) have taken advantage of the trend and opened, early last year, their Geneva premises. They are the most important of their kind in western Switzerland. We visited the shop three

months after it opened. By this time its business had already taken off and was looking forward to a thriving future.

The Manager, Mr. Martin Drury, told me that Mallet was not only banking on a general renewal of interest in antiques, but particularly in English furniture. Until recently, he explained, fine French furniture almost monopolised the antiques market. However, its sharply rising costs had left promising opportunities for English furniture, which had just begun to enjoy a new vogue in Switzerland. "There is a rich market to be tapped" said Mr. Drury.

Geneva, with its high proportion of wealthy foreigners—Arab sheiks, American businessmen and international officials—was a particularly interesting location for a firm of Mallet's calibre. So far, I was told, there was no competition to speak of. The only other shop dealing in the same category of wares in Geneva was the firm of Fuegel. However, the take was large enough for both to do good business. Among the few firms active in the same field abroad, Mr. Drury mentioned J. Kugel in Paris, Ginsburg and Levy in New York and Partridge's in London.

The adequate decoration of the shop, which is situated just off the harbour at the Rue des Alpes, was a most important thing. Mallet's had skilled craftsmen brought over from London to impregnate its showrooms with the ideal inviting atmosphere. The articles on show were designed for a rich, modern and fast-living clientele. Mallet's at Geneva have a glittering collection of objets d'art—particularly its unique gold cigarette cases. Other articles displayed were a Japanese coffee table, a flowery tapestry, jade vases and various fancy gadgets. The showrooms were not as well garnished as usual, I was told, as a first consignment of antiques from London had been sold faster than expected and a new lot had not yet arrived.

Mr. Drury said there was no shortage of local people with money. He added that they were gradually getting the hang of the Swiss market. To do so, it was necessary to study as many examples of local interior decoration as possible. This experience would enable him to adjust his orders to the market and reduce the number of unsold goods. Customers were welcomed to enter the shop and view photographs of antiques not on sale at Mallet's Geneva branch but available at the home collection.

Mallet is probably the most important British antiques firm to have opened in Switzerland. Christies and Sothebys, who are auctioneers and not antique dealers, have respectively opened businesses in Geneva and Zurich, where they have already had

record sales.

This brings us to the third category of buyers of antiques: The people sufficiently informed, professionally involved or rich enough to bid at an auction. The turnover of firms like Sothebys have soared tremendously in recent years and approach £30 million. This is partly due to the staggering prices reached by certain works of art

considered as investments. It is also a consequence of the general growth of the antiques business, since auction houses are part of the general circuit of antiques. Holding auctions in Geneva, Basle or Zurich not only brings foreign works of art and Swiss money closer together, it apparently presents considerable payment advantages for various fiscal and monetary reasons.

I wonder whether old Swiss furniture, of the kind that can be seen at the *Landesmuseum*, has already made a breakthrough in antiques. English furniture is presently being sold with increasing success in Swiss antique stores and auction houses. When will Christies put up its first Bernese chest or Valais cupboard for auction?

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