

THE VINTAGE SHOWMAN



Paul Martin is a man addicted to antiques – and, thanks to a new diet, gluten-free Hobnobs. “I’m obsessed,” he says. Indeed his wife, Charlotte, who says he can “nail a packet in a night” has playfully banished his non-edible artefacts to a lock-up in the grounds of their Wiltshire cottage.

Hidden behind bedsheets, set around the bright baize of a snooker table, are his current pick of treasures: a vast hippo’s skull called Nicholas, who, to prove provenance, Paul tells me, “committed matricide in Manchester zoo, later dying from a tumour”. There are chests of drawers and tables, a fully articulated skeleton of a horse, two Chippendale chairs, an eerily expert Edwardian stuffed boxer dog, and a beautiful burnished occasional table, listed in London for £600-£800, that he bought for £3,000. “I had to have it.”

Here, surrounded by chalk dust, old wine tumblers and kayaks, he throws off any veneer of the television showman and is puckishly enthusiastic about every piece, whipping off the blankets and sheets to reveal his finds. A dinosaur tooth; the paint-splattered easel that belonged to the artist Walter Sickert; the Queen Anne chest from his mother that he will “never part with”; and a Georgian collector’s cabinet whose drawers are filled with exquisite shells and fossils. “I bought it for £600 years ago,” he says. “The cabinet alone is worth that, and the contents are so on trend now.”

This is where the newly svelte Paul – he’s also given up cheese, ice cream and milk (except in his coffee) – can gorge on his appetite for antiques: collecting, buying, selling and just admiring and stroking for the love of it. It is a barely manageable habit. He admits to investing in three or four pieces a month spending up to £3,000. But “taste”, he tells me as we sit at the kitchen table, is a word that should be banned. “As soon as you say you’ve got taste, you’re blinkered. You have to be open. You have to be receptive.”

He’s so receptive that he gleefully confesses he feels a “tingle” every day. “I get that tingle all the time,” says the former Portobello Market dealer. “If you can pick something up and caress it and it does something to your soul, you don’t want to put it down, or it puts a smile on your face. That is the very best feeling in the world to me.”

For school-run mums, students, pensioners and fans of antiques, Paul, 59, has provided their daily TV tingle for almost two decades. As the face of BBC1’s *Flog It!*, he has been a daytime companion to the nation, visiting auction rooms from Darlington to Eastbourne, Belfast to Penzance and everywhere in between offering up his genial expertise as contestants sell their possessions at auction. It is the perfect combination of his two favourite hobbies: nosing around auction rooms and nosing around other people’s family history. The show was deemed antiquated and axed last month.

Nothing, however, seems to dent Paul’s zeal. He is opening his own gallery in Corsham, near Bath, in February – offering the chance to purchase Nicholas the hippo. Price tags will typically range from £500 to £5,000, to reflect changes in spending habits and tastes. “No one is interested in precious antiques,” he says.

Taste be damned, along with Flog It! The TV antiques dealer Paul Martin tells *Helen Davies* why he is all about the love, homemade honey and skulls

“They are interested in something that’s been loved and passed down through generations. They won’t spend £6,000 on an oyster-veneered Queen Anne chest of drawers any more. They’ll spend £2,000 on one that maybe doesn’t have the right handles or isn’t museum-worthy, and spend the rest of the money on something really contemporary and modern.”

But what if everyone wants something quirky, individual or eclectic? “Hah!” he laughs. “Yes. There is a danger that if it becomes too eclectic it becomes the norm. Eclectic may have already become the new norm.”

He then whispers about his new TV project, an original idea that he and Charlotte have dreamt up together, to be called *Curiosity* – you heard it here first. Expect *Antiques Roadshow* meets *The Crystal Maze*, with a dusting of *Horrible Histories*. There’s a book, *My World of Antiques*, published last week, and the current afternoon offering *Make Me a Dealer*, where contestants bid their own money at auction and then attempt to sell the goods for a profit. There’s a lot less Paul on screen and a lot more snarky voiceover, which may be why he tells me: “I don’t want the fans to compare it. I don’t want people to say *Flog It!* has been dropped and this is what we’ve got.”

