

Munn's ones to watch

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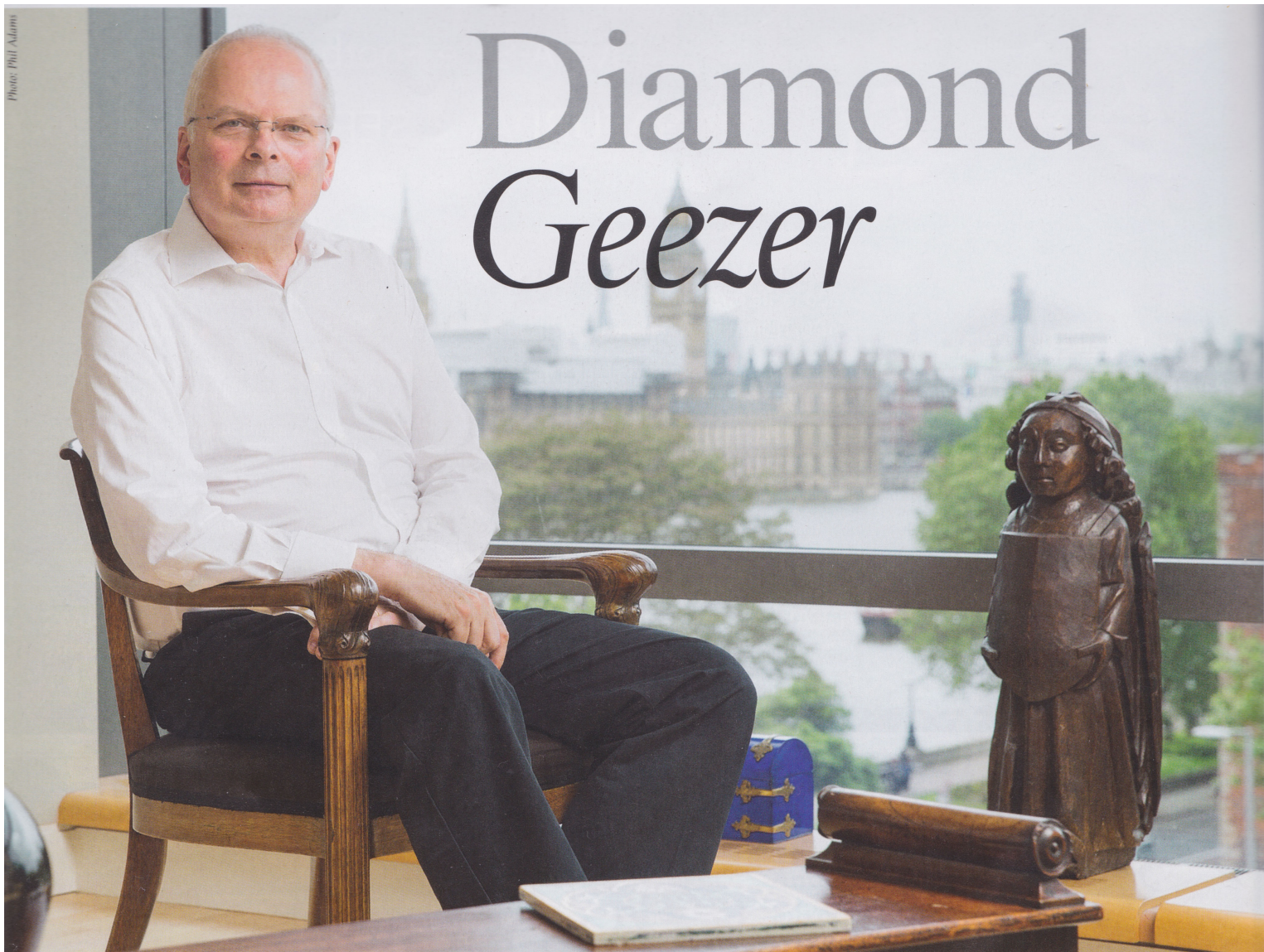
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Diamond Geezer



Kate Youde talks to Wartski's Geoffrey Munn about fashion, mudlarking and years in a family business

Let me show you a piece of dinosaur poo to get you off the track," says Geoffrey Munn, cheerfully, handing over a coprolite. The managing director of jewellery dealer Wartski is keen to change the subject, concerned about making trouble with his remarks on modern jewellery.

