

'Young people should become custodians of past'



Nick Howarth in his Morningside shop Antiques and Bygones.

Picture: SIBUSISO NDLOWU

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ANTIQUES and Bygones is a treasure on busy Lilian Ngoyi (Windermere) Road in Morningside. The shop front displays antique furniture nestled among glassware, hallmarked silver and other collectables.

Nick Howarth is the sole owner. In the business for 42 years, he has chaired the South African Antique Dealers' Association and now sits on its board of directors. His passion for collectables comes through.

His shop has existed since 1949 and carries an extensive range, from period furniture, jewellery, clocks and silver, to ceramics, glassware, militaria and Eastern collectables.

Howarth has been fascinated by collectables for as long as he can remember. His father was a brigadier in the British army and the family lived in North Africa, Singapore and Malaysia before settling in France for an extended period.

Howarth's parents would visit antique markets just outside Paris to build their collection. This fuelled his passion for antiques while young.

When his father retired from the military, the family emigrated to South Africa and Brigadier Howarth bought Antiques and Bygones in 1968.

Farming sugar cane in the lowveld at Triangle and Chiredzi in what was then Rhodesia. Howarth decided he could not pass up the opportunity to deal in antiques.

"In 1972 I joined my dad in the business in West

Street," he says. "I took over in 1985, then bought the old Aliwal church in 1988."

Business boomed until 2000 when he decided to leave the city centre and move to Morningside.

"We are in a good location visually. There were three antique dealers on this strip until recently and I had hoped the area would become the city's antique centre. But Durban is a limited market, dealers are feeling the pinch and the market is tight."

Howarth believes Durban and the country have lost a lot of enthusiasts. "The Jewish community was traditionally a great supporter of the trade. Sadly, many of them have emigrated."

But he has seen interest pick up recently from the Chinese community. "Because the oppression and Cultural Revolution in China saw so much destroyed, many Chinese people are now desperate to get their own cultural identity back. We regularly get Chinese in looking for jade, silver, porcelain and other Chinese antiques. They are investing, have disposable income, are discerning and have a good eye."

He keeps excess stock at a warehouse near his shop and regularly draws from it to keep his shop eclectic and interesting.

Rand weakness is a major challenge to the industry now, as is the supply of good quality stock.

Antiques loosely follow market trends and Howarth has seen a surge in interest in South African

art. Demand has risen for the works of Maggie Laubser and other local artists. He is not sure whether interest and pricing have peaked. Works by black artists

have also built a strong following

countrywide.

Antiques and Bygones stocks an extensive range of hallmarked silver, but Howarth says it is getting hard to buy stock in Britain.

"The silver price has shot up. Ten years ago, silver was \$6 an ounce. Last year it peaked at \$38, then dropped back and is now around the \$20-an-ounce mark."

"Solid silver is being melted down and used in the electronics industry for cellphones and X-ray machines. Experts predict the silver price could top \$100 an ounce in the near future."

