

When Farrar Woltz looks around her Charlottesville antiques shop, she sees hundreds of elaborate stories. Most began in Europe in the 18th or 19th century—some in England, some in Ireland, some in France, some in Italy. Each antique has its own unique tale of where it was made, who owned it, how Woltz discovered it and, finally, how it arrived here.

Take, for instance, a part of the tale of a large Irish cupboard circa 1800, which stands proudly near the entrance of the shop. The distinct reeding along the sides of the piece is indicative of furniture of that time period in Great Britain. “This was made to display pewter cups, plates, and bowls, which were prize possessions,” says Woltz, who studied art history at the University of Virginia and went on to earn an MFA from the University of Delaware. “This would have been positioned where people could see it, probably in a rural home—perhaps a well-to-do farmer who was doing his best to show off fine things.”

Much of Woltz’s deep knowledge was gained during an apprenticeship in the mid-1990s with renowned antiques dealer Clinton Howell in New York City. “Even at the time I knew it was a fantastic opportunity and that I was really lucky to have landed a job with Clinton,” says Woltz. “He was so generous with his knowledge. He would send me to auction houses; put me on a plane to go examine a piece in person. He taught me the ‘connoisseur’ aspect—meaning how to tell what I was looking at, how it is constructed, what has been done to it in terms of restoration. And he also taught me about the business side of things, which in New York City is a fairly glamorous affair.”

Woltz’s passion for antiques and art history, however, took root long before she could even drive. As a child, she would go on antiquing jaunts with her parents and grandparents. It’s a family tradition that she has continued with her own three-year-old daughter, Imogen, and husband Marcus



Louis XV armchairs from the 18th century, late 18th-century painted console tables and an English refectory table, circa 1860.

Mirabelle Antiques

A Storied Old-World Collection in Charlottesville

by

Natalie Ermann Russell

Photos courtesy of Mirabelle Antiques



Farrar Woltz in front of foxhunting prints by Charles Hunt Senior from 1838 at Mirabelle



Irish pine dresser, circa 1800, filled with 18th- and 19th-century Chinese-export porcelain, as well as a pair of French 19th-century plates

French beechwood chairs from the 19th century upholstered in verdure tapestry in front of a very fine late 18th-century Italian neoclassical marquetry table with late 18th-century engravings hanging above it

Wiley. (Although she concedes that Imogen, at the moment, seems more interested in feeding the ducks that are swimming in the moats and rivers at the estates.)

At 14 years old, Woltz began taking annual three-week visits to London with a friend. They would venture outside the city to explore the countryside, where she developed a fascination with the interiors and settings of traditional English country houses.

Then it was on to Paris in her 20s, where Woltz completed her training in decorative painting at the distinguished Institut Supérieur de la Peinture Décorative de Paris. During her time in France, she had

the opportunity to tour private châteaux while assisting a photographer friend compile books about historic architecture. France was also the place where she first took a magical sip of an eau-de-vie liqueur made from the Mirabelle plum, an experience that would later inspire the name of her business.

“My travels were important in terms of giving me a perspective on things that I was already interested in,” says Woltz, pointing out a pair of French chairs in the middle of the shop that were made in the late 19th century but in the style of the 18th century. These are but one example of what is referred to in the industry as a style

piece. Unlike period pieces, style pieces are made to look like those of a particular period, but are actually crafted later—sometimes as much as a hundred years after the fact. Within the world of antiques, style pieces are quite acceptable, as long as they are represented as such. A dealer worth her or his salt knows about and discloses these sorts of details. It is this commitment to integrity that keeps Woltz’s list of regular clients coming back for more.

“Farrar is so well-educated and really knows what she’s selling,” says Jim Moore, a lawyer in Richmond who has bought frequently from Mirabelle, mostly French pieces. “And her presentation—



Woltz and daughter Imogen in Paris

that's the other side of the coin—everything is beautifully presented.”

Sometimes the beauty of the pieces can become an occupational hazard—when it is nearly impossible to part with something to which she has become attached, such as the set of eight prints that Woltz couldn't live without: architectural views of Stockholm landmarks from the early 18th century. “I gave them several months in the shop, a fair chance to sell, but I told myself if they hadn't sold within a week of Christmas, they were coming home. And so they did!” she explains, adding that these types of prints would have either been bound together in books and kept in a person's home library, or they would have been affixed to the walls, much like decorative wallpaper. “These scenic engravings are artifacts of a lost world, the city of Stockholm shown in marvelous detail. Looking into these views is like time travel.”

Indeed, Woltz always has on hand a nice selection of prints, including quite a few with a sporting theme. Right now, she is particularly fond of a set of four very attractive fox-hunting engravings that date

from 1838 and that were created by renowned British sporting and genre artist Charles Hunt Senior. She is also partial to two charming 19th-century oil-on-canvas paintings depicting fishing, including one with a Scotsman in a kilt and Scottish Balmoral hat in a dramatic landscape.

A visitor to Mirabelle Antiques may learn the story of the marble-topped chest of drawers which is said to contain secrets from the dressing room of legendary singer Lena Horne. But even more fun is when a lucky customer purchases a centuries-old bureau or painting or chest of drawers, takes it home and has the opportunity to add new stories to its history.

Natalie Ermann Russell is the editor of *Edible Blue Ridge* magazine. She also has written for a variety of other national publications—including *Real Simple*, *USA Weekend*, and *Garden & Gun*—and has written two books about home décor. She lives in Charlottesville with her husband and two children.



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