He has just said commercial jewellery is in a "hard spot", partly because of the lack of "experienced patronage", and that an emphasis on stones rather than design can be seen on every luxury street in the world. It is, he adds, "a diminishment of the artistic... a diminishment of jewellery as art object".

The BBC *Antiques Roadshow* jewellery specialist (he dislikes the word 'expert') believes that, with a few notable exceptions, the jewellery trade has lost impetus because, as with many works of art, people are "buying with their ears rather than their eyes" hoping their purchase will hold or increase its value. Previously, he says, patrons'

connoisseurship was "completely visceral" and they "would want to have great things because they knew what they were and they wouldn't accept anything less... than superb design and craftsmanship".

Now, there are very rich people but, more often than not, "their eye has not been trained since birth because their wealth is sometimes coming much more quickly than that".

"And that's a good thing, the levelling of society," says Munn, 63, "but it's not good for patronage and its worst effect is, I believe, on jewellery because people now buy jewellery for the precious stones rather than the art and design, which is really rather contrary to what they did before."

Munn says it is "a great tragedy" when antique pieces are broken up for their stones, but one that has been happening since time immemorial.

Art is "on the back boiler, value has come to the front". An exception, Munn believes, is Wallace Chan, who this year became the first Chinese jewellery artist invited to exhibit at *TEFAF*, and whose pieces he found "hallucinogenic".

"I think it's not enough just to be impressed by novelty, which is what has happened to a lot of the art world, that everybody wants sensation and novelty and will pay for it in the form of Britart," says Munn, whose firm will exhibit at the inaugural *TEFAF New York* in October. "But when it's novel and beautifully made and fascinating and artistic, then that's very, very powerful."

The dealer, who has a particular interest in 19th century jewellery and metalwork, deals with objects that make his heart flutter - Wartski specialise in Fabergé, fine jewellery, gold boxes and silver and art objects - but he fell into the trade by chance.

Born in 1953, he grew up on a smallholding in Henfield, West Sussex, where the family



Courtesy of Wartski, London

Left: a striped yellow and white enamel Imperial presentation case by Carl Fabergé. It was purchased by Tsar Nicholas II and Tsarina Alexandra Feodorovna on January 5, 1910.

supplemented his father's Navy income by selling eggs at the door. His mother would take him rooting through junk shops in nearby Shoreham and Brighton, and he would take the bus to Brighton to explore the shops in The Lanes.

But antiques were only in his life on a "most minor level".

He wanted to study English at university – he peppers our conversation with literary references – but failed to get the grades and so looked for a job. A friend's mother showed him an advertisement in *The Daily Telegraph* for an assistant at a well-known London antiques shop. Cameo Corner, which was at the time, like Wartski, part-owned by Hambros Bank, didn't give him the job but suggested he try Wartski.

And so at the age of 19 and "green as a lettuce leaf in every possible department", Munn started work at the family firm, having only been to London three times before. He had an idea jewellery was important but thought it "some kind of extension of lingerie... the pearls and diamonds and everything. But I was so wrong," he says.

In those days, Wartski was "slightly chaotic and rather slower moving. [The late Wartski chairman] Kenneth Snowman, the great Fabergé guru who was my boss, said, 'Well, we're going out for lunch now but if you want to let somebody in then please do,'" Munn recalls. "I fell into that trap almost immediately, after about six days.

"A fellow arrived, [an] extraordinarily handsome young man with... two attendants with camel coats and wonderful shoes – but I only recognised that in retrospect – and said he wanted to see the Fabergé. I didn't know what 'the Fabergé' was.

