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# It's my turn to deal

With knowledge and verve – and an eye for the unexpected – a daring young generation of antiques experts are climbing right to the top of their trade. Make way for the new antiquarians, says Hubert Zandberg. Photographs by Stefano Massimo

**L**ike gentlemen's clubs, the world of antiques always conjures up an image that is more fusty than funky. The dealers are tweed-clad eccentrics, who look down their pince-nez at any item less than 200 years old, and antiques fairs are dour events, conducted in the sort of reverential silence associated with places of worship or study. It is an arcane world, shrouded in clouds of dust and the smell of furniture wax.

However, there is a new breed of dealers and collectors who are revolutionising the image of a profession that seems to have got stuck in a *Going for a Song* time-warp. These young antiquarians are the driving forces behind a novel style of interior design that embraces both the old and the new, the antique and the modern. Their aim is to extend the boundaries of the decorative signature beyond the rather bland, showroom-like interior styles that are becoming worryingly popular.

Emma Hawkins is pushing the design envelope from a gracious terraced house in Edinburgh. Her home, which doubles as the showroom for Hawkins & Hawkins, is an unexpected dwelling for a cool businesswoman. At 30, she is the youngest member of the British Antique Dealers' Association, and is also its Scottish representative. According to her eccentric business card, which features a sharply dressed skeleton, she deals in: 'Taxidermy, works of art and the unusual. This nod to the unpredictable is manifested

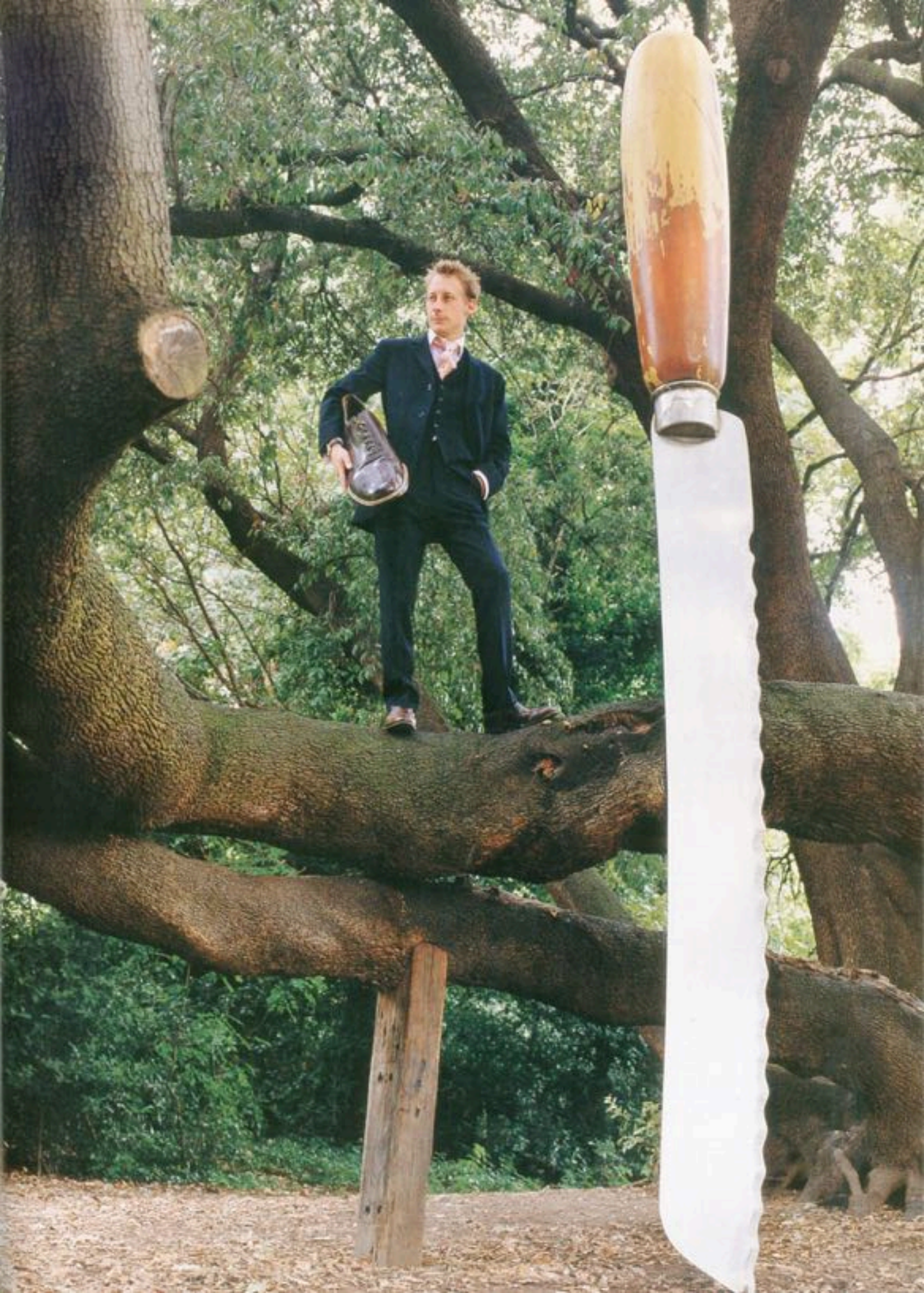
throughout the house, antiques are juxtaposed with curiosities all over it. All this stems from an anglicised correctness, tempered by her native Australian casual charm and sophisticated unpredictability. 'The appreciation of beautiful things runs in the family,' she says. 'Dad is an antique dealer and Mum is an artist. As a little girl, I always wanted to do something unusual, and when my father gave me a stuffed giraffe's head, my mind was made up.'

