

**DESIGN COLLECTIBLES**



Main: Geoffrey Hatty in his showroom. Above: Don Cameron favours '60s and '70s design. Below: Cameron's Sydney gallery-apartment.

# Hunters and gatherers

Three dealers in vintage treasures tell **Stephen Todd** what drives their obsession.

**Eddy Opmanis won his first vintage furniture in a darts game.** He'd been working in IT for two decades, "earning a good, steady wage", but with that art deco bedroom set the collector bug bit: soon his house was packed to the rafters with vintage finds. "Even my bathroom was piled high with dining chairs," he laughs.

"It's the thrill of the hunt," says Opmanis, who regularly travels to Europe and North America to source furniture, lighting and decorative objects for Smith Street Bazaar, the Melbourne emporium he established a decade ago.

"Our last trip to Italy was meant to be three weeks of vacation," recalls his partner, Eryca Judi Green. "We'd been in Rome no more than an hour and Eddy's on his phone guiding us to what I thought was the Caravaggio exhibition. But when we got to our destination it turned out to be a furniture store. He's obsessed!"

Dealers in vintage furniture are curious beasts, inveterate hoarders with a benevolent streak, eager to share their obsession with others. At a price. They spend their waking hours scouring other people's pasts for bijoux pieces which speak of provenance, craftsmanship and that most indefinable quality: chic.

Sydney rare furniture importer Don Cameron was studying film at London's Central Saint Martins when he began constructing sets from furniture and objets d'art sourced through his flatmate – the now-renowned Swiss architect and collector Claudio Holdener, who in those days had a stall at Camden Market.

Today, Cameron's apartment in Sydney's Point Piper doubles as a gallery showcasing hard-to-find pieces by the likes of Vico Magistretti, Afra and Tobia Scarpa and Osvaldo Borsani. Maybe not household names, but catnip to collectors in the know – or curious to learn.

"My favourite period is the late 1960s, early 1970s," Cameron explains, "because modularity and sculptural solutions to seating were at their most expressive and lighting was moving beyond the practical to explore ideas that were spatial, emotional, intellectual."

"Clients contact me because they need a particular piece of furniture, say a sofa, and are looking for something special. So I create a tableau with a key piece as the anchor and then build out from there with other things that were happening in the same era by the same or other designers. I



Smith Street Bazaar's Eryca Judi Green and Eddy Opmanis also offer interior design knowhow.

also like to include contradictory pieces which add an edge to a room."

Cameron speaks of interiors as sequences of a film. "As you move through a home, the way you use lighting, edit a sequence, cut away, combine close shots and long shots, you create a kind of beat."

Melbourne collector Geoffrey Hatty has a century-wide obsession, spanning

## People are moving away from Danish minimalism to the more decorative.

Eddy Opmanis  
Smith Street Bazaar

everything from the decadence of the belle époque to the heady 1980s.

"I'd deal in antiques too if I had the room and the money," he says. "The shop is layers and layers of different aesthetics because I don't have one particular belief."

We're hunkered down amid furniture from around the world and across time, amassed in Hatty's bunker-like showroom –



which has but one window onto a Richmond side street. (On the day I visit the window is all but filled with a massive oak cabinet of an astonishing beauty if unfathomable pedigree.) Over there, a slender wooden Jugendstil (German art nouveau) cupboard; behind us, an impeccable set of 1970s Italian table lamps; on the mezzanine, a pair of rare sectional timber chairs by Australian designer Clement Meadmore, circa 1955.

The place is peppered with idiosyncratic curios, such as a kettle made during the Depression from scraps of metal (a repurposed handle, a disused tin funnel, a brass sleeve, and hey presto). "It's not to everyone's taste," admits Hatty, "but I see the beauty in it. It kind of reminds me of a Memphis piece by Michael Graves."

Hatty was raised in small-town Echuca on the Murray River. A poor learner (he was later diagnosed as dyslexic), he struggled to find his métier. "I asked myself what I wanted to do and thought, 'women!' So I moved to Melbourne to become a ladies' hairdresser. I was 17 and thought that was really clever."

When that didn't work out, he began buying second-hand furniture, storing it in a friend's studio until that overflowed then,



**Need to know**

**Smith Street Bazaar**  
305-307 Smith Street  
Fitzroy, Melbourne  
Tel: (03) 9419 4889

**Geoffrey Hatty Applied Arts**  
1 Chapel Street  
Cremorne, Melbourne  
Tel: (03) 9428 1973  
Hatty will be exhibiting *The Alchemy of Things* from September 5

**Don Cameron**  
will be exhibiting the work of Dutch painter Henk Djuin at his Point Piper apartment in September. By appointment: email gallery@doncameron.com

"because I was basically useless at anything else, I opened a shop".

That first store, in St Kilda, set the agenda for decades of collecting: eclectic, open-ended, self-assured – Hatty's good taste would be intimidating if he wasn't so eager to share his knowledge.

All collectors and dealers are eternal students and inadvertent teachers. They learn on the fly and impart knowledge on the run. To scour the planet for extraordinary exemplars of material culture is a kind of modern archaeology and anthropology combined.

"I like being out in the world, being around dealers and collectors," says Cameron. "I enjoy hearing the stories embedded in the objects themselves, how they've passed from hand to hand. Above all, I'm interested in authenticity, character and originality."

Opmanis reckons Australian taste is on the cusp of change. "People are moving away from minimal Danish design towards the more decorative. They've begun mixing tribal with more elaborate pieces, using the odd Scandinavian item to punctuate a space."

Under the banner of Opmanis & Green, he and Green now offer an interior design consultancy, going into people's homes to help them navigate this new aesthetic terrain.

"It's exciting for us to see how people actually want to live with these extraordinary pieces," says Green. "There are no hard and fast rules."

There is also, she insists, no typical client. "And that's the true beauty of this business. A while back a young man, early 20s, walked in with his skateboard under his arm, just looking about. We could tell he was curious, and he kept circling a set of extremely beautiful chairs that none of us – not Eddy or Geoffrey Hatty or any of our peers – could place. He decided he just had to have them, so put them on lay-by. The next day we found out they were by Scottish-Australian designer Kjell Grant and worth 10 times what he'd paid for them." **L&L**



Afra and Tobia Scarpa's Africa chair for Maxalto (1975).