



Buying old furniture is surely better than using up the world's resources on making new, if the infrastructure behind antiques is sound

The green furniture trade

Devoted to recycling by its very nature, the antiques world is now finding ever-more innovative ways to go green, from straw-bale buildings to sea freight

PERHAPS the earliest ecological green shoot in the British art business emerged tentatively in 2002, when one of Sworders' partners, the surveyor Robert Ward-Booth, persuaded his colleagues that, rather than seek another industrial site for expansion, the Stansted Mountfitchet auctioneer should create an unprecedented building of its own. Five years later, the business proudly opened its new complex, with what was then the

largest straw-bale building in Europe, on a four-acre slope running down to the Cambridge Road, half a mile north of the Essex village. The outsides of the compressed bales were lime-rendered and the insides lime-plastered. Rainwater was directed from the cedar-shingle roof to flush lavatories and, together with a biofuel wood-chip boiler and solar panels, provided much of the hot water and the heating for the reception and offices. At night, fans blew



‘The AAG emphasises that the antiques trade is a form of recycling’

the day’s warmth into the sale-rooms. At that time the energy requirements of the 12,000sq ft complex were no more than for a three-bedroom semi.

Unsurprisingly, Sworders was an early supporter of Antiques



Greener methods of transporting (above) and packing (below) antiques need to be considered



Are Green (AAG), a movement launched in 2009 to ‘promote the green credentials of antiques’. Since then, AAG’s message has been helped by the expansion of media channels and the development of online antiques marketing. Other supporters include both national and multi-national dealers’ and auctioneers’ associations.

The AAG emphasises that the antiques trade is, self-evidently, a valuable form of recycling. However, there is a reverse to the coin. Currently, the British Antique Dealers’ Association →

A helping hand behind the sales

Sustainability is relevant not only to trades, but also to traders. Unknown to many involved in the art business, its members are sustained by a dedicated charity, the Fine Arts Provident Institution (FAPI), which helps those in need of financial assistance. The origins of FAPI go back to 1842, when a group of philanthropic London dealers headed by Richard Lambe, a print publisher, established it as the Virtuosi Provident Fund and Dealers in the Fine Arts’ Benevolent Institution for the assistance of members, their widows and children. Membership was open to ‘masters in the above trade, who shall have kept shop, showroom or gallery principally for the sale of works of art, for three years, and assistants of six years’. The subscription was a guinea



annually or 10 guineas for life membership.

The name was pruned to a more practical length in 1918, but the essentials remain the same: anyone in the fine-art trade or related services is eligible

and the current membership includes auction-house staff, framers, restorers and other linked businesses, as well as dealers. The cost of life membership has recently been raised to £100, and awards are given on a discretionary basis by the committee, which meets three times a year.

Amazingly, the membership currently stands at a mere 106. Given that the FAPI’s funds are in a very healthy state, the committee is keen to increase it. Anyone interested in applying should contact Rosalyn Gibson, formerly of Christie’s, on fapi.secretary@gmail.com



A new future with ancient materials: the lime-rendered, straw-bale headquarters of Sworders of Stansted Mountfitchet in Essex

(BADA), another of those supporters, is working on a new initiative that aims to cut its members' carbon emission dramatically. In this, it is working closely with the international Gallery Climate Coalition, which has recently reported that the fine arts and antiques community has a disproportionate impact on the environment because of its international travel, shipping, use of materials and energy consumption. They have come up with a rather splendid rallying cry, branding the trade 'caretakers of human history and ingenuity'; it has a 'unique opportunity to use its cultural influence to set a positive example and help to shift the public debate'.

The BADA identifies four principal areas of concern and the actions that members can take immediately, albeit recognising

‘The BADA calls the trade “caretakers of human history and ingenuity”’

that not everyone will be able to do everything at once.

International air travel Set a quota allowing only the most essential flights. Employ video conferencing where practical. Use a flight-emissions calculator to compare emissions between airlines and routes. Have a 'train-first' policy. Get on your bike.

International shipping Use sea freight where possible. Consider collaborating with colleagues on shipments and containers. For

local shipments and deliveries, engage bike couriers or hybrid vehicles and choose couriers that have a green tariff.

Packing materials Avoid single-use plastics derived from fossil fuels, such as bubble wrap, foam padding and tape. Incorporate the GCC Five Rs of waste hierarchy—Reduce, Reuse, Repair, Rot, Recycle—into gallery practice. Opt for low-impact materials, such as recycled paper, corrugated card, glassine, blankets and cotton straps. Ask shippers to minimise packaging where possible, especially for short journeys. Use appropriately sized boxes.

Energy consumption Switch to a reputable green-energy supplier. Aim to avoid temperature extremes and use timers, so that heating, ventilation and air conditioning systems run minimally overnight. Ensure that computers

and appliances have an EPC rating of C or above. Where possible, switch to LED rather than halogen or fluorescent lighting. Soaring energy bills will encourage this.

The BADA will set up a Green Team of members and specialists to assist and advise and, to share the pain (if that is what it is), it will commit itself to reducing its office and administrative emissions year on year. Once again, Sworders has set a good example in this. In 2021, it surveyed its carbon usage, which came out at 782.7 tons per annum, equivalent to 13.7 tons per employee and 12.2 tons per auction. This is being used as a baseline from which to monitor subsequent performance. Any business of whatever size is advised to set up a dedicated committee to shrink its footprint. →

Art market

Antique histories, as preserved for posterity in printed catalogues, must not be neglected

A matter that is not on this list should also be considered, as it has ramifications that go far beyond the art world. The printing, publication and distribution of catalogues are not carbon-free activities. Already, printed auctioneers' catalogues are becoming rare and dealers are probably cutting their print runs. However, this problem needs to be approached with care and forethought. Online cataloguing is all very well and, indeed, has positive advantages, such as when a viewer can zoom in and literally examine all sides of a picture, but it is not always as easily accessible as print in the long term. Research, history and provenance need to be safeguarded, too. 🐉

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