



Blasts from the past

Two dealers are remembered at Sworders, through a painting by a limbless artist and a Soviet state dinner service

THIS week's column will look both backwards and forwards, although, once again, one cannot be certain that the future will deliver what is planned. The major early-year international fairs—the Winter Show in New York, BRAFA in Brussels, TEFAF in Maastricht and the Paris Salon du Dessin—have all taken sensible decisions to postpone or cancel, but, at the time of writing, one or two more local events are still intending to open in reality, as well as online.

A backward look to the Interiors sale held by Sworders of Stansted

Mountfitchet in Essex last month provides an opportunity to tip the hat to two notable antique dealers, Peter Crofts, who died in 2001, and Christopher Martin-Zakheim, who died on Christmas Day in 2018.

Crofts was born in 1924 near Wisbech in the Fens, where his family were farmers. He joined the Fleet Air Arm and, in 1945, was sent to Texas for training. Just before his 21st birthday, the Corsair F4U he was piloting caught fire during take off. His legs were amputated below the knee and he spent 3½ years in hospital.



Fig 3 above: Embassy dinner service with USSR insignia. £975.
Fig 4 right: Grafton armchair by Howard and Sons. £5,200



Fig 1 left: Watercolour study of feathers by Sarah Biffin. £11,700.
Fig 2 above: Sandalwood and ivory veneer bureau cabinet. £15,600

He set up as a general antique dealer in Wisbech with his wife, Pat, whom he married in 1950, and became a pillar of the British Antique Dealers' Association. He was also a keen sailor in *Amity*, an elegant, 88-year old, clinker-built Norfolk beach boat.

Jewellery from the Crofts' collection came up at Sworders in November, followed by general items in December. The latter included a 4in by 4¼in watercolour

study of feathers (Fig 1), which must have had a particular resonance for Crofts, being by the celebrated Sarah Biffin (1784–1850), who was born without arms or legs. She taught herself to sew, write and paint holding the implements in her mouth and, luckily, was seen performing by the 16th Earl of Morton, who arranged for lessons with the painter William Marshall Craig and won her royal and other patronage.



Unsurprisingly, Biffin's work is much sought after and not only for its curiosity value; she was pretty good by any standard. In 2019, a self-portrait sold for £137,500 and, last year, in the Fry Collection at Sotheby's, there was another watercolour of feathers. That, like the Crofts' one, was inscribed by Biffin and dated 1812, but it was a larger and more elaborate composition, so it made £65,520, compared with the Sworders price of £11,700.

The Interiors sale also included a lot bought from Martin-Zakheim's highly regarded West End gallery Iconastas, which specialised in a variety of Russian works of art, as well as icons. Before opening it in 1974, Chris Martin (the Zakheim came later) was the proprietor of what he described as 'the junkiest junk shop in London' in Fulham, where anything might be discovered from old postcards to human skulls aged in tea.

He found ingenious ways to deal with both the US and the Soviet Union when regulations made this difficult. As my old friend and former colleague Victoria Wolcough noted: 'Iconastas was a perfect name for the gallery, but Soviet Russian objects also

appeared there, and that was appropriate, as they were "icons" of those times.'

Stock from Iconastas was sold by Sworders in December, but here there was a Soviet state Dulevo Manufactory six-setting porcelain dinner service emblazoned with the gilt USSR insignia (Fig 3). Martin acquired this directly from the Russian Embassy in about 1991, when such things had become an embarrassment after the fall of Communism. It would be interesting to know what he paid then and, indeed, what he sold it for—it now made £975.

Among other things that caught my eye was an Anglo-Indian Vizagapatam sandalwood and ivory veneer miniature bureau cabinet (Fig 2) measuring 28in high and 24in wide. It dated from the 1780s, when the industry producing furniture and objects such as boxes in a blend of European forms and Indian craftsmanship was well established.

At that point, the decorative penwork on ivory panels was often also a blend, some based on European prints and others fantasies. Occasionally, English country houses can be identified, but the buildings on this cabinet have more of a Dutch look to me. The



Pick of the week

The Pavilions of Harrogate Decorative Antiques and Art Fair is scheduled to take place at the Great Yorkshire Showground from January 28 to 30. There, the Walker Galleries has a collection of landscapes and flowers by the Yorkshire painter Owen Bowen (1873–1967) and a fine example of the work of the Danish marine painter Carl Frederik Sørensen (1818–79): the 25½in by 40in *Landing the Catch*, dated 1853 (above).

British and Dutch co-existed on the Coromandel coast, sometimes amicably, sometimes not, for two centuries. The cabinet sold for £15,600, but needed a great deal of attention, and perhaps even a new pediment. How easy is it now to have ivory items repaired?

Two early-20th-century pieces of furniture were noteworthy, although probably also needing

minor attention. They were a 'Fielding' sofa (£10,140) and a 'Grafton' armchair (Fig 4) (£5,200), both by Howard & Sons.

Later this month, there should be fairs in London and Harrogate. The Decorative Antiques & Textiles Fair is back at Evolution London in Battersea Park (January 25–30), offering paintings, prints, sculpture, posters and works of art of all eras, from the classical to the contemporary, together with jewellery, vintage bags and watches. The mezzanine will be occupied by the London Antique Rug & Textile Art Fair with 18 top British and Continental dealers.

Among the exhibits with Alberto Levi of Milan are several striking Modernist rugs, including one designed by the French Art Deco architect Jean Burkharter (£45,000), and a rather Futurist rug (Fig 6) attributed to Ralph Pearson of New York (£15,000).

Another beauty, with Villa Rosemaine of Toulon, is a Chinese-export Canton silk hanging or bedspread dating from about 1800 (Fig 5). Had he seen it, it would have inspired Monet.

Fig 5 left: Canton silk hanging of about 1800. Fig 6 right: Futurist rug attributed to Ralph Pearson



Next week On with the shows