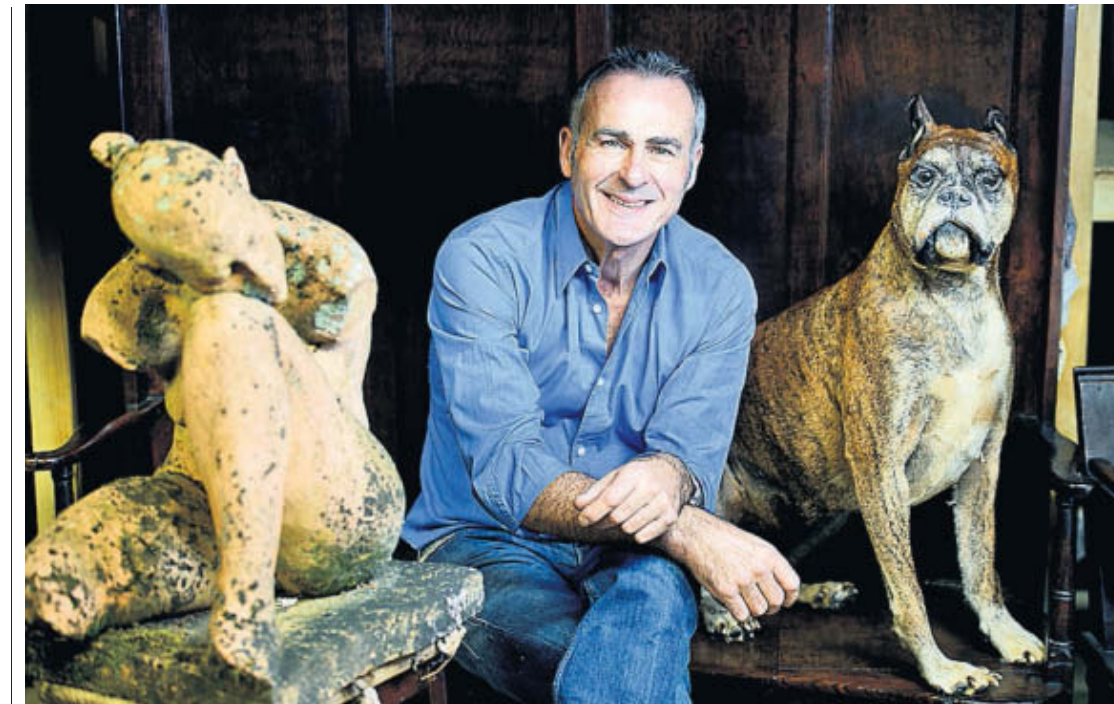
Pointing to the head of an enormous Marco Polo ram mounted on the kitchen wall helps to move the conversation along. “He’s unusually large,” Paul says, barely pausing before alighting on a sculptural piece on the windowsill that turns out to be the 19th-century bell to call passengers to the ferry at the pier on the Isle of Wight. “I’m drawn to patina, wear and use,” he says. “It has to be made with love and not pretence.”

This turns out to be a family sensibility. His home is far from a grand affair. It is an old stone cottage, hidden from the lane, with a range of outbuildings set among trees. I am greeted by a smiling Paul and a wet whiff of elderly dog: the family have three, a basset hound, a terrier and an accidental cross between the two. There are three bedrooms, a small study – which has been “taken over by felt-tip pens” belonging to their children, Dylan, 10, and Meredith, 7 – off the living room, which is set square with comfy sofas, a fireplace and, because there has to be some eccentricity, a 5ft statue of a hare wearing a bright red jacket and blue bow tie standing in the corner.

“We’re not pretentious, you just have to take us as we are,” insists Charlotte, 39. “Some days we’re tidy and some days we might come in the door and just drop our coats on the floor. It’s classic family stuff.”

The kitchen is sharper and more minimalist, with a surprisingly purple wall and cupboards with contemporary variegated veneers and mixed woods.

“It was a wreck,” Charlotte says, recalling the property as it was when they arrived five and half years ago. “We ripped the kitchen out on day one because there were so many mice living in it.”



My family and other artefacts Paul Martin with his wife, Charlotte, and children, Meredith and Dylan, and just a few of the antiques that share their Wiltshire home



Paul continues: “Yes, we went to the farm suppliers and bought overalls and sledgehammers and smashed the hell out of it.”

How did they decide how to redecorate, though? Charlotte, a creative producer, happily admits: “We fight it out. We’re quite a vocal couple. We both like to say our thing, and then may not care.” Their last argument was about the floor in the sitting room. Paul ordered it without conferring.

The cottage may be comfortably modest, but the grounds are not. The land extends to about 18 acres, including stables, paddocks, a veg patch, orchard, a swampy sort of pond, Dylan’s beehives (Paul’s son is one of the county’s youngest beekeepers) and that staple of middle-class life these days, an outdoor pizza oven.

And, because Paul is all about provenance and the best quality he can afford, they keep quails as well as chickens.

“You have to look at quality,” he says emphatically. “You have to understand what is the best before you actually go out and buy stuff.”

His one regret? Not buying works by Ravilious, Nevinson and other 20th-century war artists 15 years ago. “I’ve had access to every single museum in this country, every single gallery and every single curator, to pick their brains. I should have acted on impulse.”

Paul Martin’s book, *My World of Antiques: Collect, Buy and Sell Everyday Antiques Like an Expert* (John Blake £20), is out now. If you are an amateur collector or simply want to put your vintage knowledge to the test in Paul’s new TV show, call 0117 363 4788 or email contestants@hungrygapproductions.co.uk

PAUL’S TOP TIPS

- Always buy something you love, and always consider the space around the object. Paul suggests disrupting the symmetry of a Georgian lowboy by placing a big shell or fossil on it.
- Buy in country-house condition. If it has marks and scratches, it means you can use it too.
- Sign and design. It must be designed beautifully and signed by the maker.
- Head to London auction rooms to seek out vernacular country pieces, and sell in the provinces.
- Look for pieces of natural history, such as large corals and fossils. Good-quality taxidermy is still doing well.
- Do not buy painted furniture or anything that has had major restoration.
- Invest in great British craftsmanship.

WHERE TO BUY

The Sale Room It’s probably the best website. You can follow live auctions and go back and compare sold and guide prices; thesalerom.com

Decorative Collective A friendly introduction to UK and European dealers; decorativecollective.com

Selling Antiques Search more than 53,000 antiques from 470 UK dealers; www.sellingantiques.co.uk

1stdibs This vintage marketplace is a favoured hunting ground for the luxe fashion set; 1stdibs.com

Antiques Trade Gazette The must-read if you’re in the biz and want to be in the know; antiquetrade gazette.com