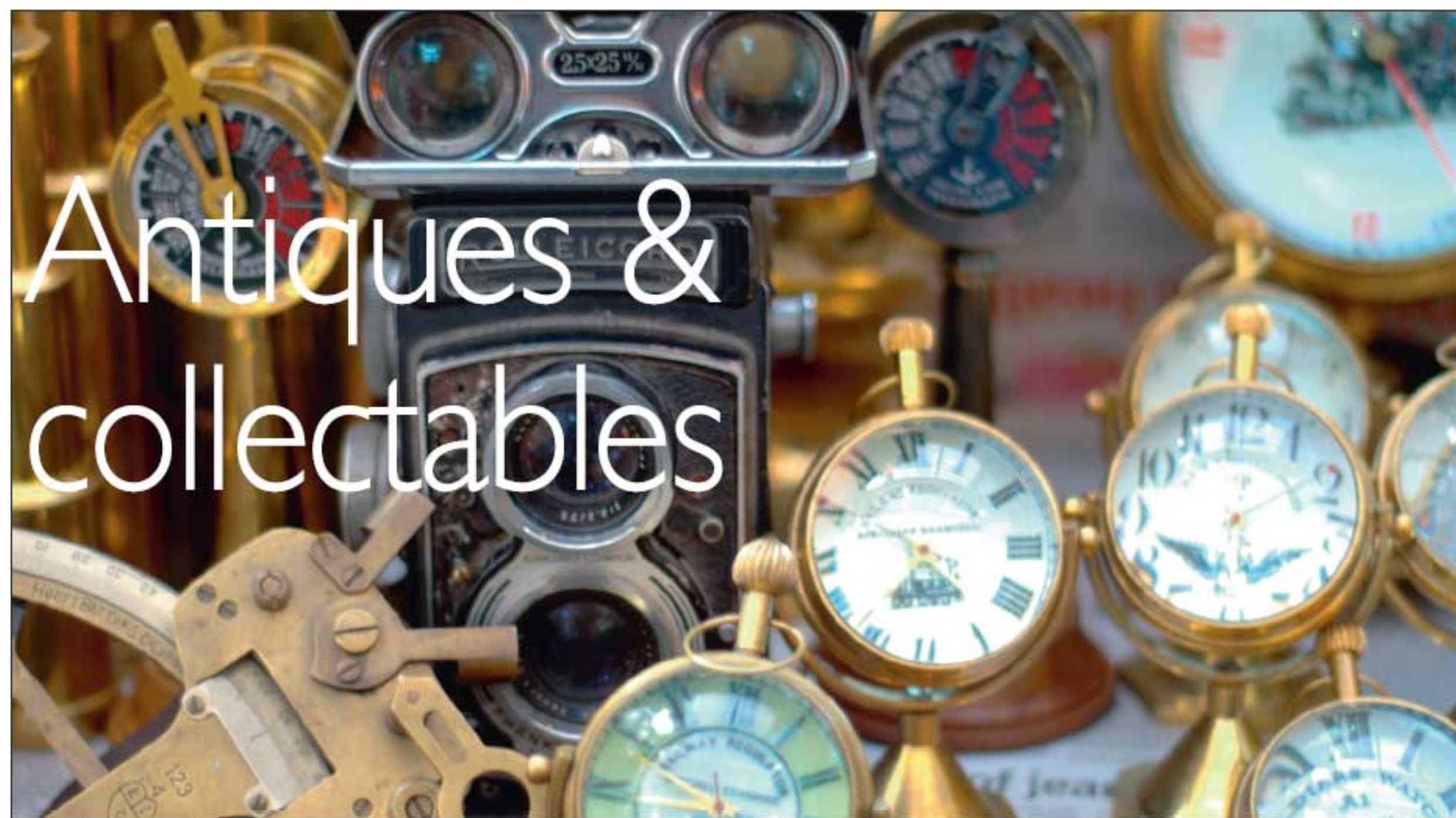
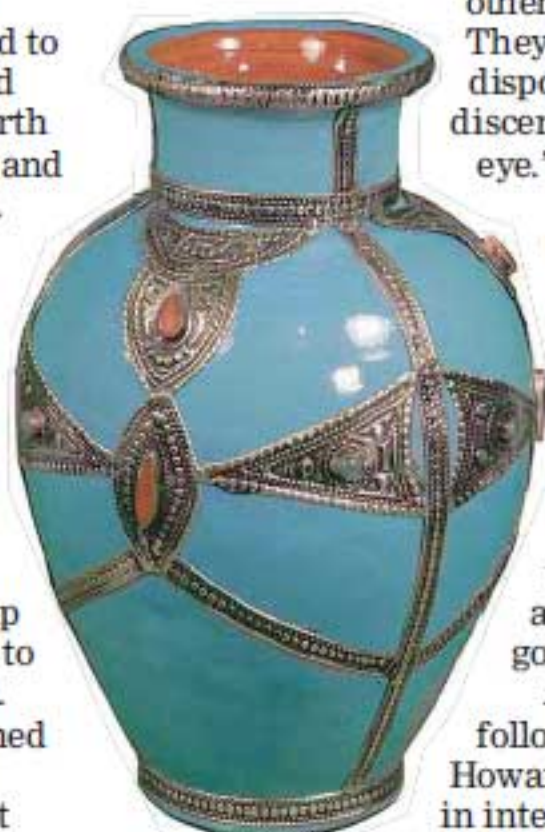
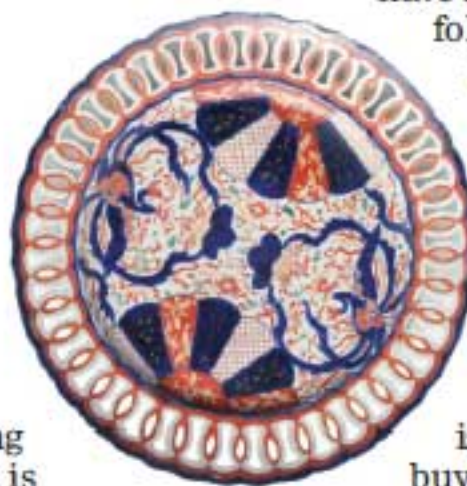
Howarth does valuations for insurance companies and deceased estates. He deals with a cross-section of clients around the country, but would like to see more young people collecting.

"Half the enjoyment of buying antiques is going around looking, comparing and talking. Our youth don't seem to have the time to browse. Those who are making good money are working hard to earn it and don't seem to have the luxury of time."

He believes they should try to become "custodians" of the past and consider buying a few choice items of furniture and decorative pieces for their homes.

Similarly, the collectors' market (small treasures such as silver snuff boxes, spoons, good jewellery or coins) is dwindling in South Africa while it's booming in Europe and China.

Howarth says a wise antique buy is a good hedge against inflation and a plunging rand.



Antiques & collectables

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THE South African Antique Dealers' Association was established in 1963, making it the country's oldest antique association. It represents 53 specialist dealers, four in KZN.

Jeremy Astfalck, the current chairman, says the association promotes the interests of dealers,

gives clients peace of mind and encourages high standards of ethics by regulating all members' trading activities through a code of conduct.

Astfalck says there are clear trends in the marketplace.

"Shrewd buyers are using our members' knowledge to buy the best available. In art and antiques, knowledge is essential."

The association is celebrating its 50th anniversary this year, a milestone he feels is indicative of members of the association delivering products and services that are unrivalled.

As for recessionary fallout, Astfalck says, "A lot of what we sell are luxuries, so we are feeling the effects of the economic downturn. However, many of our

clients are in the top income bracket and we find they will snap up the best. It's also a buyer's market now and many affluent collectors are getting really good value for their money."

He says art seems to be doing well, with sales strong in silver and 20th century design and the Chinese antique market is following closely.