



# Reinventing history

Thanks to the visionary refurbishment of the Cape Grace hotel, Cape antiques have lost their dusty, museum image and been given a glamorous new look



At the beginning of 2008 an interesting thing began to happen. Stocks of Cape pieces started to disappear at a rapid rate from shops around the country. One collector looking for a *wakis* was told in George, “No these three have been sold,” and again when he saw two in a shop in Oudtshoorn he was told they too had been sold. “Who on earth would want five *wakiste*?” he wondered.

In fact the buyers, he discovered, were on an aggressive shopping spree to purchase not five but as many as 22 *wakiste*, dozens of chairs, brass and copper, 15 side tables and a lot more.

The project that was gobbling up Cape furniture as never before was the refurbishment of the Cape Grace hotel. The buyers were Cape furniture dealers Jo-Marie and Pier Rabe, who had been commissioned by interior designer Kathi Weixelbaumer to source all the Cape antiques needed for an amazing

project that was to electrify the market.

“When I was approached to refurbish the hotel,” says Kathi, “my immediate thought was that an overseas visitor, from say Italy, would not be interested in staying in a Tuscan villa. What the international traveller wanted to see was something with a Cape flavour.”

Although named Cape Grace, there was very little ‘Cape’ about the place. “I wanted to truly reflect the history of the Cape,” says Kathi, “what sweetened the contract was that a large proportion of the budget went into the collection, which is a complete investment in itself. All the bones are now there,” she says.

“The collection will outlast any number of refurbishments that are so necessary with wear and tear. It was a very logical route to take and in the end made much more financial sense than spending a lot of money on new things that would have lost their value the minute they were out of the showroom,” she says.

The Rabes with 25 years in the antiques



TOP LEFT: African Sketchbook’s striking gable border design on these handwoven silk dupion curtains reflects some of the oldest Cape Dutch architecture.

CENTRE LEFT: A 19th-century brass and teak water *balie* on stand. The wall cupboard is one of a pair in stinkwood c.1820 and a fine, rare caned settee that Lady Anne Barnard might have put in her refurbished, English-style drawing room.

BOTTOM LEFT: A hand-painted tapestry depicting a Japanese Imari urn, created by African Sketchbook, makes a statement in the entrance of the Imari Suite. Imari porcelain was recorded in inventories of early Cape Town homes simply as *Japaans porcelijn*.

business were the ideal people to source the collection. Jo-Marie has an academic research background and Pier an extraordinary, photographic memory for every piece he has seen in the last 25 years. The couple criss-crossed the country every week, called up every contact from their little black book of dealers, collectors, marketers, and even thrift shop owners. In the end they amassed over 500 pieces of Cape antiques ranging from small items such as simple buckets, corkscrews, irons, copper bed warmers, hand-carved picture frames, brass *komfoors* to larger pieces such as armoires, cabinets, benches and wall cupboards that provide guests at the

hotel with an endless visual feast of history.

The jewel in the collection is undoubtedly an 18th-century cabinet that belonged to Cecil John Rhodes. Rhodes lent it to Sir Herbert Baker to use as a filing cabinet on the Grootte Schuur estate when the architect was rebuilding the house after a fire. It was bought for R225 000, but now less than a year later is worth R450 000.

“I have fallen in love with Cape furniture all over again,” says Kathi. “If you put a lot of furniture in a beautiful Cape home it looks fine, if you put Cape furniture in a normal house with ordinary proportions it ▶



TOP RIGHT: Once used by a surveyor or a photographer, this 19th-century tripod is now a lovely standard light. On the yellowwood *wakis* is a 1930s model of a trek wagon probably made to commemorate the 1838 Great Trek. The Morris chair is an early 19th-century teak piece.

RIGHT: A child's 19th-century high chair. Traditionally the grandfather would commission such a chair for the first born only if he approved of his daughter-in-law. These chairs are very rare today.

BELOW: The jewel of the collection: the c.1780 cabinet given to Sir Herbert Baker by Cecil John Rhodes when Baker was rebuilding Grootte Schuur.





just doesn't fly," she explains. "As a building the Cape Grace lacks good proportions. I walked the corridors with a sense of dread thinking this will never work."

