



# Clear in the attic

Intriguing chairs, tables and bookstands peppered the Holkham sale at Sworders, but, for me, a lacquered-brass stick barometer in a mahogany case stole the show



**Fig 1 above:** Cased, lacquered-brass stick barometer by Henry Barrow. £2,125. **Fig 2 right:** Leather-covered 18th-century armchair. £3,000



**Fig 3 left:** Child's metamorphic chair. £275. **Fig 4 below:** Bookstand. £350



**Fig 5:** Mahogany console table lacking a top. £6,000

ONE imagines workshopsful of antique-furniture restorers rubbing leathery palms together in satisfaction at the results of Sworders's Holkham attic sale on February 11. However their trade may have been faring in recent times, there should be plenty to employ them now.

It was a proper attic sale, so there was none of the sadness that inevitably accompanies a full contents sale at country houses with a long family history. The Earl of Leicester wrote in his catalogue introduction that 'the attics and cellars were full to bursting with furniture stacked high, that hadn't been used' for more than 70 years. In such circumstances, things that have been damaged deteriorate further, as damp, decay, mouse, worm and perhaps pigeon do their work.

There were a good many thoroughly distressed armchairs, sofas and daybeds. Most were 19th century and they sold readily, even without the magical name 'Howard' in their descriptions. They are undoubtedly having a fashionable moment. Two of the earlier seats intrigued me, as I do not remember having seen anything quite like them before. One was an 18th-century wingback armchair covered in leather (**Fig 2**), which had been estimated to £300 and sold for £3,000, despite missing bits of leg. Perhaps it was the remains of the leather that looked strange.

The other, although also very battered, struck me as perhaps cheap. It was a Regency child's mahogany metamorphic chair and table fitted with iron wheels (**Fig 3**). The top rail was carved with the Leicester crest, an ostrich with a horseshoe in its beak. This had been estimated at £600, but it reached only £275.

There were also some interesting tables. Very much one for a restorer was a mahogany console example (**Fig 5**), for which no date was suggested. The top measured 36in by 56in—or would have done, had there been one. Sworders is very good about publishing condition reports and here the catalogue warned us: 'Lacking top, later additions and pine blocks and screws. One bracket missing, some moulding lost.' Thus the up-to-£400 estimate, but not the £6,000 price.

A small, 19th-century circular bookstand (**Fig 4**) that would justify the technical judgement of 'wonky' or, in Sworders's view, 'joints loose and in need of attention, light scratches and dirty, the gilding knocked and chipped, signs of historic restoration to the gallery' still had the label of T. H. Filmer & Son. This was a respected business off Oxford Street from the 1830s and Thomas Henry Filmer held a warrant from Her Majesty's War Department. Unfortunately, the son went into bankruptcy in 1883. At £350, this seemed a very reasonable buy. So too, I suspect, was a cautiously catalogued and estimated (to £400) lot that sold for £2,125. This was a 52in-high mahogany case housing a lacquered-brass stick barometer (**Fig 1**) that 'seems to be lacking mercury, the case very dirty and dry,



**Fig 6:** A collection of Roman marble sculpture fragments, estimated to £20,000. £47,500



**Fig 7 left: Sand Dunes, Ambletuse by Charles Conder. £239,400. Fig 8 above: Max Beerbohm's A Recollection. £37,800. Fig 9 right: Gustav Klimt's design for Ver Sacrum. £132,300**



brass tarnished.' However, the instrument was signed Henry Barrow (1790–1870), one of the finest makers of his time. He may have been apprenticed to George Dollond and from 1830–39 he was Mathematical Instrument Maker to the Surveyor of India, working closely with Sir George Everest of the eponymous Mount. One of his instruments won a glowing testimonial from the great man: 'I must do the artist the justice to say that for excellence of workmanship, accuracy of division, steadiness, regularity, and glibness of motion, and the general elegance and nice fitting of all its parts, not only were my expectations exceeded but I really think it is as a whole as unrivalled in the world

as it is unique.' Barrow was in business in London from 1842 to about 1860 and he died rich. As with furniture, so with sculpture: a lot of Roman marble fragments (**Fig 6**) estimated to £20,000 reached £47,500.

A sale and collection of very different stamp followed two days later at Christie's in London. There were many sides to Barry Humphries (1934–2023). He was a national treasure, or perhaps national treasures, in Australia and Britain, and his numerous personae included not only Dame Edna and Sir Les, but, off stage, collector, bibliophile, landscape and portrait painter. An Australian dealer friend has said that, unlike some of his characters: 'There was never any angst in his paintings,

they were always painted on holiday and they were always sunny and happy.'

Much of the comment on his sale has highlighted the prices for Edna's spectacular eyewear (up to £30,240) and his own paintings (up to £25,500), but these were small change compared to the best of what he had collected. Linked passions included the Anglo-Australian painter Charles Conder (1868–1909) and Oscar Wilde, who together brought him to Max Beerbohm and Belgian and other Symbolist artists. At one time, he owned more Conders than anyone else and there were plenty here, together with numerous portrait drawings. At £239,400, Conder's sunny 24½in by 19in *Sand Dunes, Ambletuse* (**Fig 7**), 1901, headed the sale, and among the Beerbohms the 8in by 11in *A Recollection: Conder, Max, Rothenstein and Wilde at the Café Royal* (**Fig 8**) reached £37,800. The Symbolist aspect of Gustav Klimt's work was shown in a 13½in by 11½in charcoal and pastel design for *Ver Sacrum*, the Viennese Secessionist magazine he founded (**Fig 9**). There was even some gold on the lettering (£132,300). 🐉

### Pick of the week

If you want an 18th-century painting of leopards and cannot have a Stubbs or an Agasse, then James Northcote (1746–1831) is your man. Sloane Street Auctions' sale, in February, was headed at £63,250 by a 24½in by 29in canvas of *Two Leopards at Play from the Royal Menagerie*, which Northcote exhibited at the Royal Academy in 1797 and perhaps sold for 20gns (surprisingly, only £3,300-odd today). A mezzotint after it by Samuel



Reynolds belonged to the late Christopher Lennox-Boyd and is now with Harvard Art Museums. The auctioneer called on the expertise of zoologist Dr Jonathan Scott to identify the animals further as rare 'Sunda Clouded Leopards from Indochina', noted for their exceptionally large gape and the longest canines of any extant felid, as well as for the pattern of their pelts. Northcote, a pupil of Reynolds, was as adept at portraying exotic animals as human sitters.

**Next week Hopes for a Fair wind**