

# AN ALADDIN'S CAVE FOR OUR TIMES

Diggory Hadoke examines some treasures that can be often overlooked at auction inspired by a recent trip to Holt's

I WROTE LAST month about the 'statement piece' possibilities that eye-catching taxidermy offers to the designer of a modern apartment. However, gun auctions offer a lot of other 'related' items that can appeal to the collector and designer alike. A recent trip to Holt's showcased more than one or two.

A very comprehensive collection of African, European and American beasts were sold at Holt's in their September 19th sale. Prices were strong, confirming that this once maligned and unfashionably Victorian phenomenon is making inroads into modern design. The classic American Trophy Room is sometimes mimicked in the UK but you really need a huge country pile to manage it. More common these days is a minimalist, white wall with dark gloss wooden floors and a big moose head as a centerpiece. Holt's sold their biggest moose head for £1,500 and huge white rhino for £1,400.

If a moose head in your sitting room is a bit too ambitious for Stoke Newington, how about a lion skull as a coffee table conversation starter? You could have picked one up at the same sale, but the £100 low estimate was a bit weak, the piece actually realising £500. Zebras are always popular and a really nice example made £1,000 from a high estimate of £350. If your budget is a bit lower, a very impressive pair of sable antlers, European mounted, went through the door at a modest £160. I doubt many of your friends will have one.

So much for the heads and horns – £1,000 would have netted you a vintage Indian tiger skin. These are invariably a little worn and moth eaten but they represent a trophy which is never likely to re-appear on our safari or shikari list. They come from a time when tigers were plentiful and shooting them was strictly licenced by the British authorities. Today, Corbett's large hearted gentleman appears destined for extinction in the wild, as the corrupt and venal powers dominating his fate in India and China connive to provide the wealthy and superstitious with a false promise of renewed vigour.

Ethnic items make good wall pieces and they vary from the military hardware of the last century to sporting implements and mementos.



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At Holt's the Sealed Bids are displayed on tables and strewn on the floor in a back room, offering the bargain hunter a chance to sift through all manner of treasure and rubbish in the hope of uncovering a gem that the buyers of £20,000 side locks overlook in the main area of business next door.

Zulu assegais, Javanese kris, Nepalese khukris, sword sticks, rapiers, Italianate daggers with wicked triangular blades. They all overlap on the periphery of the guns displayed in racks. It is so easy to overlook items in a pile, which alone would stand more scrutiny and garner greater admiration. The professionals hone in on the quality; the genuine issue original Fairbairn-Sykes fighting knife, the toledo-bladed sword cane, the rare re-loading tool or perhaps a cocking spanner for a Scott & Baker back-lock. This cherry picking notwithstanding, multiple

bids on perhaps hidden curios often gather the bidder a new friend to adorn his study or a desk ornament that will become familiar over the next two or three decades.

I love this recycling of old curiosities. Every generation of ownership adds a layer of mystique. They may have originally belonged to a traveller or adventurer, who brought them back from a long, arduous Victorian mission to uncharted lands. Others may have been the lifetime's collection of local objects from a career soldier or administrator in the old Empire. By now, they are very likely passing to third, fourth or fifth owner, having traversed the lifetimes of the previous holders of the title.

What parts have these things played in the lives of their keepers all these years, what have they witnessed and what do they tell us of our own mortality? In some cases, we are literally passing the baton, or cutlass, or club, or helmet to the next generation, who one hopes, will find equal fascination in the darkened wood, the patinated metal or the grip-worn wood. We humans are here for a short time. If I have twenty-five more summers to look forward to, I will do better than most who lived before me, yet these implements of war, of the chase, of passing cultures and eras live on to remind future generations of what they once were.

All this can be had for a few pounds; a punt on a whim and a glimmer of interest or recognition when an item sparks a slowly burning fire of interest or stirs a sleeping dog of family history. They can re-connect us with our ancestors. I once found a Stephen Grant hammer gun for sale – which, delving into the records, I revealed was made for my forebear Lord Edward FitzGerald, back when the family actually had money and lands rather than few old pieces of silver and dusty books with 'Ex



**KNIFE EDGE:** The author finds a couple of sharp bargains

libris' stamps on them from a castle that is now a golf club. My current shooting syndicate friends on the Boyne estate in Shropshire were interested to see a Holland & Holland hammer gun, originally a double rifle; now a 28-bore shotgun, made for the lord of our manor in 1880. I hope the current Lord Boyne is in a better financial position than I was when the Grant emerged and managed to pay the £1,000 the gun made in September.

Paintings and prints, sometimes with battered frames, scratched varnish or cracked glass can go overlooked. Rather than do so yourself; put a silly figure in the box. You never know what you might land. What looks old and dusty in a room full of old, dusty objects, requires only a new context, a clever presentation, a new interpretation of its place in order to become an asset, a one-off, a feature of your home. Mix the modern and the classic, juxtapose the white and the steel of an industrial modernist flat or loft with a wickedly glinting steel blade or a burnished hard-wood fighting stick. Reposition a Thorburn print with a minimalist frame, highlighted on a modern kitchen wall. They add interest, they break the predictable monotony of a minimalist interior and they give clean space a warmth or an edge that otherwise can be missing.

This quest for display items can include guns. De-activation these days is a wicked, destructive and expensive desecration of a beautiful old firearm. In order to hang it on the wall you have to destroy it. Far better to opt for the obsolete calibres which Section 58 of the firearms act permits us to collect unmolested and display proudly as curios. Pistols, rifles and shotguns, pin fires, muzzle loaders and obsolete chamberings all fall into the permitted category. The daddy of the last Holt's sale in this respect was a revolver made for H.Holland by Tranter in the massive, man-stopping .577 Boxer calibre. Put that on you wall and look at it until the end of your days. I doubt you will ever see another like it. Whoever did just that in September parted with the princely sum of £12,000 for it.

So, twelve pounds or £12,000; the sales have something for us all. Happy hunting. Christmas will be upon us by the time we next gather in Hammersmith and where better to find that gift that you simply cannot find elsewhere at any price? **GTN**



**You're not just buying an old gun - you're buying a piece of history**