

FURNITURE

In with the new, in with the old

If you thought antiques and modern furniture were mutually exclusive, then think again. An antiques dealer and a contemporary furniture designer speak to **Veronica Stivala**.

When we speak of decorating our homes or the way others do up their living spaces, we tend to categorise into eras or styles. And that means that we might wrongly assume that one style is mutually exclusive of another.

Or not. Trending interior décor concepts such as steampunk, for instance, combine styles from the Victorian era (inspired by steam machines and the like) and the contemporary. Various modern utilitarian objects have been modified by aficionados into pseudo-Victorian mechanical steampunk style.

In a similar fashion, world-renowned furniture designer Francis Sultana's creations combine the grace and style of pieces from the past with the modern and contemporary.

Sultana says that, "I draw inspiration from the past and re-invent it with my own signature. In a way, it's editing, so it feels more contemporary yet is still harmonious with the past."

Agreeing with the furniture designer, antiques expert and auctioneer Pierre Grech Pillow says the old and the new complement each other perfectly, though, of course, both need to be of good quality.

The idea that antiques are far more expensive than contemporary items is, surprisingly, a mistaken belief, says the expert. The two explain themselves better here.

TIMELESS PIECES

Pierre Grech Pillow, owner of Obelisk Auctioneers and Valuers, was born and bred into antiques and fine arts.

"From a very early age I used to accompany my father, who was one of the first to get involved in the antiques business in Malta, on his many activities connected to the business. Over a period of many years, I therefore worked with most of the people engaged in the antiques business in Malta and gained a lot of valuable experience and knowledge."

Villa Drusilla in Attard, which is Obelisk's showcase, is adorned from floor to ceiling with gorgeous chests of drawers, dining tables and chairs and impressive paintings by the likes of Giuseppe Cali and Mattia Preti. Set up to high international standards, it has now become the premiere auction house in Malta.

"An ancient and simple form of commerce, auctions have long been the best way to establish the value of unique items," says Grech Pillow. "Obelisk has perfected the art of the auction business, but is nonetheless continuously seeking ways of updating the process. Today, modern innovations such as broadcasting sales over

"I have been successful in selling a number of antiques and fine arts at record prices. The 17th century painting of St. John the Baptist in the Wilderness by Espinosa (exhibited at the Caravaggio and Painting of Realism in Malta exhibition in 2007) sold for a record €120,000. I have also sold: two important works by Mattia Preti, published; major Maltese Baroque painters such as Francesco Zahra, Giuseppe D'Arena, Antoine Favre, Stefano Erardi and others; a number of Old Master paintings and also contemporary art sold to Heritage Malta for the National Collection; a 17th century Maltese chest of drawers sold for €100,000; and a rare German Walther Model PP 7.65mm pistol issued to the NSKK (National-Sozialistische Kraftfahr Korps - a Nazi party para-military organisation) in the late 1930s, sold for a record €6,100.

The next Obelisk auction, being held on February 24-25, also includes some outstanding items, including a rare 19th century C. Cairo Complete Volume by Count Amadeo Preziosi, fine 17th and 18th century Maltese furniture, glass, clocks, Old Master paintings and Maltese modern art by artists

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the internet and accepting bids online in real time, allow you to participate in our auctions from anywhere in the world."

For a country the size of Malta, the local antiques market is very healthy.

"In the world of antiques and fine arts, the size of a country does not have a specific impact on the market," says Grech Pillow. "In Malta we are very lucky to have a lot of fine antiques and art items, including paintings, furniture, silver, glass, gold, militaria as well as Melitensia and contemporary art. The demand for various items changes from time to time, but whatever the situation, there is always a healthy demand for quality items from the discerning buyers."

During his career, Grech Pillow has auctioned significant works.

such as E. Caruana Dingli, W. Apap, V. Apap, P. Carbonaro, G. Vella, A. Agius, E. Barthelet, V. Diacono, H. Alden, and Mario Caffaro-Rore.

Buying an antique piece of furniture is an investment, says Grech Pillow. Once you've got hold of a genuine antique, you have a gem the value of which will increase over the years. During periods of financial belt tightening, antiques seem to acquire more stability and may also see a price improvement.

