

**THIS PAGE** Two rare pieces:  
a leather armchair from the  
1940s and a late-19th-century  
painted leather screen;  
**OPPOSITE PAGE, FROM TOP**  
A selection of artefacts from  
the Rare by Oulton collection;  
Oliver (*left*) and Timothy Oulton

# ONE *of a kind*

A trunk with a hidden cocktail bar? A Georgian lacemaker's oil lamp? Timothy and Oliver Oulton have scoured the globe for the rarest artefacts and furniture

By EMMA J PAGE



**F**urniture designer and interiors specialist Timothy Oulton is examining the glass-encased eardrum of a blue whale, recently sourced in Paris by his 24-year-old son Oliver. “Items like this are beguiling,” he says. “It’s not necessarily something you need, but it’s impossible not to be transfixed by it.”

It’s a philosophy that Oulton is well versed in, having been immersed in the antiques business since childhood, when his father, Major Philip Oulton, set up Halo Antiques after he left the military in 1976. “I helped my father out after I left school, considering it a temporary stopgap,” Timothy says. “But of course, the business got under my skin. Collecting is like a disease; they say that you only ever sell in order to buy more, and I can vouch for that.”

With his passion for craftsmanship, it was inevitable that Timothy would end up designing and producing his own pieces, inspired by techniques including hand-carving, joinery and tufting. He launched his eponymous range of furniture and home accessories in 2008.

“‘Be relevant or be dead’ has always been my mantra,” Timothy says. “Our pieces borrow from the past, but they’re reworked in a contemporary way, from a distressed leather sofa inspired by the Beat culture of 1950s America to an extravagant chandelier influenced by the Jazz Age.”

Now, the designer’s knack of ‘reframing’ pieces has resulted in a new kind of cool that



*“Our pieces borrow from the past, but they’re reworked in a contemporary way”*

has captured the imagination of the interiors world. Timothy and Oliver are returning to their roots with Rare by Oulton, a pop-up concept store in which a range of curios, antiques, rare finds and one-of-a-kind artefacts are gathered under one roof. And, given the family’s peripatetic existence, it’s little surprise that Oliver has caught the collecting bug. He grew up in the Far East and spent much of his childhood travelling to fairs in southeast Asia, the Caribbean, the South of France and the UK. “I would sit in the back of the van with my brother and sister, and watch how the conversation between dealers would go down,” he recalls. After leaving school, Oliver travelled alone to fairs, arriving in the early hours of the morning to forage among dealers’ stalls before first light. He cultivated an interest in 18th-century English furniture, 20th-century classics and accessories from the early- to mid-1800s.

Father and son may live on different continents – Timothy is based in Asia, while Oliver resides in London – but the pair riff off one another, with Timothy uncovering curios – or ‘smalls’, as they are known in the trade – and Oliver focusing on larger, standout pieces. The result is a juxtaposition of styles and designs that bounce off each other in unexpected ways, such as the coupling of a modern Arne Jacobsen Egg chair with a set of early-19th-century lacemaker’s oil lamps, or a pair of 1830s French cabinets with a Goyard trunk that has been reworked to incorporate a hidden cocktail bar. Among Oliver’s recent finds is a pair of brass-framed glass cabinets thought to have belonged to

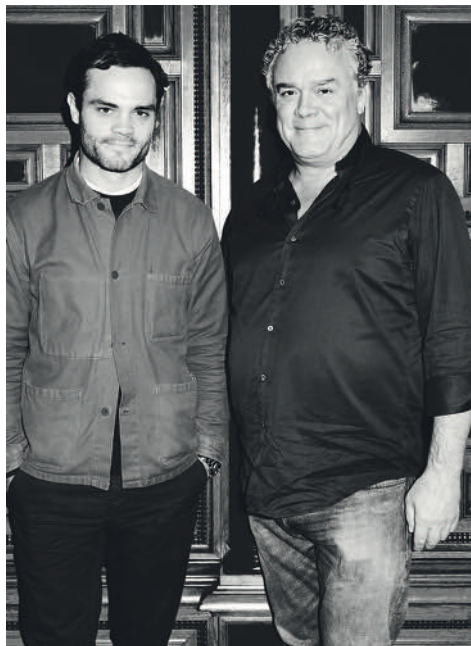
one of Burlington Arcade’s original retailers; meanwhile Timothy’s search for Dunhill Aquarium lighters verges on an obsession. “I wanted to collect 10 or 20, but over the years I’ve discovered 200,” he says. Once the story behind them unfolds, it’s easy to see why. “They were made from the 1950s until the turn of the century by a specialist called Ben Shillingford, who was based in Birmingham,” Timothy explains. “They’re made of acrylic, which was unusual in the 1950s, reverse-carved by hand, and every one had a unique design. Churchill owned one, and so did Roosevelt. They form the life’s work of one man.”

Pieces like these are sourced through research and a network of dealers, though father and son remain tight-lipped on the details. “We’re bringing extraordinary pieces to people, travelling the world to find them so that they don’t need to,” Oliver says. “It’s not necessarily about unearthing the most expensive items, but curating a collection of the rarest and the finest.”

Given the nature of these pieces, stock is finite. And as a result, Timothy and Oliver are rarely at rest. “But that’s the thrill of it,” Oliver says. “It’s in our blood. I remember my grandfather climbing into skips and rummaging around when he was well into his eighties, so I doubt we’ll ever stop. Once you’re in this business, it captivates you for life.” ■

**Visit Rare by Oulton until the end of June, Pop-up Shop, Third Floor**

*Emma J Page is a contributing editor at Homes & Gardens*



This page, both images Benjamin McMahon