Will Fisher discovered his *raison d'être* at the precocious age of nine, when he started to deal in curiosities at Greenwich Market (he was subsequently shut down by the authorities for being under-age). 'When I was six, my favourite book was Randolph Churchill's *Fifteen Famous English Homes*,' he says. 'From then on I was hooked, and my parents regularly had to take me around stately homes so that I could have my country-house fix.'

He got his first break in the business when, still aged nine, he was invited to lunch by William Brooks, the then chairman of Christie's South Kensington. Will later worked for Christie's, and at Bermondsey Market, where he sharpened his eye – an eye that was already sharp when, as a young child, he expressed his strong disapproval of the upper fenestration of Buckingham Palace, which he felt to be disproportionate. 'I remember thinking, "What a disappointment." The expectation of the glorious start of the ground-level façade is let down horrendously by those mean little windows at the top.'

This fondness for proportion – as well as enormous mobile-phone bills – is an attribute that Fisher shares with Hawkins. What is also clear is that the personalities of these young dealers are













mirrored in their stock, and this makes the experience of dealing with them doubly pleasurable. Also, a network of long-standing connections and great knowledge of their field puts their professional reputations beyond dispute.

Owen Hargreaves, a dealer in African artefacts, holds strong opinions about the preservation and appreciation of African culture. 'People in the West tend to group the 53 diverse nations of the continent under the label "Africa", he says. On trips through West Africa, he gathered knowledge of its different cultures and developed an eye for the quirky. This eye is now respected by many London collectors, including Lord McAlpine and Antony Gormley, both of whom are regular clients.

To maintain a high turnover and value for money, Hargreaves travels to Africa every two to three weeks, and he has 25 regular destinations. 'I travel on buses and taxis, and sometimes have to take a private plane in order to go deep into the Sahara, the home of ancient migrating tribes,' he says. 'I believe that the expressiveness of a piece only becomes apparent through gaining knowledge of the

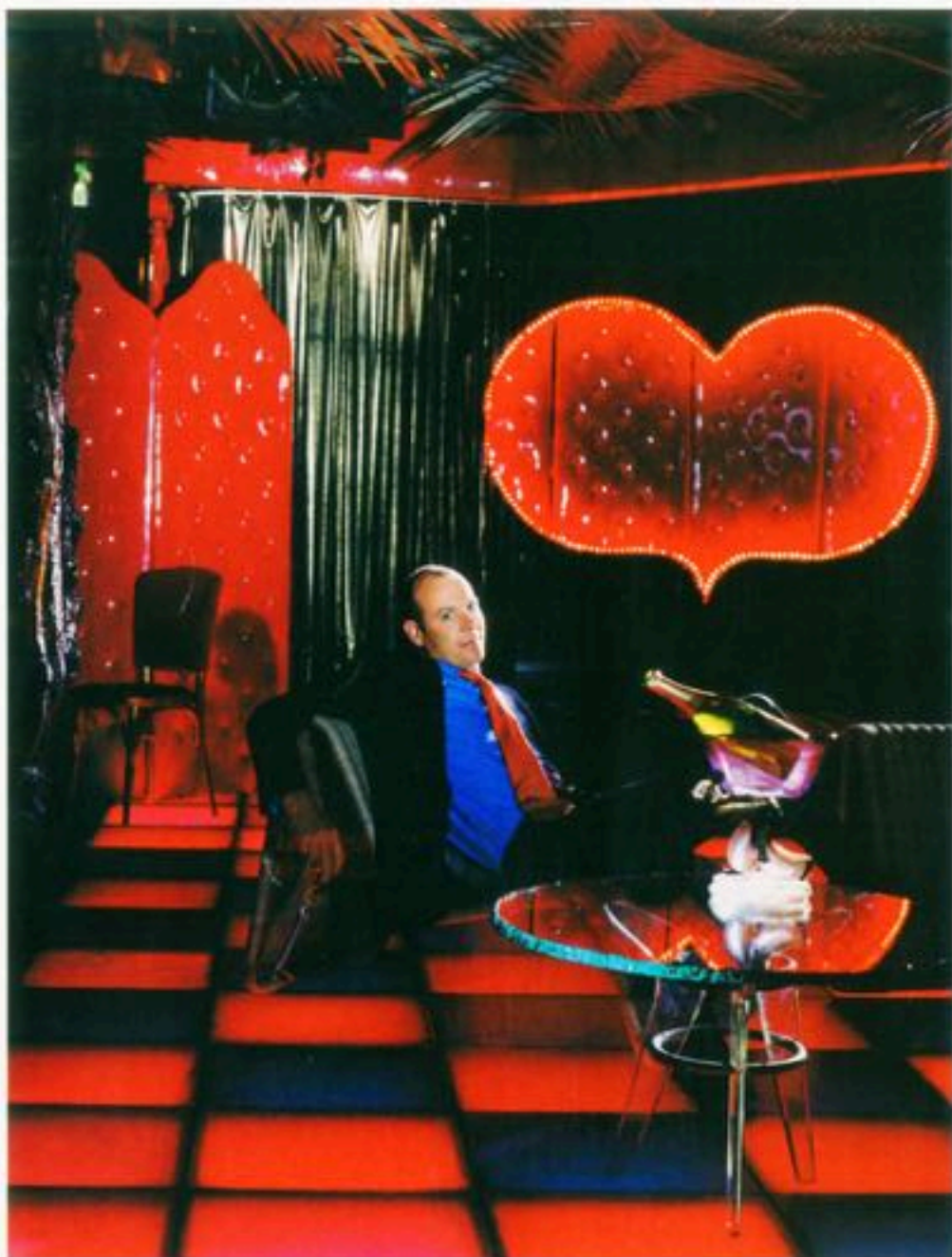
**Above:** African-artefact specialist Owen Hargreaves on Portobello Road, London.  
**Left:** Emma Hawkins in the Etruscan Room at Home House private members' club, Portman Square, London.  
**Previous page:** Will Fisher with a selection of antique advertising signs