"We went downstairs and I thought an intelligent remark would be to say, 'Do you have any pieces of Fabergé?' And he said, 'Well, I have my father's cigarette cases and we sold a lot at Sotheby's some years ago, which I rather regret'. I said, 'What's your name then?' And he said, 'I'm the King of Greece.' It was a baptism into the society fire."

Munn says that to work in antiques one has to be like a flatfish, which can change from one colour to another to match its surroundings, because of the astounding cross-section of people you meet. For that reason, there is no such thing as a typical Wartski customer.

Snowman, who died in 2002, was a formative influence on him. "He was like a sort of ball of mercury, hurtling left, right and centre, rather sparkling and alluring, but you found it enormously difficult to pin him down and understand him," says Munn.

"But nonetheless that was equally fascinating. And he was very, very, very inclusive, which I think is terribly important in all these firms. He would expect you to make sure there's enough loo roll downstairs and he would also take you to Buckingham Palace."

It was an office romance that led to Munn's marriage to Caroline, with whom he has two sons. His "new baby," however, is an early 17th century pine 'wonder cabinet' veneered with ebony and ivory, bought from the *Decorative Antiques & Textiles Fair* in Battersea in April.

Its small drawers house treasures including

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Photo: Phil Adams



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Curriculum Vitae

1953

Born in Hastings, East Sussex

1972

Starts work at Wartski

1984

First book, *Castellani and Giuliano: Revivalist Jewellers of the Nineteenth Century*, published

1989

First appearance on *Antiques Roadshow*; releases book *Artist's Jewellery: Pre-Raphaelite to Arts and Crafts* with Charlotte Gere

1990

Appointed Wartski managing director

1993

Releases *The Triumph of Love: Jewellery 1530-1930*

2002

Curates 'Tiaras' exhibition at V&A

2013

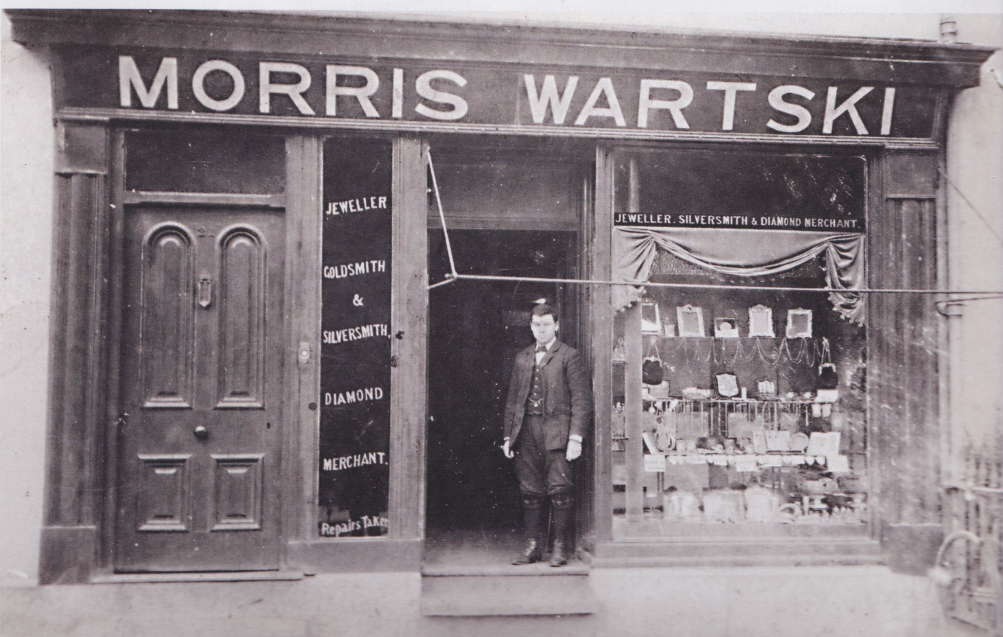
Receives OBE for services to charitable giving

2015

Publishes *Wartski: the First One Hundred and Fifty Years*



Kenneth Snowman, on the right, who joined Wartski in 1940, with client Bing Crosby.



