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Diversity is the key

A quality field lines up for the 2011 COUNTRY LIFE/LAPADA Object of the Year competition, from a monumental staircase to a tiny *netsuke*

A HAPPY morning—news of the lifting of the most immediate threat to the Portobello Market had just come through—sifting the full entry for this year's COUNTRY LIFE/LAPADA Object of the Year still left us with more than 30 fine, interesting, rare and/or beautiful pieces to consider at the second stage. As usual, it is a matter of comparing unlike with unlike, so our next meeting of judges could be a long one.

Let us begin with some of the better stories, a couple of which can be combined to make 'The Tale of Two Staircases'. The first is an actual entry for the competition; the second is a ghostly presence, represented by (but not in) a stumpwork picture. Both are mid 17th century. Oddly, the ghost has a stronger provenance than its physical counterpart.

The handsome oak staircase ***(Fig 2)***, with its panelling, entered by Architectural Heritage, is thought to have come from Wynnstay, a half-timbered house at the entrance to the Vale of Llangollen demolished in the 19th century. Certain history begins when parts of it were reused at Ruthin Castle, which became a hospital and then a hotel, and the rest kept in a watertight store that had been the X-ray block. After the hotel closed in 1960, the stairs were acquired locally and presumably kept in similar conditions. Whatever its origins, as the dealer says: 'There is no doubt... that this period staircase is a near unique example, the rarest of survivors from the 17th century, and by good fortune has remained almost intact.'

Were one to drive 30 miles almost due south from Wynnstay, one would come to the site of another lost half-timber house, Lymore, near Montgomery, once a seat of the Herberts, Earls of Powis. It was little lived in, and in 1921, after a near disaster, when the floor of the great hall collapsed during a church fête, Lord Powis decided on demolition, with an auction of the remains, including a fine staircase. There was only one bidder, Fred Anderson, and, according to his descendants F. E. Anderson & Son, when he got 'home and told his wife and two young children that he had purchased Lymore and they all burst out crying'. Luckily, he got his money back with the sale of the main staircase, and the Earl gave him the stumpwork picture in gratitude for his courageous bid.

Another survival is even older, a mid-14th-century limestone female figure ***(Fig 1)*** identified as Aseneth, wife of the Patriarch Joseph (Genesis, 41, 50–52), who was removed from Beverley Minster during the 19th-century Gilbert Scott restorations. She was preserved by a family of builders working on the Minster, who stood her in a pot.

Fig 1 left: **Female limestone figure from Beverley Minster, with Beedham Antiques.**
Fig 2 right: **Oak staircase, with Architectural Heritage**

Fig 3 above: **Cobalt-blue-ground Meissen vase, with David Brower.** *Fig 4 below:* **Gold, sapphire and diamond expandable bangle, 1974, by Giorgio Facchini, with Didier**

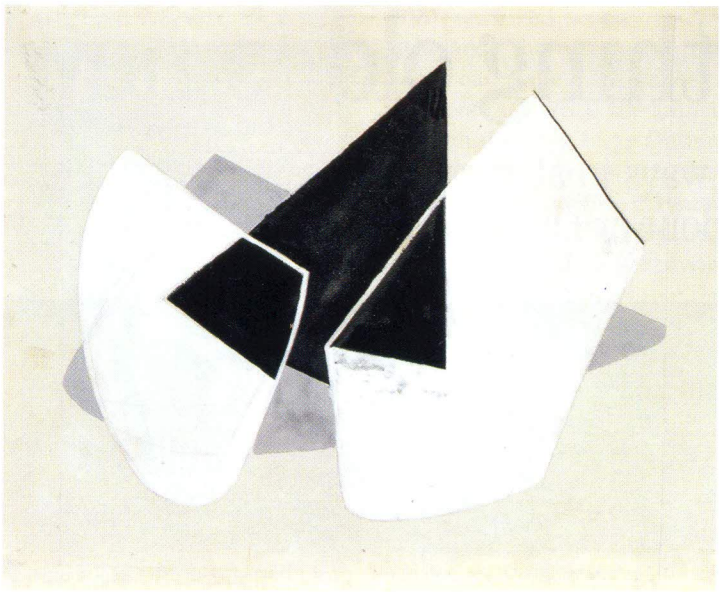

Fig 5: ***Gross Balance 1*, 1935, Winifred Dacre, with Lucy Johnson**

Evocatively, the darker staining comes from tallow candles. This is entered by Beedham Antiques, which also offers a mid-16th-century oak coffer, which it argues is more precisely dateable to about 1545 when Edward VI was Prince of Wales, because his stylised portrait wears a feather.

