

# ANTIQUES TODAY



News from the South African  
Antique Dealers' Association

■ OCTOBER 2008



Antony Wiley

## classic design

When people think of the South African Antique Dealers Association they assume that all pieces are antique, but this is not always the case. Classic designs have an endearing quality that lasts forever.

Some of these design almost become a cliché if they are overexposed, but the original design will always be unique. Chippendale's designs for his dining chairs for example or even the Vespa Scooter are examples of this.

Many pieces designed during the 20th century have become classics in their own time even though they are not yet a hundred years old. If a design has classic qualities they are soon recognised for their importance and quality. Jeremy Du Mughn of Jeremy Stephen Antiques has established a name for himself dealing in 20th century decorative glass and 20th century design. Because of his passion and knowledge he has managed to find some marvelous pieces that the average dealer might easily have overlooked, or in fact regarded as copies. His latest find proves yet again that there are still exciting pieces to be found in South Africa if you have the expertise and knowledge to know what you are looking at. Jeremy will be showing on the South African Antique Dealers Fair from the 3rd to the 5th of October a pair of original 1930s Barcelona Chairs, designed by Ludwig Mies van der Rohe (1886 –1969).

First a history of the chairs. In 1929 Mies van der Rohe was asked to design the German Pavilion at the International Fair which was held in Barcelona. Being an architect he designed the building and then some of the furniture which was included in it. Initially only two chairs were made and they had the design number MR90.



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When the fair closed the chairs disappeared into storage, and it was only in 1931 that the chairs were first produced for sale, by Joseph Muller of the Bamberg Metalwerkstätten Factory in Berlin. The original chairs which he designed were based on a Roman Magistrate's Stool known as a Sella Curulis.

In 1937 Mies van der Rohe immigrated to the United States where he became a professor of design in America. In 1948 Florence Knoll was given permission to start reproducing these chairs, the construction they used however was slightly different to the original but was approved by Mies van der Rohe. Many of these chairs were later used in important buildings and institutions throughout America because of their iconic design.

Back to the pair of chairs that will be on show at the Antique Dealers Association Fair. The provenance of any piece is important and can add considerably to its value. It is easy to say that a piece belonged to Napoleon for example but without proof this provenance is meaningless. These chairs and a glass top table called the Tugendhat (or Barcelona) table have a fascinating history. They were bought by a German architect Otto Apel who was a contemporary of Mies van der Rohe, in Germany. Apel's secretary and her son Rolf visited Apel's home regularly, and Rolf recalls being told of the history of the chairs and the man who designed them. Rolf and his family moved to South Africa some years later and had fond memories of both the chairs and the table. Some years later when Otto Apel died Rolf found that the chairs and table had been left to him in Otto's will, and they were eventually shipped to South Africa. After some years of use here it was

decided to replace the leather on the cushions as it had now become cracked and damaged. Tragedy now struck as the factory to which they were sent was burnt down and the cushions were destroyed. I can understand the owners distress and because of this the frames were stored in the garage and no longer used.

Recently Rolf's family approached Jeremy to see whether he would be interested in buying the two chairs and the table. After many months of negotiation he bought the chairs and the table and all the documentation relating to their history. Being a perfectionist he set about replacing the only two missing leather straps and ensuring the pliability of the remaining original thirty two. Restoration of anything with age is required to restore it to near original condition. He was also able to check the construction of the chairs to make sure they were original early chairs and not later copies. The cushions had to be remade and here he contacted the Knoll Factory in America to ensure that they were as near to the originals as humanly possible.

This discovery is an important one not only for local collectors of 20th century design but also for the international art world. Why did Jeremy decide to offer the chairs and the table for sale locally rather than on the international art market? He feels it is important that local buyers and collectors should have an opportunity to buy important pieces like these, and it would be sad if they were to leave the country. He intends to offer the three pieces together rather than splitting them up which makes a lot of sense to me. The last time a single Barcelona



Photography courtesy of Mark Lanning and the Garden & Home Magazine.

chair appeared on auction in London was in 1999, and it sold for fifty thousand pounds. Let us hope that these classic pieces do find a home in South Africa and remember just how important their provenance is to the art world. To their provenance they can now add Jeremy Stephen Antiques which is a great credit to a member of the South African Antique Dealers Association and the expertise that can be found in South Africa.

**A.W.**

## 45<sup>TH</sup> SAADA ANTIQUES FAIR

Johannesburg, Wanderers Clubhouse, 2 - 5 October 2008



## UPCOMING events

**SAADA ANNUAL FAIR**  
Johannesburg  
Wanderers Clubhouse  
2 - 5 October 2008

**SAADA ANNUAL FAIR**  
Cape Town  
Kirstenbosch Gardens  
14 - 15 February 2009