

The Same But Different

21 March 2024

A more pared back approach to interior design shows antique furniture in a new light.

By Giles Kime

For at least a decade there has been speculation in the press about the health of the market for antiques imprecisely described as 'brown furniture' that could refer to anything from a piece of post war utility furniture to a George II walnut secretaire. Like the fashion for flares and German Riesling it's either on the way in or the way out, usually at the same time. Those who love antiques will tell you two things; one is that it's a market driven less by prevailing taste and more by the size and proportions of the piece (ie not everyone has room for an eight foot Regency sideboard); the other is that the demand for good antiques has never gone away - it has simply evolved, as it has done for centuries.

'Twas ever thus. There are simply times when period and styles are a little more sought after than others - Georgian, Regency, Victorian, Biedermeier, Gustavian have all had their day in the sun. However such is the glorious variety of antiques, one has never (and will never) eclipse another. Our relationship with antique styles is like a parent with children - they are all loved for different reasons, and you never go off them.





Photograph Courtesy of [Godson & Coles](#)

What changes, however, is how furniture is presented; the unhinged eclecticism of the Victorian era, the burden of historicism that dominated the first half 20th century until it was dispelled by the pervasive influence of Nancy Lancaster and John Fowler who lightened the mood of classic interiors with delicate curtain treatments, chintz and painted furniture as well as the atmospheric tableaux of the dealer decorators of the 1970's and 1980's. These are subtle and nuanced shifts that happen over decades rather than years.

In the early decades of the 21st century it happened again. After the minimalist revolution of the 1990's came, as it always does, counter revolution. Decoration became sexy again; with a revival of everything from wallpaper and chintz to lustreware and antique furniture. But this time it was different; there was none of the heavily layered fullness of the 1980's.

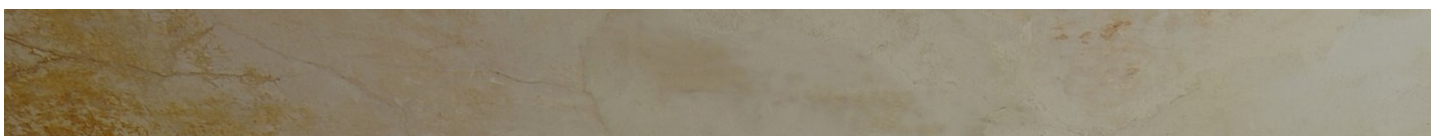




Photograph Courtesy of [Godson & Coles](#)

In a sense, it was a more disciplined approach that invoked the spirit of the pared back interiors of the early 19th century.

Mario Praz's *Illustrated History of Interior Decoration* reveals the rigour of continental interiors in the early 19th century when few extraneous objects disturbed the linearity of an interior. Even as late as the 1850's RS Tait's portrait of Thomas and Jane Carlyle in their house in Cheyne Row demonstrated an ordered simplicity that dominated Victorian interiors before the more full throttle style typified by the home of the Punch illustrator Linley Sambourne in Stafford Terrace in Kensington. It is a monument to the materialism stimulated by the possibilities of mass manufacture and growing global trade. Like the Carlyle's home it's still intact and open to the public.







Photograph Courtesy of [Godson & Coles](#)

The new mood in decoration relies on a variety of elements; quality over quantity and a carefully curated eclecticism, a spirit that is perhaps most eloquently expressed by the Ben Pentreath Studio; the interiors arm of the architectural and masterplanning practice. The Studio demonstrates how a pared back approach can bring pieces to life with a clarity that is often lacking in more crowded interiors. More pared back still is the work of the interior designer Rose Uniacke in which antiques bring a distinctive look to large rooms which take on the look of large, gallery-style spaces. Antiques are also a regular feature in the work of a new generation of designers such as Rita König, Nicola Harding and James Thurstan, for whom they bring all the qualities that we love about good antiques - colour, craftsmanship and exquisite design.