



It is often said that old-fashioned connoisseurship is on the wane, steadily being replaced by new forms of authentication based on scientific and technological analysis. That may be true in some parts of the art market, but there are still categories where decades of hard-won expertise remain irreplaceable tools. Chinese export porcelain is one such realm and it is a realm in which the English dealers Cohen and Cohen—Michael and Ewa—reign supreme.

The Cohens are now widely acknowledged as preeminent in their field, although their modesty belies the high regard in which they are held. In a career spanning nearly forty years, they have helped assemble many of the world's most prestigious collections of export porcelain.

Michael puts his success down to an "innate feeling" for Chinese porcelain, which he discovered as a young man in the early 1970s. "I walked into a shop in Richmond in West London and saw a Canton bowl, or what the Americans call 'rose medalion.' I couldn't afford it, so I bought a teapot with a broken spout."

The broken teapot is still in the bottom of a desk drawer in London's Portobello Road, where Michael first set up shop in 1973, trawling antiques shops and auctions all over the UK and learning as he went.

Michael and Ewa now let out their Portobello store and do much of their business from home or at the world's top antiques fairs—the Winter Antiques

Show in New York in January, the American International Fine Art Fair in Palm Beach in February, and the European Fine Art Fair in Maastricht in March.

Michael describes the current market as "surprisingly buoyant," given the state of the global economy. Most of the Cohens' business is with American collectors. "The Americans are to a large extent the saviors of every market. Even in a recession they know that buying works of art is better than the stock market. Other countries come

and go, but America is always there."

Ewa, Polish by birth, did her early ceramics training at the Victoria and Albert Museum and later worked in a Warsaw museum. One day, a teacher advised her, "Don't waste your time with museums. Work for a dealer." She took that advice and hasn't looked back.

So who does what in the Cohen and Cohen business? "We share everything," Ewa says. "It's whoever is on the ground. I do the fairs."

Collector Malcolm Sterrett is among those who have benefited from their knowledge and experience. "I first met Michael and Ewa nearly twenty years ago. They have been instrumental in the acquisition of a significant portion of my collection. I have relied on their expertise, and their advice has always been right on the money."

How difficult do they find it, sourcing the right objects in such a rarefied realm? "In some respects it is hard, but in other respects it isn't," Ewa says. "We're highly specialized and we're only buying the best, so those factors narrow it down. But that also



narrows our competitors."

Rarely have the Cohens been as excited as they were in July 2005 when Christie's offered the collection of the Portuguese banker and industrialist António de Sommer Champalimaud at their London salerooms. The auction—held on the same day as the London terrorist bombings—included an important pair of Kangxi period biscuit figures of snarling leopards. "For obvious reasons, the auction had been held up," Michael recalls. "So having stayed in London overnight we couldn't even get a taxi. We were thinking that we'd need to pay £1 million, but we soon revised that to £2 million."

In the event, they established a new world record for Chinese export porcelain, paying £2.3 million (\$4.1 mil-

Top: Michael and Ewa Cohen, at home with some of their favorite pieces of Chinese export porcelain. *Except as noted, photographs by Dairy Digital Images.* **Above:** Made for the English market, these rare covered sauce tureens are modeled as partridges, with the stands enameled with scattered flowers and feathered borders to match the birds. **Left:** These large covered vases of c. 1795 are painted with buffalo and pine trees and with elaborate borders on the covers and shoulders.

