



ANTIQUES & ART IN QUEENSLAND

Queenland



THE STORY OF UNIQUE FRANCE

From childhood friendship to French antique dealers

Two hundred selected guests, art and antique lovers celebrated the opening of Unique France's new showroom in Brunswick Street Brisbane on 24 February 2010. It was a night of elegance and sophistication where guests intermingled amid antique furniture, artworks, textiles and ornaments.

Over the past seven years Unique France has become one of Australia's most respected and sought-after French antique treasure choices.

The story of *Unique France* is a deeply shared passion between two friends for art, history, craftsmanship and the things of beauty in French culture. Their labour of love and discipline was expressed in what Unique France revealed on the opening night: a realisation of their passion.

DENIS Geoffroy

Denis' earliest memory of antiques was in France in his grandmother's house when eight years old. 'I had a favourite spot under a Louis XVI game table which is still in our family today. I was fascinated by the marquetry work and the inlays as if someone had drawn on wood. The fluted tapered legs made the whole table appear as a temple and while playing underneath, I felt special,' recalls Denis.

By age ten, Denis had developed a passion for 18th century cabinetmakers and learnt all their names, the different woods they used and the craftsmanship of gilding. His favourite book was a reference guide to antiques. Visiting his mother's friends became a new playground where he could test his knowledge and where he meticulously turned over every piece of furniture in search of an *estampille*, the cabinetmaker's stamp.

Denis' aunt recognised his true passion and nurtured his interests by taking him regularly to

museums and art exhibits. Denis' mother would often come home to a new interior where Denis and his aunt had spent the day moving around the furniture and setting a new atmosphere.

'What I like the most about antiques is the stories they tell. For example, at the beginning of the 18th century, France started to import spices that arrived in ports such as Nantes or Bordeaux in mahogany crates. Mahogany was a new wood and soon cabinetmakers, who were pressured to always innovate and use unusual materials, started to re-use the mahogany crates to build their cabinets,' explained Denis.

By the time he was fourteen, Denis started attending auctions in Versailles where he observed how the world of antiques worked and soon understood that it had its own language. He rapidly grasped how to sell, buy and bet on a piece and decided then to become an auctioneer.

Denis studied law for two years along with art history, but soon realised that most of all he wanted to directly deal with objects. By the age of 21 he was France's youngest antique dealer. Denis opened his first *brocante* in Chartres on his mother's property, a large 13th century fortress with a tower on hectares of manicured land. 'A *brocater* will buy a piece and resell it as is, where an antique dealer will apply his skills to restore the piece to its previous glory,' shares Denis.

Over the next four years Denis established his name and acquired a 'tough dealer' reputation in the French world of antiques, admired for his willingness to carry heavy pieces of furniture through snow and in bad weather. As demand grew, Denis felt the need for a partner to take his business up to the next level of exporting French antiques overseas. He contacted Gregoire who had been living in Australia and Fiji for four years.

GREGOIRE d'Harcourt

I met Gregoire when he was four years old and two years later Denis enrolled in the same school as Gregoire. Our favourite summer activity was exploring abandoned houses and making our way through large cobwebs to find objects that told stories of previous owners.

At 12 years old, I was already a keen photographer and writer and captured our adventures in words and in black and white photographs. Denis and Gregoire would collect whatever they could put their hands on. We were *house combers* of what remained standing, the walls, the stories, the lives long-departed by its occupants. Denis would always go for the furniture, Gregoire for the religious ornaments and I for the musty books with pages turned yellow, our found treasures.

Gregoire acquired his first antique when he was eleven years old. His mother was his biggest influence in the love of beautiful things and interiors; she would take us to *brocantes* and teach us the art of *chiner*, hunting for unique antique pieces.

Gregoire surrendered his pocket money for a 19th century Regency style silver crucifix as he was fascinated with the chiselled work. It then dawned on him that he could now possess at home what he only saw in churches and become a lifetime guardian for such objects.

Gregoire's parents built the first solar home in Dreux and it became his stage to apply the art of antiques in a contemporary interior. His mother would acquire a rare piece not just for its value but for the association with a family member. Soon there stood a Napoleon III grand piano for his sister, a 19th century marble bust for his father and the walls were adorned with two large 18th century Aubusson tapestries depicting a little boy reading in the forest for Gregoire.

Our childhood holidays were often spent in remote medieval villages around France,

bringing pleasurable moments of walking through narrow cobbled streets, and leaning against rough stoned facades still carrying their rough iron signs from centuries ago. We only understood later on that his mum was teaching us *l'Art de Vivre a la Francaise*, a ceremonial pleasure to enjoy and savour what life has to offer.

Gregoire moved to Paris to study art history, politics and linguistics. He travelled to new horizons, and in the late 80s we met in Perth. For the next four years we travelled and lived in Australia, Asia and Fiji where we shared our passion for tribal art.

In 2002, Denis and Gregoire opened Unique France in a charming south of France style boutique in Milton, with seven years of successful trading and interior designing for the most beautiful contemporary and Queenslander homes around Australia.

UNIQUE France forever

Denis remains the main buyer for Unique France, based in France. He maintains contact with owners of private homes, chateaux and grand city residences and sources rare and unique pieces. Gregoire manages the showroom, displays and the interior designs of their clients' homes.

Gregoire and Denis intend to develop their interior designing business, introducing their clients to the art of floor marquetry and wall finishing achieved by French artisans. Their showroom reveals the elegant and unique *Frenchness* that can be achieved and nourished through a continuous skilled partnership and friendship for our greatest lasting pleasure.

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