

Ronald Phillips

Dapper and *bon vivant* dealer in English antique furniture who had a mischievous sense of humour

RONALD PHILLIPS, a rumbustious figure in the trade of old English furniture, who has died aged 97, began his career just as the antiques trade was reviving after the Second World War.

In 1951, the Festival of Britain celebrated a newly victorious nation rising from the ruins; it expressed faith in its future and pride in its past, sentiments of which the patriotic Phillips thoroughly approved.

He was then in his early twenties, a clean-cut Old Harrovian from a well-off Jewish family, who was casting around for an appropriate vocation after his National Service. The world of antiques promised the finer things in life with the possibility of decent remuneration.

His timing was shrewd. By the time Ronald Phillips Ltd opened in 1952, British society was shaking off austerity and adapting to consumerism as a way of life. Mass production was often the dubious result, but many in the expanding middle class craved prestigious furnishings.

As the 1950s became the 1960s, ownership of antiques, once confined to the gentry, drew in nouveau riche entertainers and entrepreneurs, and foreigners furnishing the country piles they were acquiring. Trawling antique shops and street markets for “vintage” and “retro” items became emblematic of Swinging London.

By the 1970s, the city was the world’s shopping capital for antiques of every description, whether sourced from the clearance of impoverished stately homes or the plundered fruits of British colonialism.

Starting out on the Old Brompton Road in South Kensington, with a short-lived

partner named Billy Rixon, who had a van, Phillips sold local customers “brown, functional” furniture at low margins. This typically meant “two-pillar” dining tables with a set of six-and-two chairs and sideboards. They were seldom exceptional pieces, but were still worth several thousand pounds and sold quickly.

His personal taste was late 18th century. When he moved into a Georgian home in Kensington, bought in 1959 by his parents and now owned by the actor Eddie Redmayne, he furnished it with Sheraton and Chippendale.

The business practice of his day was to sell in volume where possible; an eye for a bargain was indispensable. Dealers traded between themselves, and everyone got a cut as the traded item moved up the chain. If it proved really valuable, it might finally appear in the glamorous salerooms of Christie’s and Sotheby’s, or in the metropolitan emporia of dealers with address books full of well-heeled collectors.

An improbably cosy image has been fostered on television by the popular *Antiques Roadshow*, where experts value casual items brought by hopeful owners. In truth, trading antiques was a rough-and-tumble business, with unscrupulous dealers not above fixing auction prices. Phillips, conscious that reputation, like provenance, is everything, always insisted on his own honesty.

He took care to exhibit at fine arts and antiques fairs, like the up-and-coming Chelsea Antiques Fair and the venerable Grosvenor House Art & Antiques Fair, held since 1934 in a converted ice-rink. At these coveted events, patronised by connoisseurs and collectors, he wore the toffs’ uniform of tweeds and cavalry



Often answered the phone ‘Sieg heil!’

tweeds with a cravat. He prided himself on his appearance, even when he went scouting for “goods” at dealers around the Home Counties, sometimes with a child in tow. His journalist daughter Caroline recalls his bluff greeting: “Hello, you old bugger. How’s business?”

His sense of humour could be colourful. He would bark “Vive de Gaulle!” or “Sieg heil!” when answering phone calls, and in private he re-enacted a television sketch in which the comedian Tony Hancock sang “Coughs and sneezes spread diseases” to the tune of Germany’s national anthem.

He was still fighting the war: his party piece was to recite aloud famous speeches by Winston Churchill, once while wearing a

grass skirt. Less convivial were his two marriages, to Elisabeth, née Macdonald, and Pimphun Channon, with whom he had a second daughter, Dara. Both ended in divorce and upset.

Born on February 5 1929, he grew up in Belsize Park in north London. His father, Ivor Marcel Phillips (born Isaac Augustus), was a barrister and synagogue elder, and his mother, born Olga Somech, a writer and authority on Anglo-Jewish issues; she dedicated her book *The Boy Disraeli* to her three grandchildren.

Ronald never shared his parents’ intense Jewishness. A more formative influence was his childhood friendship with John Partridge, scion of the Partridge antiques dynasty, to whom he sold furniture in adult life.

For many years, Partridge Fine Art occupied a building on New Bond Street, opposite Sotheby’s, known as the “Palace of the Arts”. Nearby were other grand names in antiques – Agnew’s, Mallet, the Fine Art Society.

They represented a Mayfair elite to which Phillips gained entry in 1976 when he found larger premises in Bruton Street, opposite a house at No 17, where Queen Elizabeth II had been born. There, in 1979, 18-year-old Simon, his ambitious younger son, joined him and set about modernising the business.

His first act was to order a second telephone and replace Ronald’s antiquated typewriter on which he wrote invoices. Then he concentrated on making premium sales to private clients and museums.

He sought out valuable artworks of the early 18th century, trophy pieces such as giltwood dolphin tables by CH Tatham, or a William and Mary japanned bureau. In 2021, a magazine article claimed

that his stock inventory numbered 1,000 items, collectively worth £10 million. Simon’s belief was that “furniture should be like sculpture and stand on its own merit.”

Those are not words that would have come easily to Ronald, but in 1995 Simon bought out his father, who semi-retired to the Cotswolds with his dogs and returned only to proffer business advice.

But there is no doubting his legacy: today, Ronald Phillips’s showroom is among the world’s leading dealers in English antique furniture. It has prospered while eminent rivals have fallen victim to ruinous overheads, internet selling and a change in interior design towards lighter, mid-20th-century furniture. The average value of all but the greatest antiques has slumped in consequence.

In Phillips’s heyday, the West End hosted five major furniture auctions every week; those days of wine and roses now seem distant. Antiques are very often family businesses, yet fewer young people want to work in antiques, as Ronald did, let alone buy them.

Phillips was among the last of his generation. But the hunger for beautiful, historic objects will not fade: it is a consolation and a paradox that the older they get, the more valuable they may become.

In his final years, Phillips entered a care home for the wealthy in the heart of Kensington. According to his daughter Caroline, he wished to bequeath his body to medical science. Among his last words were a request for a scoop of ice cream.

He is survived by two daughters and two sons.

Ronald Phillips, born February 5 1929, died March 29 2026