To emphasise the differences rather than trace similarities, next a look at two 20th-century items. Didier, specialist in artist-made jewellery, has submitted three pieces. One in particular seems very remarkable to me. This is a gold, sapphire and diamond expandable bangle ***(Fig 4)*** by Giorgio Facchini (born 1947) All his jewels are one-offs, and they show his interest in geometric motifs with moveable parts. This sculptural bangle, created in 1974, has arms set with gems that are fixed in such a way that they may be extended to create a more dynamic form for evening wear, as shown.

Lucy Johnson is known for the felicity with which she combines early furniture and objects with Modern British art on her stands at fairs. Recently, she has added a third string to her bow with commissioned furniture. Among her entries here is a strong Modernist painting that is also a footnote to turbulent relationships among artists. The 9¼in by 12½in *Gross Balance 1 (8b/Abstract Sequence No 5)* ***(Fig 5)*** is signed Winifred Dacre, the name used by Winifred Nicholson so that her abstract work would be distinct from that of Ben Nicholson, from whom she was separated. It was painted in Paris and in 1935; soon afterwards, she moved back to figurative work. Of this phase, Christopher Neve, (once an ornament of this magazine), wrote: 'Her poetic vision could find its way into even the most uncompromising relationship of geometric figures suggesting depths of ambiguity in the simplest shapes.'

David Brower specialises in Meissen porcelain, and, as last year, he reminds us just how sumptuous the 19th-century products of the factory could be. This time, he offers a very splendid 1880s cobalt-blue-ground vase ***(Fig 3)*** standing just over 27in and of a shape originally created by Ernst August Leuteritz (1818–93).

The newly launched partnership of Rutherston & Bandini specialising in Japanese art offers a lovely *netsuke* ***(Fig 6)*** by 'one of the most highly regarded *netsuke* carvers of all time, 18th century Kyoto master Masanao'. At just over 1½ in each way, it is actually relatively large, and is a nervous rat eating a chilli.

Pick of the week

LAPADA
THE ASSOCIATION OF ART & ANTIQUES DEALERS

The full list of dealers entering items for the Country Life/LAPADA Object of the Year (www.lapada-object-of-the-year.com) by category. Some have more than one piece, and six have entries in two or more categories: F. E. Anderson & Son (Clocks etc., Carpets); Gregg Baker (20th/21st-Century Design, Specialities); Beedham (Furniture, Specialities); Lucy Johnson (Fine Art, Furniture, Specialities); Graham Smith (Furniture, Jewellery etc.); Didier (20th/21st-Century Design, Jewellery etc.)

Fine Art Blackbrook Gallery; Robert Bowman; Julia Korner Fine Art; Rountree Fine Art; The Swan Gallery; Campbell Wilson. **Furniture** Butchoff; Summers Davis; Freshfords; Georgian Antiques; Hares; W. R. Harvey; Moxhams; Reindeer; John Robertson; S. & S. Timms; Wakelin & Linfield; Wilsons. **Ceramics and Glass** David Brower; Denton Antiques; Mayfair Gallery; Mark J. West. **Clocks, Barometers etc.** Raffety & Walwyn. **20th-/21st-Century Design** The Country Seat; De Parma; Peter Petrou. **Jewellery, Bijouterie and Objects of Vertu** Anthea A. G.; Hancocks; Lucas Rarities; McKenna & Co; Moira of New Bond Street. **Rugs, Carpets, Textiles and Tapestries** Farnham; Witney. **Specialities** Architectural Heritage; Billiard Room; Joanna Booth; Tim Bowen; Shaw Edwards; Richard Gardner; Timothy Millett; Kevin Page; Rutherston & Bandini; Garth Vincent.

Next week Myths and memories for sale

Fig 6: ***Netsuke* of a rat, with Rutherston & Bandini**