



The Deal-Good **FACTOR**

He's the mastermind behind the London art fair Masterpiece and owner of antique-furniture specialist Ronald Phillips. All-round art aficionado Simon Phillips lets NICK FOULKES in on a few trade secrets

If you think that a cassalette is a variation of the pork, foie and bean stew from south-eastern France, then you are simply not sufficiently well acquainted with the inventory at Simon Phillips's Bruton Street showrooms. Phillips has a jolly nice pair of George III ormolu cassettes—fancy urns to the rest of us—a shade under 10 inches high, “each having a stepped, domed and pierced lid with berried finial”. Indeed, for lovers of the late-18th-century cassalette this brace of beauties has the lot: “fine rope-decorated rim with pierced guilloche,” check; “ram’s head handle to each side connected with drapery above,” check; “acanthus leaf-decorated base,” check; “waisted socle with berried laurel-leaf ring,” check; and of course the *sine qua non* of any good cassalette from the 1790s, a “stepped moulded acanthus leaf-decorated platform with fine arabesque fields to each side and terminating in paw feet,” check.

“But that is not really representative of what we do,” says the well-modulated voice. “They’re just rich men’s toys to dress up the furniture.” A toy, by the way, with a five-figure price tag (but to be fair, as he points out, you can use them as candlesticks as well).

To step across the threshold of Ronald Phillips on Bruton Street is to enter a world of ormolu and tortoiseshell, where candlelight is refracted through the cut-glass pendants of peerless chandeliers, reflected by centuries-old mirrors and gleams warmly in patinated mahogany. If you are in the market for a George II cut-glass sweetmeat tree or a 10-foot-something giltwood chimneypiece that looks like an opium dream, then you probably have Simon’s number on speed dial and have had dinner with him recently at Harry’s Bar, where the gregarious and good-natured antiques dealer can be seen with Greek shippers, Italian textile magnates and discreet American collectors.

After leaving Harrow and doing three months at what was Phillips Auctioneers on Bond Street, Phillips joined his father Ronald in the family business in 1978. The intervening decades have seen the trade change. First, there is the merchandise. “My father used to sell a lot of good but fairly ordinary brown furniture, but these days nobody wants to know: people want to buy very rare, important, expensive items.” Accordingly, the epithet “museum quality” does not do his stock justice; his favourite adjectival construction is “Buckingham Palace”, as in “that’s proper Buckingham Palace furniture”, and he has one or two bits and pieces that used to be in situ at Windsor Castle.

Then there is the increasingly competitive pace of business. “It used to be a much easier pace. We used to buy everything very leisurely and sell on in the trade,” he drawls, leaning back in his chair and giving a good impression, it must be said, of a man whose biggest decision of the day is which cigar to smoke after dinner.

But that Hermès-silk-smooth manner and *bonhomie* is deceptive, as Phillips is one of the prime movers in the biggest thing to happen to art and antiques in London in at least a generation: Masterpiece. Along with Mallett, Apter Fredericks



THE FINER THINGS

Opposite page: Simon Phillips on the Grimsthorpe Castle settee in front of a pair of George III carved giltwood wall brackets and Qianlong period cloisonné quail incense burners. *From top:* the Ronald Phillips showroom; the stamped reverse of a Regency Windsor Castle side cabinet; a pair of George III ormolu cassettes.



and stand-builder Stabilo, he launched London's grande-luxe answer to Maastricht and the Biennale des Antiquaires in Paris. "Masterpiece came about when the Grosvenor House Antiques Fair came to its end after 75 years. I was chairman and we had one of the best fairs ever, but people had outgrown the room, the ceilings were low and people felt cramped. We started Masterpiece with wide aisles, tall ceilings, great catering and enough space for you to put a mirror over a commode. We also changed the whole thing. We wanted to have things for everybody: there are watches and cars, new and old examples of most disciplines," united by one criterion—that each is "the very best available". And given that Phillips has a reputation as an epicure to uphold, the catering is courtesy of the likes of Harry's Bar and Le Caprice, with a Ruinart champagne trolley doing the rounds of the fair at tea time.

This summer saw the third iteration of the fair and recognition has been almost instantaneous. As well as serious shoppers of the calibre of Sir Elton and Tom Ford, the second edition of Masterpiece saw the fair given unofficial royal patronage when Prince Harry spent an afternoon going round the stands. Phillips hints that he would like the Masterpiece brand to go global, talking vaguely about "taking it international at some stage. However we have got to get London perfect. It is more like a fair that has been around for 10 years and it was up and running very quickly but we can't take our eye off the ball." And for bon vivant Phillips this is as much about the antipasti as the art. "One of the main improvements this year was that we managed to get Scott's Champagne and Seafood Bar right into the centre of the fair," which, coincidentally of course, was not far from Phillips's stand. □



The trompe l'oeil exterior of Masterpiece, at the Royal Hospital Chelsea.



The Nascade Racer, exhibited by Shaw Speed & Custom.



Eros, by George Mancini, exhibited by the Fine Art Society.



Tom Ford and Tim Jefferies



Vivienne Westwood

MASTERPIECE *of the* ACTION

Highlights of London's Summer Art Extravaganza



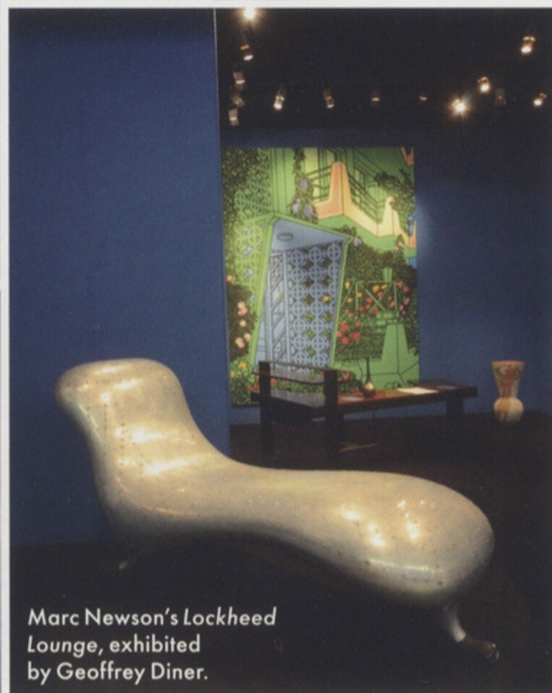
With a Girl Like You, by David Spiller, exhibited LULA by the Portland Gallery.



Exhibits at the Alberto di Castro & Sperone stand.



Prince Harry



Marc Newson's Lockheed Lounge, exhibited by Geoffrey Diner.

PHOTOGRAPHS: LUKE SHERIDAN-OLIVER