culture from which it comes. I try to translate what I refer to as the contrariness of African pieces, the power of the tribe, into a European aesthetic. The fussiness of the Western eye means that one must be persistent in order to find pieces that are unique.'

Such perseverance is shared by David Grocott and Ian Lemon, who run Plinth. 'Our diverse tastes take us all over England,' says Grocott, 'from second-hand clothes shops to grand country-house sales.' Theirs is a laid-back approach to dealing, which creates a positive energy in their super-cool space at Core One in London's Chelsea. The true art of finding everyday objects and giving them a new life in a peculiar context is a profoundly underrated design process. Grocott and Lemon show themselves to be masters of this approach: fired bricks, previously used as flooring in a cowshed, are presented as a work of art in the Carl Andre style.

The traditional role of the dealer is moved onto a new level by Grocott and Lemon: they recover period pieces and combine them with naive materials, such as Forries mattress covers and military blankets, with dramatic effects. This integration is carried out with





a lively and provocative sense of humour; the pair have raised eyebrows at antique fairs with their Jackson Pollock paint finishes and gravity-defying metal cabinets.

Another dealership run by partners is that of brothers Sean and Peter Berg, who deal in 20th-century furniture and accessories. In their west London studio, time not spent selling is taken up with restoration. The Berg Brothers' approach combines pragmatism and perfectionism; they acknowledge that not all age should be removed from a piece. 'We take 20 years off a 40-year-old piece, leaving some age there,' says Sean, who can describe the ageing and layering process with scientific precision.

Sean's interest in antiques-dealing started when he was a teenager. He cut his teeth in the trade during the Eighties on the Fulham Road, during its heyday. He avoided the problems that can arise when working in a partnership by joining forces with younger brother Peter. 'I didn't want to dilute the taste with conflicting ideas,' says Sean. The partnership clearly benefited from Sean's experience and Peter's more touselled approach. Their teamwork is characterised by strict professionalism and high standards of service. Presentation

**Above: Sean Berg, one half of Berg Brothers, at the Eve Club, Regent Street, London.**

**Right: David Grocott of Plinth, with his dog, Sidney of Briarwood, at his company's innovative studio space, Core One, in London's Chelsea**

is important; they will not abdicate responsibility when it comes to delivering and installing difficult pieces. This is particularly important when one considers that today's retailers have created such a choice for customers. Nevertheless, the standards of craftsmanship and design at the Bergs' showroom indicate that they need not lose any sleep.

These inspired collectors demonstrate the potential of an approach that mixes good finds in very different styles. They all believe that the spirit of the object should take precedence over the look – in this way, the relaxed coexistence of an Italian Fifties lamp and a bongo statue from Sudan becomes possible. African artefacts and modernist design rely on similar aesthetic principles of form and simple lines. The artful, witty mix of the natural and the man-made creates a dynamic fusion that is entirely current. It is this ability to find the old and let it inform the new that makes these dealers so very current themselves. □

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