



THE

RE-IMAGINISTS

LOOK AT AN OLD WINE BARREL.
NOW PRETEND IT'S A CHANDELIER.
WELCOME TO THE IMAGINATIVE WORLD OF
MARK SAGE AND RUDI NIJSSEN.

STORY BY WALTER THOMAS | PORTRAIT BY MATT JONES

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“When I’m picking through a dark basement with my flashlight and I see all these forgotten things covered with dust and blankets my heart jumps out of my chest – every time!” says Mark Sage, antiques collector and furniture re-imaginist. “Who lived with this before? What was its history? Can you imagine sitting at this table a hundred years ago and hearing the conversations around it?”

Mark and his business partner, Rudi Nijssen, spend their days rummaging through cob-webbed attics, weather-beaten barns and long-abandoned cellars ferreting out one-of-a-kind objects. “It’s like the 10,000 Hour Rule in Malcolm Gladwell’s book *Outliers*,” explains Mark. “Only after doing the same thing over and over for years and years can you even begin to understand your subject.” In the 15 years Rudi and Mark have been hunting antiques, they’ve examined enough tables, chairs and bureaus to gain nearly encyclopedic knowledge. “Until you’ve examined 10,000 chairs,” Mark adds, “you can’t truly know that the one you happen to be standing before is unlike any of the 9,999 others.”

The inherent problem with any unique piece is its very uniqueness, however. “We came to the painful realization that whenever we find a one-of-a-kind piece, once it’s sold, it’s gone forever” admits Mark. “So we decided to make our own,” grins Rudi. “We’re re-imagining new pieces based upon antiques we’ve found in our travels.”

Re-imagining antiques begins with trying to determine which of the pieces they find each year holds the greatest promise of being embraced by a discerning audience. The mysterious quality that renders an item so appetizing is often described by industry insiders with a somewhat unsavory metaphor. “In France,” explains Mark, “they say *dans son jus*, which roughly translated means, ‘steeped in its own juices.’” It’s a stew whose recipe can only be imagined: An ineffable patina that insinuates a voluptuous, storied past; a sensual warping that maps uncharted journeys; a forgotten language that whispers, “See what time hath wrought.”

The use of timeworn materials insures their creations possess the same *dans son jus* as a one-in-ten-thousand antique. Sourcing those materials – which go well beyond the realm of salvaged wood or vintage hardware – is an international network of pickers, each with an intimate knowledge of their specific area. Mark says, “They’ll know of a little bistro that just went out of business, or a school that has some things for sale, or a factory that’s up for auction.” The resulting spree has netted them a trove of

ready-made elements – shelving, drawers, shades – whose life story is told through infinitesimal scratches, barely discernible dings and artfully oxidized stains.

Their design business was born in the barrooms of Antwerp between treasure hunts in the Belgian countryside. “We’d sit and sketch ideas on cocktail napkins,” says Mark. The influence of Belgian beer may have played a role in their decision to create driftwood chandeliers. “Driftwood branches have the ideal shape for a chandelier we wanted to make,” relates Rudi, “but I searched along a riverbank for five days and only found six usable pieces.” While bending over to pick up stick number six, a marsh reed grazed Rudi’s eye, scratching it badly. “I went back to the warehouse in Antwerp and was running around with one eye closed when I smacked into an old wine barrel we had stored there.” He was also struck by an epiphany. “That’s the shape I need!” In a stroke of genius, he realized that an inverted barrel stave forms the same contour as a classic sac-à-perle chandelier. Mark fast-forwarded the process by sourcing thousands of vintage oak wine barrels from wineries in Northern France. “The material has immense character, a fantastic patina and a great story,” enthuses Mark. “Plus, each stave bears the nose of a Cabernet or Beaujolais.”

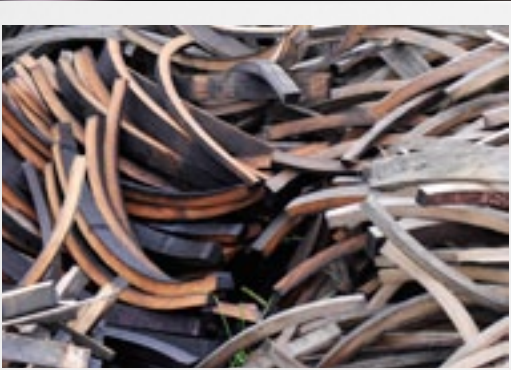
As the two men have evolved as designers, they’ve developed a “less is more” philosophy. In their quest to expose the essence of what makes a piece intriguing, they often eliminate the very things that people associate with antiques – an approach that renders the overwrought, under wrought. “A lot of designers will add something to a piece to increase its visual appeal or give it additional functionality, but we try to strip things away until it’s as unadorned and simple as possible,” says Mark. Rudi notes, “It’s addition by subtraction.” Eventually they arrive at consensus. Says Mark, “We’ll get to a point where we both think it’s the best it can be. That it’s perfect. That it resonates.”

In the antiques business, provenance is tantamount to value. For Mark and Rudi, character and soul count for even more. “Our re-imagined pieces may be new, but they still have provenance. They started out in a factory or farmhouse. They’re aged oak wine barrels turned inside out, or work-scarred bricklayer pallets transformed into coffee tables. They have something special that gives them character. You can see the passage of time on their surface. You can sense their history,” says Mark. Adds Rudi, “They have soul.”



Clockwise, far left to right: Hand-hammering metal; fitting wine barrel staves to the metal frame of the Wine Barrel Chandelier; the Wine Barrel Chandelier; a stack of reclaimed French oak wine barrel staves.

Below: Rudi Nijssen



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Above: Mark Sage



Above: An artisan crafting the Versailles Wood Teardrop Chandelier