Right: a photograph of Morris Wartski outside his first shop in Banqor, c.1895.



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fragments of 17th century Kangxi porcelain he found under the windows of the Palace of Westminster while mudlarking along the Thames, a hobby he began in earnest after moving more than nine years ago into his modern London home, where we meet. Overlooking Lambeth Palace, it enjoys breathtaking views across the river to the Houses of Parliament.

Munn, who splits his time between London and Southwold in Suffolk, jokes about how he was delighted to find a flat to suit the expensive candlesticks he had bought at Japanese department store Takashimaya on New York's Fifth Avenue.

Sitting with a 15th century wooden angel from a Suffolk church roof staring over his left shoulder, a 1917 Dod Procter still-life above his head and an 18th century black vase, given to him when he did removals as a school holiday job, near his feet, he describes the room as "absolutely terrifyingly like a stand at the BADA Fair".

The sofa opposite displays two sawn-off shotgun cushions, designed by footballer-turned-actor Vinnie Jones and made by prisoners through the social enterprise Fine Cell Work.

The living room also displays Pre-Raphaelite artist Dante Gabriel Rossetti's design for a watch commemorating his wife Elizabeth Siddal, made by Morris & Co in 1862. Munn has spent his life looking for the watch itself and put out a plea for information on the *Antiques Roadshow*.

Through his work on the BBC show, he sees "masses" of costume jewellery. While he thinks the genre important, he says it does not have the "magic" of real jewellery because there is an "almost feral instinct in man to be attracted to precious stones". He is writing a book exploring the psychology behind our fascination.

Wartski's academic focus on jewellery, through the publication of books and staging of exhibitions, is something that has traditionally set them apart from other dealers.

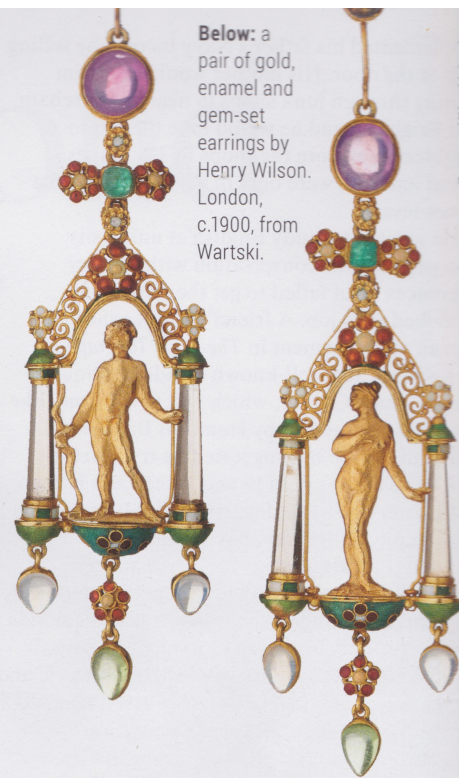
While there are no exhibitions in the pipeline, Munn's colleague Kieran McCarthy is due to release a book on Fabergé's activity in London - Fabergé had a branch in the capital from 1903-17.

The market for the objects the 150-year-old firm sells is "very buoyant", says Munn, but narrowing as masterpieces become rarer, as they enter public collections. He believes it is a "long way off" impinging on Wartski, however, or forcing the business to change its focus.

Whatever the future holds, Munn's accidental career has served him well. "I've invested a lot of energy and enthusiasm in the world of art and antiques but it's rewarded me a thousand fold," he says.

"I couldn't have ever hoped to have seen what I've seen, and done what I've done, and be as free as I have been in what is essentially a family business that isn't mine." ■

Left: Geoffrey Munn on the *Antiques Roadshow* with Fiona Bruce.



Below: a pair of gold, enamel and gem-set earrings by Henry Wilson, London, c.1900, from Wartski.

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