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BRINGING THE OLD WORLD HOME

Charles Nevinson rescues and expertly restores Europe's most precious architectural antiques

BY DONNA SOPER | PHOTOGRAPHS BY DAVID SCHILLING

For the last 27 years, Charles Nevinson has been on a rescue mission—an architectural antiques rescue mission, that is.

The Englishman, who started his career as a design and development professional in London, has perfected a personal passion for antique architectural elements into a thriving business that is widely respected across the United States and Europe for its meticulous attention to detail.

Started in 1981, Architectural Accents, which is housed in a former dairy on Piedmont Road at Miami Circle, is now bursting at the seams. The 30,000-square-foot building sits on three acres, nearly all of which are consumed with the business of collecting, rebuilding, restoring, refinishing and selling antique doors and door hardware, including hinges, knobs and keys; lighting fixtures, such as chandeliers, lanterns and sconces; and other accent pieces, including wooden and stone fireplace mantels and wrought iron balconies, fences and gates.

"There's virtually nothing we don't cover in terms of architecture," Nevinson said, "But we are not a salvage yard. We salvage things, yes, but we go a lot farther."

What that means, Nevinson says, is that Architectural Accents retrieves and flawlessly restores 16th-, 17th-, 18th- and early 19th-century British, French, Spanish and Italian architectural elements for reuse. To that end, the store has several workshops at its rear, where skilled employees spend hours polishing centuries-old brass and iron doorknobs and hinges and refitting them with specialized screws, rewiring light fixtures, refinishing doors, repairing stained glass and reassembling stone mantles.

"If you buy a pair of antique gates, for example, and something is missing, we painstakingly restore it, and hopefully you can't tell the difference," he said. "Because everything is replaceable [now], no one knows how to repair a thing, but we do."

That capability of not only rescuing but repairing and refinishing unique architectural pieces so they are completely functional is what is largely responsible for the store's wide following.

"We have a pretty long history here," Nevinson continued. "We are very good at what we do. There are people that offer some of our services, but in terms of full-service, we are it."

Though European antique architectural items are becoming more of a rarity,

Antique and reproduction mantels are among the store's many treasures.

Nevinson said the interest in them has only increased. "The more difficult they are to find, the more desired they are," he said.

To that end, Architectural Accents offers a selection of architectural reproductions, including mantels and lighting fixtures.

"We do reproductions of a select 40 to 60 cast-stone mantel pieces, and we do carved as well," Nevinson said. "We also release one new design for a reproduction lighting fixture each year."

Architectural Accents caters mostly to architects and designers who are looking for a particular style for their project. "We don't sell anything here," Nevinson said. "It sells itself."

However, Nevinson, who continues to accept design projects in what little spare time he has, said he is not averse to offering advice to his clientele.

"For the level at which we work, we are fairly blunt about why things would work or not," he said. "In many cases, the client is as interested as the designer is in what they are looking for, but they are not always knowledgeable."

For example, a client might indicate that he is interested in a Country French look, but that has a very wide meaning, Nevinson said, and he has to ascertain whether they are talking about Northern, Central or Provencal.

Nevinson said he's been fortunate over the years to have made several noteworthy European contacts, who often will call him before they call someone in England when items become available.

"I know the people very well," he said. "I spend at least three months per year in Europe, and I am on the phone and on the Internet with everybody in Europe on a daily basis. I have a very specialized taste. I buy what I would like to use myself."

Architectural Accents has an extensive collection of 16th-, 17th-, 18th- and early 19th-century doors and door hardware, including knobs, hinges, knockers and keys. All of these finds are refinished, repaired, repolished and restored by skilled employees in workshops located at the rear of the store.

As he points out particular ironwork, chandeliers or mantels on a tour around the store, Nevinson, who calls himself "an apprentice for life," is a veritable architectural encyclopedia, easily remarking on the style and era as well as the country and building from which each piece was retrieved.

"I've walked among these buildings. When I plan my trips to France, for example, I take every conceivable route to every public or private chateau. I study every detail. If you look at it like that, you are learning every single day."

Donna Soper is freelance writer based in Peachtree City.

FOR MORE INFORMATION

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