



► Web traffic at Ceraudo.com, run by sisters Victoria (left) and Emily Ceraudo, has more than doubled in the past year; they are selling this bevelled Barbaolo mirror for £145
Georgia Rothman

◄ Tobias Vernon of 8 Holland Street with (below) a 1950s Italian reclining armchair, £2,850
Mark Hough/Liaison Long



Meet the new antiquarians

Collecting | Forget fusty and musty and quaint

village shops: young dealers are using social media

to woo millennials who appreciate antiques for their

nostalgic value and sustainability. By *Jessica Salter*

When Victoria and Emily Ceraudo turned up with a van at a pre-lockdown country house clearance in Oxfordshire, they stood out a mile. Both in their early thirties, the sisters are usually the youngest at such events "by about 15 years", Victoria says, and often the only women. "But as soon as we start bidding, people look at us differently."

They are confident buyers, filling up one van at a time after having researched each piece beforehand, including ordering condition reports in advance. In Oxfordshire, they knew the tortoiseshell-effect bamboo Victorian side tables would "sell like hot cakes" for the £300 mark, and there would definitely be a buyer for the 46-piece antique Minton dinner service. (The food writer Skye McAlpine bought it for £395).

Older dealers, accustomed to selling much larger pieces of furniture, sidled up to the Ceraudos after the auction to ask for advice on the changing market. It is something they have learnt about

since starting their eponymous online antiques business in 2016.

Then, a piece could take up to two months to sell; now, items sell within a few days. Web traffic has more than doubled in the past year – further still in the recent lockdown months when customers have been at home plotting furniture upgrades. Turnover increased 60 per cent between 2018 and 2019.

The Ceraudo sisters are part of a growing number of technology entrepreneurs capitalising on the resurgence of interest in antiques – particularly among young adults. Antiques appeal to millennial consumers, says Gemma Riberti, director of WGSN lifestyle and interiors. "They are sustainable and the opposite of throwaway fast furniture; they provide a sense of nostalgia and they have a narrative buried in them. For a younger consumer who perhaps rents their home, it's comforting to own something with a sense of meaning."

The current trend for contextualising antiques in a con-



◄ Charlie Porter of Tat London: she is selling this still-life painting, artist unknown, 1958
David

temporary setting – popularised by designers from Beata Heuman, Rita König and the FT columnist Luke Edward Hall – is, Riberti says, "aspirational, cool and approachable".

But, as traditional collectors have noticed to their cost, young urbanites cannot always or do not necessarily want to rummage around in an over-stuffed shop in a quaint English village (as delightful as that may sound to others). They enjoy a collection photographed on a clean, white background, packaged by a brand they trust, and want to buy it at the tap of a finger. "This audience are used to buying everything online," Riberti says, "so why wouldn't they buy antiques online? It just streamlines the process."

Selling online – particularly via social media – is partly what makes these outlets so nimble. "As social media increasingly connects buyers and sellers of art, antiques and collectibles, smaller entities are able to attract clients with bespoke services, servicing a

gap in the market that large companies are far less suited to fill," says Veronika Lukasova, director of the industry analyst firm Art Market Research.

Something that is centuries old can sell in seconds to buyers anywhere in the world via Instagram, where there are more than 16m posts related to antiques, and the search term is growing 12 per cent every month. König says she furnished her entire farmhouse in County Durham "lying on my sofa shopping dealers on Instagram".

Charlie Porter, founder of Tat London, a quirky online antiques store that has collaborated with designer Ben Pentreath and gallery 8 Holland Street, says 70 per cent of her sales come from her 50,000 Instagram followers. Porter says sales have risen since lockdown, albeit for smaller, cheaper items than usual.

