



*A bearded lady holding an ostrich feather* by Helene Detroyat (1899-1951). Sold for £1,300 in February, 2019

# Out of the ORDINARY

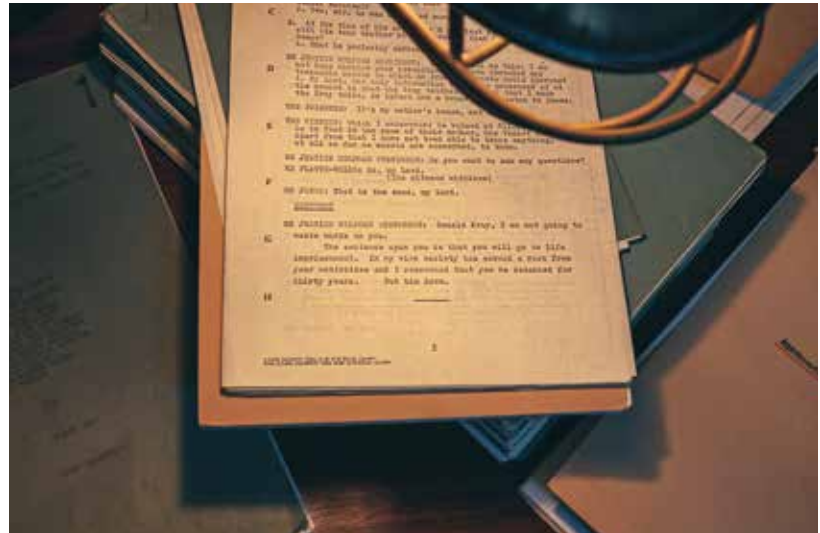
Looking for something different? An eclectic mix of antiques and collectables is up for auction this month – and it's all been curated by an expert from Sevenoaks

WORDS: Julie Lucas ♦ PHOTOS: Sworders Fine Art Auctioneers

The British embrace eccentricity, we're known for it: the individual, quirky and odd fascinate us. This month an auction featuring just those sort of objects takes place, and while the location for the sale may be in Essex, the specialist behind it is from Sevenoaks in our very own Kent. For many years an expert in 20th-century arts and furniture at Christies, Mark Wilkinson joined the centuries-old company Sworders Fine Art Auctioneers in 2016, to work on what was to become its annual Out of the Ordinary sale. 'We came up with the idea for Out of the Ordinary because we recognised that people were designing and decorating their homes in different ways and looking for unusual, one-off statement pieces. With the market flourishing, we thought: "Why not pull everything together in an annual event?"'

Sworders' first Out of the Ordinary 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 and has proved a highlight in the company's auction calendar ever since. 'The sales are so varied,' says Mark.

'We've had everything from big fossils and meteorites to suffragette items and pieces relating to Captain Scott.'



*'We've had everything from big fossils and meteorites to suffragette items'*

**TOP:** Original transcripts relating to the trial of Ronnie and Reggie Kray which are up for sale as two lots this year, valued at £200-£400 and £500-£800

**BELOW:** A dodo bone sold in the 2018 Out of Ordinary sale for £3,800

I'd question whether a chunk of a meteorite can really be classed as a statement piece for the home, although I'll admit it's a conversation-starter. 'A lot of the pieces within the sale are great talking points,' agrees Mark.

'For instance, we've also sold a few dodo bones over the years and, like the meteorites, they're not large items but they are a real oddity. During the 1690s there were lots of dodo-bone hunters. The area in Mauritius where the dodos lived had so many people coming over in search of

these bones that the local people decided pretty much to fill in the area where they could be found – since then no more bones have ever been discovered.'

This year's sale features not just natural objects but a menagerie of items, including documents. These include the original courtroom transcripts relating to the trial of Ronnie and Reggie Kray, 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 in the sale include a large Bakelite coffin – one of only three known to exist – a group of fairground items and, on the day I speak to Mark, a mailbag from the Great Train Robbery has just turned up, something that creates much excitement among staff.

'Another interesting item we have is a very pretty, long thin bottle, like a scent bottle,' explains Mark. 'These are called tear catchers and were made in the 1850s – when you lost a loved one or went to a funeral, you would take this glass bottle along





and collect your tears in it. We've got a good selection of minerals and fossils, which always attract buyers, and we also have some sorcerer's mirrors. If you imagine a round mirror, these have got a section that's cut into it, so you have circles within the circular mirror, all of which are mirrored – they give this slightly weird effect. We had some in the last sale that we put in at £500-£800 and they made £3,000 or £4,000.'

How does the Sworders team find all these weird and wonderful things? 'We're 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



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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 selling at £8,000. We also had one sale where a whole coven turned up to view the items *en masse!*' One of the most expensive items to go under the hammer in an Out of the Ordinary auction was a stuffed polar bear that 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 that goes with it – The Great Train Robbery mailbag, for instance, is just fantastic. The people that 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 for Mark from a past sale was a skateboard created by artist Grayson Perry. Called *The Kate Board*, it features an image of the now Princess of Wales in the style of a brass rubbing. 'It's really mad and something I would happily own,' says Mark. 'It was one of an edition of 1,000, so went

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

**RIGHT:** Fairground ostrich sold for £720 in 2022

**BELOW:** Mark Wilkson loves the diversity of the items he comes across in the Out Of The Ordinary sale

for around £500. Had it been a one-off it would have made £50,000.' Then there was the ginormous late 19th-century hair-stuffed whale's penis that went under the hammer for £3,500. 'Certainly one of the strangest items I've ever handled,' says Mark. 'That's what I love about my job: the chance to see things you've never seen before.'

Though Sworders' main sale room is in Essex, the company is actively looking for items from Kent. Part of Mark's remit is to seek out business within the county – and living in Sevenoaks himself means he couldn't be better placed to do so. 'We certainly don't see the Thames as a barrier to business, and it makes sense to include areas south of the river in our quest to bring the best in art and antiques to auction,' he says.

So if any of us here in the county has anything we'd like Sworders to take a look at with a view to selling it – from dodo bones and court-case transcripts to possibly less unusual treasures – we know who to call. ♦

## GOOD TO KNOW

The Out of the Ordinary sale takes place at Sworders Stansted Mountfitchet, Essex, on February 7. Bids can be made by telephone, online or at the sale on the day.

View the catalogue at [sworder.co.uk](http://sworder.co.uk)  
Contact Mark Wilkinson for a Sworders valuation in Kent at [markwilkinson@sworder.co.uk](mailto:markwilkinson@sworder.co.uk)