

## A CAUTIONARY TALE OF TWO BLACKAMOORS

When Simon Fleet, sale-room correspondent of the *Observer*, enthused over the fine carved wood figures (front cover and facing page), he was more or less

echoing the considered judgment of Messrs Knight Frank and Rutley and leading experts in the British and French antique trade. This wide endorsement of two speedily executed copies highlights a malaise too current in the expensive end of the trade. Restoration is perfectly legitimate and often essential. Sometimes the restorer has to exceed his brief and improvise to recapture the spirit of the original craftsman. But today, the commercial viability of exotic furniture appears in some cases to outweigh the aesthetic or moral considerations involved. Many dealers have recently been disturbed by the appearance in fashionable salerooms of a series of highly decorated 'Venetian' Nubian figures that had turned up, apparently by chance. One famous interior decorator is never without a pair; "picked 'em up in Venice last year, dear boy." We noticed certain similarities in technique amongst this growing tribe, and, after discreet enquiries amongst the glossier of the interior decorating brotherhood, discovered 'Venice' to be a small studio in Homer Street, Marylebone, London W.1.

The studio belongs to Vilmo Gibello, a master framer with a legendary knowledge of the colours and techniques used by early craftsmen. His colleague Eduardo Pirotta is Maltese, a gifted carver who studied in Italy. Though a promising modern sculptor in his own right, he has a profound feeling for the antique.

Their clients are mostly well-padded collectors and connoisseurs. Only a Gibello frame carved by Eduardo and decorated by Vilmo will do justice to their latest acquisitions. Moving easily among the clientele are a number of 'savant' dealers and decorators. The studio found that they were being increasingly asked to copy early decorated furniture, gilded mirrors, console tables and Venetian blackamoors. The reasons were varied, modest, and of course generally valid. "My client wants to replace a piece lost in a fire." "My client wants one just like this magazine illustration." Disturbingly, however, they noted their work was coming on to the

market, not as copies, but as the real thing.

Both men co-operated eagerly with us. A baulk of seasoned pine was purchased for £12 (formerly it held up the bookie's telephone blower line at Ascot racecourse). Vilmo made a small model in red clay, and on Christmas Eve, seasonally fortified, Eduardo set to with axe, cleaver and chisels. By New Year's Day, the figures were ready for decorating. First they were given several coats of 'gesso', a composition of chalk plaster and water; each coat was rubbed down, and minor abrasions were built in. The female was given indentations round her neck to show where a necklace - lost long ago - had been fixed. Gold leaf was applied, and then rubbed down, and replaced by several coats of black lacquer, made to the 18th-century formula. The loin cloths were also gilded, the design carved in over the gilt, and then decorated in green and gold. They were then rubbed right down, and the process repeated again. The figures were then broken, re-

paired - with period glue - broken and repaired again. A final coat of decoration was applied, and the surface gently distressed. As a master touch, Eduardo set the male's right leg slightly askew, a foible peculiar to a carver called Viani, who could never quite follow the anatomical drawings of Bellini, the Venetian artist. By late January, Eduardo and Vilmo had delivered their handiwork to THE SUNDAY TIMES.

The figures were then floated off into the trade. They turned up in Messrs Knight Frank and Rutley's auction rooms in Hanover Square. The vendor said he had no idea what they might be. The auctioneers replied that they were English of the Regency period. The vendor replied that he had been advised by a West End dealer that they were 18th-century Venetian, but as far as he was concerned they could very well have been made yesterday. On March 20, Simon Fleet's paragraph appeared. They had been catalogued by the auctioneers as

### THE SALEROOM

PIECES of fantastical Blackamoor furniture are as fashionable now as they were in late-seventeenth-century Venice, where they originated. The taste for them spread across Europe in the eighteenth century and continued into the nineteenth. The figures, carved in wood or plaster, either stand upright or twist themselves into small tables, stools or candlestands. They vary in size from 2 ft 6 in. to 7 ft. The splendid eighteenth-century pair on the right, to be auctioned by Knight, Frank and Rutley on Friday, sport colourful loincloths and stand 6 ft 4 in. high on octagonal pedestals.

SIMON FLEET



sp  
po  
ou  
ne  
of  
s  
r

o  
co  
w  
p  
t