Moreover, antiques and fine arts bring a definite improvement in the style, elegance and prestige of a house, be it an old palazzo or indeed a modern apartment. They speak volumes about their owner, whoever he or she may be.

"It is amazing how beautiful antiques look in a modern environment,"



affirms Grech Pillow, underlining the paramount importance of class and quickly dismissing materials such as stainless steel, chipboard and mica.

He goes on to explain that antiques enrich a room, giving it character and style.

"The beauty of antiques is that each country has its idiosyncratic pieces such as the local chest of drawers which will never go out of fashion," the dealer notes. He patriotically explains how the imposing Maltese item does contain similarities with its Italian

counterpart, although the trained eye can tell the differences in the way the two were crafted.

Discussing how best to showcase antiques, Grech Pillow stresses the importance of professional lighting in the display of a valuable work of art, for the sheer genius of the artist can be properly appreciated like this.

On gazing at a stately Chesterfield settee with matching armchairs, this poor writer can't help but point out that such specimens of the past surely are for those on the higher end of the pecuniary pool.

Not so, asserts Grech Pillow, explaining that not only can prices work out the same as a contemporary piece, but that an antique will increase in value.

Intrigued, I ask where does an antique apprentice start a potential collection?

"A Maltese chest of drawers is always wise to have," advises the expert. Naturally, one needs to assure that it is a genuine piece. Another good starting point is with baroque paintings. Perhaps some day...

NEWS ON THE NEW

A sleek, oblong rectangular board lies poised over four elegant, white legs. Oozing style, Francis Sultana's Palm Spencer Console is simple yet magnificently chic. Although a careful creation of the 21st century, this piece obviously nods at classical beauties from the past with its slender table legs containing strong echoes of the Greek Corinthian column.

As *World of Interiors* magazine aptly said, Sultana, "Ardently advocates mixing traditional and up-to-the-minute".

As the furniture designer explains, the console was inspired by the Palm Room at Spencer House in London. A gem of a space, the Palm Room boasts fantastical architecture with carved and gilded palm trees. Here, one sees the connection with classical archi-

ture for the palm trees were chosen to underline the 18th-century belief in the close connection between classical architecture and nature.

In the same way as this room merges architecture and nature, Sultana speaks of creating a relationship with the now and then in his furniture.

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Speaking about his past, the Gozoborn designer reminisces how as a little boy he had visited Ta' Ċenċ when it was owned by the Federici family. Although still very young, his artistic eye picked up on the way the family had stylishly mixed old and new and



Photo by Solina Guedroit

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how the villas they had commissioned were so sophisticated.

Indeed one notices the local influence on Sultana in creations such as the delicate Twig Dining Chairs that are reminiscent of their simple Maltese counterparts.

An ardent traveller, Sultana draws his inspiration from the exotic places and museums and galleries he visits. His most recent, luxurious trip to the small, private island Mustique, which forms part of Saint Vincent and the Grenadines, inspired him to design a new collection.

The Gerhard Richter show at the Tate Modern in London also left a mark on Sultana. Similar to Sultana's juxtaposition of styles, Richter has a diverse approach to his paintings mixing photography with painting and even combining contradictory styles.

In addition to the lavish trips, Sultana adores old movies that serve as a muse for more inventions. For example, he

recently re-watched the 1961 film *Come September* with Gina Lollobrigida and Rock Hudson, which includes beautiful shots of "great furniture".

Returning to Sultana's furniture, one cannot but admire the Mayfair Dining Room which superbly combines antique-style chairs with the contemporary, such as the abstract wall-art. Is there a correct ration of antique to contemporary pieces in a room?

"There is none," says the designer. "It's a question of setting a good balance you are happy with as well as combining pieces that you like."

And what pieces does Sultana like? "My greatest love," he shares, "is the Emilio Terry armchair commissioned by Carlos de Beistegui for his 1928 penthouse on the Champs Elysées in Paris designed by Le Corbusier. Apart from its extraordinary beauty, its perfect provenance makes it a chair that will be well-remembered in 20th century history."