



Farewell to a giantess of the trade

A selection of the late Jan Finch's stock at Sworders reflects her wisdom, flair and eclectic taste



Fig 1 left: A pair of trousers that belonged to Queen Henrietta Maria's dwarf, Sir Jeffrey Hudson. £9,750



Fig 2 left: A fine 6in-high Victorian cut-paper model of a font. £910.
Fig 3 below: An African Shona carved softwood headrest. £780

WHEN Jan Finch died last year after a stoic and heroic fight against cancer, Finch & Co's 37th catalogue was in the works and it was possible to include a fitting tribute from Ted Few, a fellow antiquarian dealer in collector's cabinet items. 'Whilst Finch & Co will continue to flourish,' he wrote, 'it is difficult to contemplate it without Jan's quiet, unassuming yet ever-present persona. Bold, instinctive, compassionate, tough if necessary, thoughtful, loyal, fiercely protective of those whom she held dear, and empirically wise... her absence will leave a gaping hole in the industry, but her influence and the firm's presence will thankfully be felt for decades to come.'

He expressed it perfectly. I shall particularly miss arriving at Finch's stand at BRAFA or Masterpiece to find Craig, her husband and business partner for 33 years, happily juggling and Jan standing ready to steer one to some wonderfully quirky treasure that she knew would appeal. In the grandest fairs and exhibition spaces, she retained the enthusiasm and charm of her early days stalling with her mother in Portobello Road. Her grandfather had also been an influence,

introducing her to the Egyptian rooms at the British Museum, to such effect that, as a young teenager in the 1960s, she donated her pocket money to a school initiative supporting the relocation of Abu Simbel and a lifelong fascination followed.

Since her death, Craig has produced another of their handsomely presented biennial catalogues and held another of their summer exhibitions, still offering an eclectic mix of the best quality in ethnography, European works of art, natural history and antiquities, this time at the Cromwell Place antiques hub, London SW7. He has decided to spend more time abroad, so consigned a selection from stock and Jan's collections for sale at Sworders of Stansted Mountfitchet earlier this month.

Many of her interests and enthusiasms were represented: antiquities, sailing, travel, dogs, cookery and wines—together with a good eye, she is said to have had a 'perfect nose and an educated palate'—quirks and quiddities. Perhaps only opera was missing, although that, too, may have been hinted at somewhere.

Obviously, cookery was not directly responsible for the presence of a carved hardwood *iculani bakola* among the lots. That

instrument was, indeed, an eating fork, but one specifically intended for the eating of *puaka balavu* or *vonu balavu*—long pig or long turtle, as man meat was known in mid-19th-century Fiji. Chiefs and priests represented the gods and their lips could not be sullied by the touch of sacrificial meats, which had to be placed in their mouths by attendants using these forks. They then became *lapu*, sacred, relics to be hung in the gourmet's spirit house. This one, with a damaged tine, sold for £1,170.

Provenance is rightly valued by Finch & Co and that includes ownership by other eminent dealers. A number of items among the tribal arts here had come from Edric van Vredenburg, a collector whose dealing career was brought to a near close in a controversial fashion a few years ago, but whose eye and taste are unequalled. His interests are as wide as those of Finch & Co and Sotheby's sold remaining stock for him in April. A speciality was African headrests and I illustrate a Shona carved softwood example that Finch & Co bought from him; it made £780 here (**Fig 3**). The superb *sali* club illustrated last week (*Art Market*, November 23) also had a van Vredenburg provenance.



Fig 4 left: A scrimshaw pan-bone plaque of a whaling scene. £7,800. **Fig 5 right: A prisoner-of-war model of a 48-gun frigate. £27,300**



Another notable trade provenance was Eila Grahame, a Kensington High Street dealer. At her estate sale in 2016, Jan Finch paid £550 for a pair of trousers (**Fig 1**) that had belonged to Queen Henrietta Maria's dwarf, Sir Jeffrey Hudson (1619–82). In a most adventurous career, he was twice captured by pirates and these green silk brocade trousers must date from before 1644, when he was enslaved by Barbary corsairs, as the stress brought on a growth spurt from 18ins to 3ft 6ins. The price here was £9,750.

Space precludes more than a glance at a few more curiosities in this cabinet. *Charivari* has several meanings: mob justice employing 'rough music' to shame wrongdoers, a tumble of clowns, a style of Baroque pastoral music or, in an opposite sense, a silver or silver mounted good luck charm. Here was one of the latter, an 18th- or 19th-century Bavarian mounted rock-crystal finger, which made £585 (**Fig 6**). A remarkably elaborate Chinese lacquered wooden pigeon whistle sold for £494 (**Fig 7**) and

an impressive 6in-high Victorian cut-paper model of a font reached £910 (**Fig 2**). Most notable among lots relating to Jan's love of sailing were a 15in wide scrimshaw pan-bone plaque of a whaling scene (**Fig 4**) created by a 19th-century sailor (£7,800) and a very fine French prisoner-of-war model of a 48-gun frigate (**Fig 5**), which made £27,300, the sale's top price. In 1908, this had been bought for \$4 12s, equivalent to about \$475 today.

Next week Autumnal thoughts



Fig 6 above: An 18th- or 19th-century Bavarian mounted rock-crystal finger. £585.
Fig 7 left: An elaborate Chinese lacquered wooden pigeon whistle. £494

Pick of the week

One thing stood out for me above all else when I visited the Winter Olympia Fair. This was a Regency small oval centre table (*pictured*), which was offered by the West Sussex dealers Wakelin & Linfield. The tilt top was made of a single piece of thinly cut amboyna wood measuring 38in by 24in and was decorated with ebony cross banding and central medallion. It was supported on a hexagonal tapering stem and tripod outswept sabre legs with original and very unusual brass castors in the form of what appeared to be cat's paws. The stem was embellished with elegant decorative panels, consisting of a brass inlaid foliate design on an ebony ground, as well as crisply carved details and stringing.

As the dealers said: 'It features many of the elements used by George Bullock during this time. The delicate use of ebony, brass and amboyna are generally associated with his work. Even if it is not, in fact, his, the attention given to the elegant proportion and line is clearly executed by a master of cabinet work and design.' Bullock was one of the most interesting Regency furniture makers and supplied Napoleon on St Helena. I would certainly think that attribution very plausible.

