

All the Pretty Rocking Horses...

BY JULIE CARTER

When I was little, we had a dapple grey rocking horse that lived in the loft of our 18th century house in England. He had a saddle and bridle, a tail that I liked to brush and the capacity to transport me into a carefree rider galloping the countryside with abandon.

Back before computer and video games – way before iPods, iPhones, i-everything else and even before the Walkman (remember them?) – toys invited you to use your imagination, and for legions of children the rocking horse held an allure that led them into their very own *Narnia*.

Someone who understands the magical dreams of the rocking horse is Sasha Douglas, a specialist in rocking horse restoration. A professional artist, she has been drawing, painting and making horses since she was struck with Horse Fever at the age of six. She was smitten with a traditional rocking horse as a young girl, and always planned to make her own – even keeping hair from her own (real) horses to use one day on a rocking horse.

The daughter of Australia's celebrated iconographer Tonia Ganin, Sasha set out in her mother's

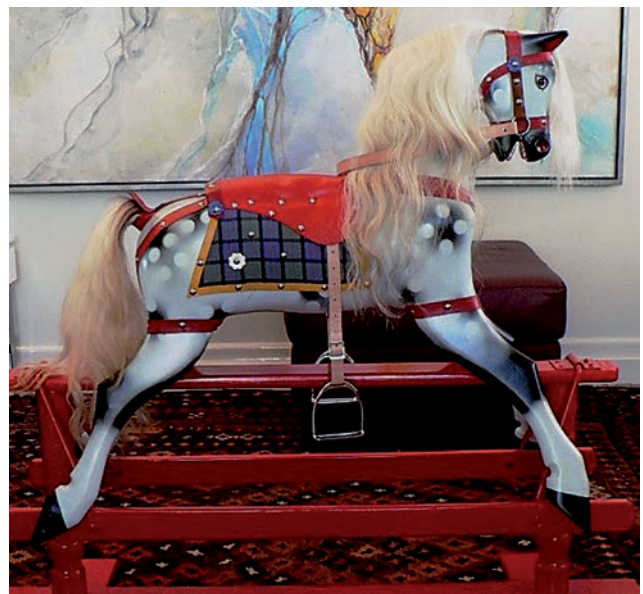
footsteps at the age of 15 while still at school and by her twenties had become a respected iconographer in her own right. She trained as a graphic designer, then for years painted Orthodox icons in the difficult ancient egg tempera medium (with other fine art). Her work can be found all over the world - Israel, USA and Europe; and she was invited to have her work displayed in a private exhibition for Blessed Pope John Paul II at St Mary's Cathedral in Sydney during World Youth Day 2008.

With the arrival of a baby, Sasha had the excuse needed to realise a long-held dream and rather than go back to fine art she began to restore rocking horses. Her technical skills from iconography – simulating specific styles and working with traditional materials – adapted easily to rocking horse restoration, and her experience in horse portraiture,



Above: Legolas, an early Lines bow, fully restored in 2012. Value: \$5500-6000. **Opposite, top:** Edmund is a Lines Bros Sportiboy and a wonderful choice for those who want an old English horse but don't have the budget for a premium antique. Value: around \$3500.

Rocking horses were made in the hundreds of thousands from around 1870 to 1920, when their popularity began to decline along with the use of horse-drawn transport.



Left: Leach horses show gorgeous carving with exquisite detail. This horse still has most of its original paint. Not in Australia yet, its arrival is eagerly awaited. Value: \$10,000-12,000. **Above:** The Roebuck rocking horse as known and loved by many Australians, with traditional restoration.

Customers have a choice of trim colour, and bright colours are popular with children. Value around \$2000.



Above: Every rocking horse collector or restorer's dream is to have something not previously known about and restoration has just started on one such fascinating rocking horse: a No. 6 Roebuck that was originally a three-seater, with seats mounted to the ends of the swinging mechanism.

Below: Ariadne shows beautifully original condition and has only been given conservation treatment. Attributed to Lines. Value: around \$6500.

breeding and showing Arabian horses gives her a critical eye for a horse that translates into rocking horses that look 'right'. Add to that a passion and skill for reviving broken old things, and it soon becomes obvious why Sasha's studio is the perfect place for old rocking horses to be stabled and restored to their former glorious selves.

Antique rocking horses and their restoration is Sasha's specialty, with Victorian horses her special love. She has recently been to England to research fine antique rocking horses and meet some of the restorers whose work she most admires. Some of Australia's loveliest old horses have been revived by Sasha, including those belonging to long-time collectors and Sasha is now proud to have her work in a collection in England.

Her busy little studio offers a full restoration service when workload permits. Currently in the workshop, work has just started on every rocking horse collector or restorer's dream - a horse that virtually nothing was known about until now - a 52in Roebuck that was originally a three-seater (with seats mounted to the ends of the swinging mechanism), Sasha says it is a privilege to have it visit her before it goes home to

an owner who has had it since babyhood.

For Sasha, buying a rocking horse is intensely personal and something that shouldn't be rushed. "The very best guide to the rocking horse that's right for you is your own heart, no matter what anyone might say about what particular kind of horse you must or must not have," she says. "All sorts of people buy rocking horses for all sorts of reasons, and while I am proud to keep an extensive range from basic right up to fine horses to please a connoisseur, a rocking horse is meant to be fun. It [doesn't have to be a rare, original or valuable antique to endear itself to you and be a cherished possession. If YOU love it - it's right for you. It should capture - like nothing else can - the dreams and magic of childhood. An old horse that has served generations of young riders, especially if they were your parents or grandparents, has its own special enchantment."