Howard Byrom, who runs Society Antiques and Decorative out of a disused Methodist chapel in Morecombe, north Lancashire, has also used social media to his advantage. He takes pictures of his finds as he loads up the van, posts them to his 3,640 Instagram followers, labelling the treasures #freshoffthevan. "Sometimes I sell most of it before

I've got home," he says. The platform has been instrumental in raising turnover from £35,000 a year to up to £20,000 a month. Now that he is not touring the country, he is posting pictures of stock in storage, including a Josef Frank brass bar cart, and reports trade inquiries from the US.

Many of these entrepreneurs have backgrounds in art and design. Victoria Ceraudo worked in the branding departments of fashion houses including Giorgio Armani, while Emily, an architect, studied under Tom Dixon. Sophie Miller, co-founder of Skinflint, a Cornwall-based lighting and restoration company, trained at Central Saint Martins before working as an art director.

Tobias Vernon, founder of 8 Holland Street, was an interior designer before he set up his business "sourcing pieces for clients and coming across these pieces I loved but couldn't



◄ Howard Byrom of Society Antiques and Decorative with his Josef Frank bar trolley, on sale for £880 — *Sonja Byrom*

► Sophie and Chris Miller of Skinflint, a lighting and restoration company, with an antique operating light they are selling, £8,250 —



place", he says. He says new customers come into his galleries in Bath and Kensington to "touch, feel and talk to us about the pieces". Nevertheless, two-thirds of repeat sales are through the website, helping fuel his monthly turnover of up to £80,000 a month for antique sales (he has a side income from consultancy and design services).

Since lockdown, Vernon has launched a slicker, Amazon-like ecommerce site, as well as selling through Instagram to his nearly 24,000 followers for the first time (followers have risen by 30 per cent since the start of the year).

"I was freaking out about the shops closing, but actually it has given us the push we needed," he says. Vernon had previously found that customers appreciated coming into the store to touch and feel expensive items. "So I was sceptical about it working for high-end pieces, but we have had some fairly significant orders, including international," he says.

By establishing solid digital businesses before the world went into lockdown, the new dealers have bought themselves a head start at a time when we do not shop physically and perhaps still do not want to, even as rules relax.

Nevertheless, antique selling is tough. Prices are "rock bottom", according to Lukasova. That may be excellent for the consumer, but is hard for a dealer who has to factor in the time spent researching, bidding and buying individual pieces, then photographing, packing and transporting.

"The process can take weeks," Vernon says, all before accounting for how long it may take to sell. There are problems with cash flow – everything has to be bought upfront – and storage. Mistakes are costly. Gemma says that they have made plenty, including buying a tapestry unsewn, which, when unfolded, turned out to have had holes cut out of it, and an expensive Maïson Jansen Chinoiserie cabinet that sat in storage for two and a half years. It is no wonder that Porter says that in the first few years of running Tat London she "barely made a profit" – although this year, now she is working on the business full time, sales are strong.

A finite amount of stock is also a problem – and particularly in the smaller sizes that young people want to buy. "Now that there are more of us selling antiques and making them more accessible, I do wonder if prices will go up as things get harder to find," Victoria Ceraudo says.

In April, König threw the industry a virtual lifeline when she revealed a private list of her favourite Instagram antique dealers. "This was something I never meant to reveal, but I realised that unless I did something there was a chance some of these businesses I love would not be around when we come out of these strange times," she says.

Victoria Ceraudo says: "Any sales we make now in these difficult times have a profound and meaningful impact on our company."

But these companies are also adept at reinventing themselves. Ceraudo launched its own range of vintage-inspired pieces, called POMEI, last year, a "reflection of the pieces that we've been looking for when we source antiques" – including cane furniture and vintage-style cocktail chairs. It collaborated with Liberty London in October and released a collection just before lockdown. A wallpaper range and furniture collection is in the pipeline. Vernon is working on a collection with the cabinet maker Alfred Newall.

The future of the sisters' business still includes antiques, Victoria says – "we're passionate about them" – but sales will be weighted 60 per cent towards their own collection. "It's not about copying antiques," she says. "It's about having your own take." Which is what their customers have bought from the start.