What made the corridors come alive with interest, she maintains, was firstly the perfect paint colour and then the series of metal museum boxes hung along the walls that house the hotel's collection of small antique pieces.

"What made Cape antiques sexy again was the risky way we used things with stripes, mirrors, chandeliers and tapestries, hand painted by African Sketchbook. We gave 'Cape' glamour and dusted off its museum image. In the first bathroom we refurbished, we hung a yellowwood cupboard on the mirror, added a West coast chair and a *balie* to the decor and it instantly started to look different and exciting."

Kathi themed each of the four lobbies, one on each floor. The lobby with the Baker cabinet is Blue and White, a play on the blue and white porcelain that arrived at the Cape, mostly illicitly, smuggled in by sailors who wanted something to trade to finance their shore leave in the brothels and taverns.

The third floor lobby took its cue from the huge Imari vase that Kathi bought on ▷

ABOVE LEFT: This bathroom is decorated with a dainty Sandveld cedarwood wall cupboard and orangewood chair, the latter with a quirky and ancient repair made with ironwork stays.

ABOVE RIGHT: Details give the hotel decor depth and interest. Here a collection of African pieces, two pretty headrests and two knobkerries, hung together provide a living image of Cape history.

LEFT: On the fourth floor landing this wonderful collection of disparate objects sums up various aspect of the Cape's history, from the old brandy still to the four Oregon pine wall cupboards c.1880 to the Baroque *riempies bank* c.1750 and a superb old *wakis* with original paintwork still intact. During the 1970s and 1980s collectors stripped many *wakiste* of their protective paint thus lessening their value.

CONTINUED ON PAGE 140

## CONTINUED FROM PAGE 22

auction. The set here also represents a later period at the Cape when Lady Anne Barnard was to write to her friends back in England. “Just had my *voorkamer* redone in the English manner. The heavy Dutch taste is too awful.”

So of course, everyone else at the Cape at that time had to have their rooms redone too, probably with an elegant, swirled cane work settee covered in soft cushions, like the one that is the centrepiece on the third floor lobby.

It is private collectors and businesses such as the owners of the Cape Grace who are helping as custodians of the past in a time where public funds are more urgently needed elsewhere.

## HISTORY UNFOLDS ON FABRIC

When African Sketchbook’s Anne Thistleton and her partner, Di Christian, were commissioned to create the fabric for the 150 rooms of the Cape Grace, they knew this was a great opportunity to tell the early history of the Cape through the medium of fabric. Di, the company’s creative director, created over 50 custom fabric designs for a total of 6 000m that were all hand painted at their studio in Cape Town. The bespoke fabrics became the cornerstone of the storytelling. For example, The Spice Route Suite is a tribute to the sailing routes between East and West. The Nutmeg and Pepper bedrooms remind one of the valuable spices that were the foundation cargo of the great trading company, The Dutch East India Company, and the Lion Mountain Suite highlights the original uses of Lion’s Head and Signal Hill: critical communication points between ships in the bay and the Castle.

Peter Kolbe’s 1719 etching of the Company Gardens has been painted on six metres of fabric to provide a captivating backdrop to the dining room in one of the suites. And when you open the door of a three-bedroom suite, you are overwhelmed with the painted tapestry of an Imari urn used in the Cape in the 1600s. Each suite, each room, and each space has a story.

“The overwhelming reaction to the Cape Grace and its fabrics confirms that the marketplace was ready for fabrics to play a different role in decor,” Anne says. “Fabrics are once again centre stage – original, fresh and completely engaging. It is a refreshing reminder that fabric design doesn’t have to be dictated by the repeats of the highly efficient rotary printers or restricted by the protocol of a computer programme. Words such as ‘lovely, gorgeous’ seem vastly insufficient for these fabrics and completely ignore the depth, richness and relevance of the fabric’s design and production by hand. These fabrics have soul. These fabrics are timeless.” 

### SOURCES

**African Sketchbook** 021 715 6025

**Cape Grace** 021 410 7100

**Pier Rabe Antiques** 021 883 9730

**Weixelbaumer Design** 021 761 2223