

How to succeed in antiques

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HOW TO SUCCEED IN ANTIQUES

Mr. Louis Jacomelli, brother of Peter Jacomelli, wishing to complete his job of catering to the "Valchera's" many regular customers with an artistic occupation, opened an antique shop off George Street in Richmond. As I had always been puzzled by the means with which antique dealers got hold of their valuable chattels, I resolved to see Mr. Jacomelli in his shop, and learnt from him that the ways of an antique dealer had nothing secret about them.

I asked him what were the main ways in which he supplied himself with his classy furniture. Did he have to cast around in the homes of dying dowagers and ferret in the antique market? He told me that he did not usually have to go out of his way to look for interesting pieces: he just had to wait for them to be brought to him. Usually, when somebody had a worthwhile antique object to sell, that person would call on Mr. Jacomelli, who would quote a price. This was the first way in which antiques found their way from a private home into his windows. Another important source of supply were fellow antique dealers. There are many of them in Richmond and they tend to form a kind of fraternity, ready to co-operate and help each other by supplying themselves with specialities mutually required. A dealer interested in Chippendale tables would survey his colleagues' establishments and may find that one of them, specialising in some other kind of antique, would be ready to part with a valuable table at a friendly price. The service would be returned, and in this spirit, all the dealers of the antique community of Richmond can get most of the wares they need through mutual communication and exchange. A vital part of an antique dealer's job is therefore to look at what other dealers have to offer—he has got to know the nature of supply within a certain area and this knowledge enables him to assist his customers by indicating to them useful addresses if he is unable to offer them what they are looking for. Mr. Jacomelli mentioned the case of a Mayfair dealer personally unknown to him who, having spotted a rare chest in his shop, had directed a customer to him. The dealer had naturally sought a 10 per cent commission in the case of a successful transaction, and Mr. Jacomelli found this to be a perfectly fair proposal.

Although the antique dealers professional journal contains abundant information on auction sales and antique agents, Mr. Jacomelli rarely uses this channel of supply. For one, the local supply is sufficient. He knows the dealers and estate agents in Richmond who are in a position to inform him when a wealthy resident has died or when a quiet, local auction is to be held. Another reason why Mr. Jacomelli dislikes vast and publicised auctions is that they are often rigged by

antique rings who, by their numerical presence, manage to outbid individual dealers and spread profit and risk among themselves. Rings are forbidden by law but are effective enough in the antique business.

There is another shady side to the antique business in that many of the wares on sale—particularly in emporiums like Portobello—are stolen goods. Mr. Jacomelli, who wants to lead a peaceful existence, is especially wary of this aspect of the trade and draws a certificate of origin for every piece he buys. A class of people with which Mr. Jacomelli avoids to deal with are the "knockers" who look for their goods in house-to-house calling. He makes use, however, of the services of an agent who knows the business inside out and who can orientate him on the interesting seams. But basically, his business style is to co-operate and fit harmoniously in the network of local dealers. There are ways of making quick money in antiques, depending on the kind of things one sells. But for Mr. Jacomelli, antiques are as much an end in themselves as a breadwinner. He loves old things and has gathered throughout the years a rich collection of ancient objects and furniture, as well as an encyclopaedic library on arts and crafts. It took him many years to stock up, using his own home as his store room. When some precious piece goes for sale, he has to replace it in the short term by depleting his sitting room. This has the result that his attachment is shared between the adornments of his sitting room and of his shop and that he is quite sad, really, when he has to sell something of beauty. The joy of a "pure" antique dealer does not lie in how much and how quickly he sells, but in the beauty and the rarity of his vintage. The longer the time he can admire it before he sells it the better.

Mr. Jacomelli doesn't want to deal in cheap, scrappy antiques and Victoriana. The goods he has for sale are of the kind which have to be sought for a long time. A Louis Philippe or an Adam table cannot, and indeed may not, be bought like a refrigerator. The antiquarian worthy of his name has the taste and knowledge of these things. A precious antique may take months to find, and like all higher pleasures, must be sought with perseverance. This is the spirit in which Mr. Jacomelli likes to deal.

Just behind Mr. Jacomelli's shop there is another antique shop, situated in Paved Court, a lovely medieval alley joining King Street to Richmond Green, specialising in clocks, china and Persian rugs. It belongs to Mr. de Grancourt, a remarkably young octogenarian. He has helped Mr. Jacomelli along the way and the two antiquarians co-operate closely. This means that anyone who visits "Le Centre" will not go home before having a good look-in at its nearest neighbour.

(PMB)

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