



Fairground Ostrich
sold for £720 in 2022

Out of the *Ordinary*

Looking for something different? An eclectic mix of antiques and collectables goes on sale this month ▶

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PHOTOS: Sworders Fine Art Auctioneers





OPPOSITE PAGE: Helene Detroyat (French, 1899-1951). A bearded lady holding an ostrich feather. Sold for £1,300 in the Out of the Ordinary sale in February 2019

LEFT: Carrier pigeon message written in code during the Boer War – part of the Gary Pyper collection (estimate £150-250)

The British embrace eccentricity, we are known for it, so it is not surprising that the individual, quirky and odd fascinate us. For Gary Pyper it is anything out of the ordinary. He began collecting at an early age – his fascination with objects and their stories proved a welcome alternative to school textbooks. ‘The more unexpected the discovery, the more rewarding,’ he says. Many of the objects were found by scouring local flea markets, or simply by following up on a random conversation with a stranger. It was in this way that he came to own items as diverse as a carrier pigeon message written in code during the Boer War.

His collection of curiosities is included in Sworders Fine Art Auctioneers annual Out of the Ordinary sale this month at Stansted Mountfitchet. It’s an eclectic mix of art, antiques, design and collectibles with a ‘wow factor’ or things outside the norm that make people stop and stare.

The sale is curated by Mark Wilkinson, who worked for many years as a 20th century specialist at Christies and describes the out of the ordinary as “much more fun”.

“I felt that people were designing and decorating their homes in different ways and looking for the unusual. Rather than cluttering up houses, people are now looking for more statement pieces. We do cater for the collector in the sales but we also go for statement and usual pieces. The market was flourishing with this kind of trade, so we thought why not pull it all together for a sale once a year?”

Sworders’ first sale took place in February 2018, showcasing 20th century decorative arts, objects, posters, prints, drawings, modern design, motoring art, pop and film culture and photographs. “The sales are so varied,” Mark says. “We have had everything from big fossils and meteorites to suffragette items and Captain Scott pieces.”

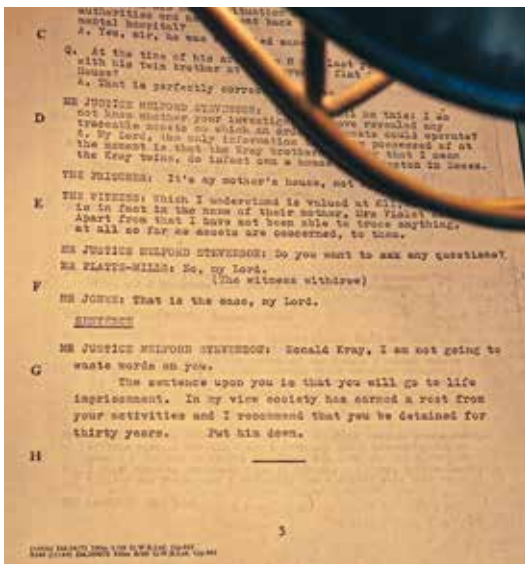
I question whether a piece of meteorite is classed as a statement piece for the home although I admit, it is a talking point. “They do tend to end up on a desk,” explains Mark. “A lot of the pieces within the sale are great talking points. We have sold a few Dodo bones over the years, again not a large item but a real oddity. During the 1690s there were lots of bone hunters. The area where the Dodos lived in Mauritius had so many people coming over to find these bones that the local people decided to pretty much fill in the area where they could be found – since then no more bones have ever been discovered.”

This year’s sale includes a menagerie of items. There are original transcripts relating to the trial of Ronnie and Reggie Kray. The rare courtroom documents have been consigned by the family of Leonard Ernest Read. Known as detective chief superintendent ‘Nipper’ Read, he headed the Metropolitan Police’s murder force from 1964 until his retirement in 1977. Leonard was the police officer tasked with putting the East End gangsters in jail and from the first day of his appointment, the Kray twins were his primary target.

Other items include a large Bakelite coffin (one of only three known), a group of fairground items and the day I speak to Mark, a mailbag from the Great Train Robbery has just turned up which has created much excitement among staff. “Another interesting



LEFT: A Dodo bone sold in the 2018 Out of the Ordinary sale for £3,800



LEFT: All the Kray transcripts, which are split into two lots, one estimated at £200-400 and the other at £500-800

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item we have is a very pretty long thin bottle, like a scent bottle,” explains Mark. “They are called tear catchers and were made in the 1850s and when you lost a loved one or went to a funeral, you would take this glass bottle along and collect your tears. We’ve got a good selection of minerals and fossils which are always attractive and also have some sorcerer’s mirrors. If you imagine a round mirror, it’s got a section which is cut into it so you have circles within the circular mirror and they are all mirrored – they give this slightly weird effect. We had some in the last sale which we put in at £500-£800 and they made £3,000 or £4,000 each.”

How do they find all these weird and wonderful things? “We are quite well known for these sales now, and we have a big following so people do hold things back for us, but at the same time we do approach people as well.”

Popular items include anything to do with witchcraft, folk art, fairground items, large advertising signs, motoring and aeronautical art and architectural items. “Witchcraft is extremely popular. We had a book about the trial of witches in Suffolk in 1664 and put an estimate of £600-800, I think it ended up at £7,000. We also had one sale where a whole coven turned up to view the items on mass.” One of the most expensive items that has been sold so far was a stuffed polar bear, which made £20,000. Mark explains that there are restrictions as to what can be sold – Canadian polar bears are okay but Chinese ones are not apparently.

Mark never knows what will turn up and enjoys the history and stories behind the artefacts. “It’s fascinating when something has a story with it, obviously the Great Train Robbery sack is fantastic. “The people who collect these things are interesting people themselves; the out of the ordinary collectors and dealers are quite knowledgeable generally about a wide range of things.”

A favourite item was a skate board by Grayson Perry. “It was called the Kate board and had the Duchess of Cambridge on it,” says Mark. “The way that he designed it was like a brass rubbing on the back of the board. It’s really mad and something I would happily own. It went for £880 as it was an edition of 1,000. If it had been a one-off it would have made £50,000. It’s things like that, that I love. That’s why I do my job because it’s seeing things you have never seen before.” ♦

Out of the Ordinary sale at Sworders, February 7. Bids can be made by telephone, online or at the sale on the day. Sworders has a valuation office in Hertford



RIGHT:
The Kate board
by Grayson Perry