So what should you look out for when you're thinking about adding a rocking horse to the family? The first consideration, says Sasha, is to decide what you want to do with the horse. Will it be used by children and sold when they grow up? Or do you want it to become a family heirloom? Is it for decorative purposes only, or are you looking for something that can be expected to increase in value? Are you planning to start a collection



Although tatty and in need of extensive repair, this early bow rocker is still valuable and beautiful. He will be stunning after restoration.

Value: around \$25,000 after restoration.



Did you know...
knights and warriors practiced
jousting and swordsmanship
on wheeled horses...

All the Pretty Rocking Horses... cont.

and create a rocking horse herd? Once you've answered these questions, you can decide on how much money you're prepared to spend, which will give you an indication of what's available to you in the areas you are looking.

It's also important to decide if you want a new or vintage rocking horse. "There are many makers who make beautiful new toys for a wide range of prices," says Sasha. "New professionally made toys are made (or should be) subject to safety standards covering design, materials and accessories; they should also be free of age-related wobbles, creaks and cracks, although they will develop them in time. If you like the appeal of an old rocking horse, there is no reason a sound antique can't be used and with some basic care it will still have many years of service. It's also more likely to retain its value should you decide to sell it in future."

Whilst it's cheaper to buy a horse that needs restoration than a finished product, it's worth bearing in mind that the wait for a good restoration can take many months (or even years). And there's also the problem of lead paint. If you buy an unrestored, vintage horse, it will probably retain paint that is pre-1950s, which means it can contain up to 50% lead. Even until the late 1960s, paint still contained more than 1% lead. These days the maximum lead content allowed is 0.1% and it must be declared in the labelling if it is present. If a horse is intended for children to play with, Sasha recommends fully restored horses rather than those with original paint intact, which she thinks are better given a graceful retirement free

of rough play and preserved for posterity.

If you decide to look for a horse by a known maker, it's a good idea to learn the characteristics of each maker's style so you can recognise a good individual horse. "Name isn't everything," says Sasha, "and even the best makers turned out unattractive horses sometimes, while there are gorgeous ones with a modest pedigree. I see no reason to pay a premium price for an inferior horse with a famous name when there might be a beautiful horse from another maker for much less."

If you're buying a horse for your children (or grandchildren) to play on, and you're looking at restored examples, make sure you have all the information on its restoration and if possible, ask for photos of the horse

The safety stand was patented in 1877 by PJ Marqua of Cincinnati, USA. Before then, all rocking horses were mounted on the frequently unsafe bow rocker.

prior to the work being done – you want to make sure that any structural damage has been properly mended before any young riders climb aboard.

If you use the internet to research, you may well decide it's cheaper to buy a horse from overseas and have it shipped to Australia. Says Sasha, "In long-distance purchases, be very sure of what you are buying so you can prove if it was damaged in transit and make a success-



Penelope, a 'Swan' rocking horse and a beautiful example of a fine horse from a less well-known maker. Value: \$5000-6000.

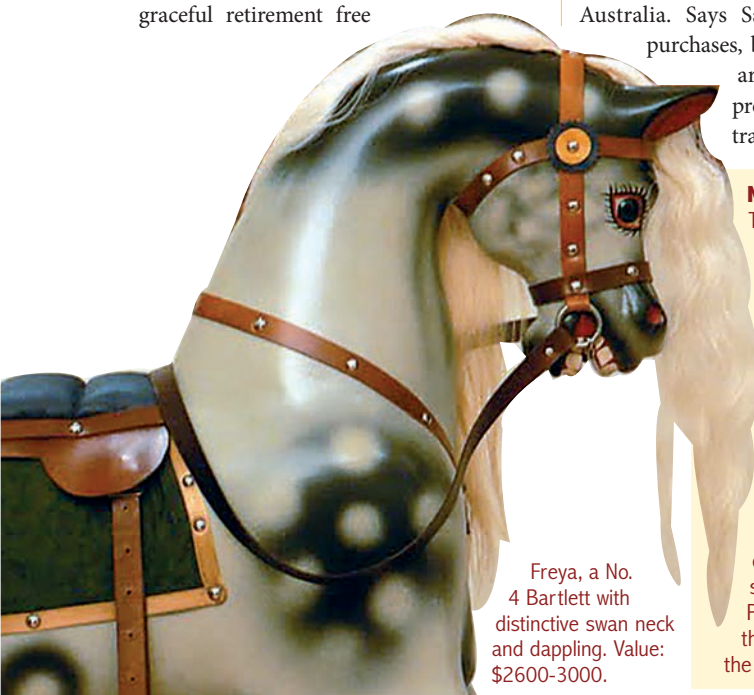
ful insurance claim, or if it is not what was represented to you. Get a comprehensive condition report that describes all wear, cracks, breaks and scuffs, clear photographs of the horse from all sides as well as accurate dimensions. Finally, be aware that shipping is the least expensive component of importation, with a minimum total cost of \$1500 (AUD) after port costs, taxes and customs fees to import a single rocking horse that cost \$1500 coming from overseas to an Australian port."

Although the style of horse that you ultimately decide upon is a personal choice, it's worth bearing in mind that the beautiful antique bow rocker that immediately springs to mind, first introduced in the 1750s, can be impractical for riding by children. Aside from crushing toes and anything else that gets in their way, antiques are also prone to worm damage and, says Sasha, the design is not engineered well to carry a load: "Especially if there is worm damage, with age

New or old?

Traditional English rocking horses had horse or cow hair manes and tails, with the hair attached to the hide. A carved mane or tail on a rocking horse is a likely indication that the horse is a new mass-produced Asian mock antique (genuine antique carousel horses have carved manes but are scarce). Many new horses also have handles coming sideways out of the head; these are not found on vintage horses. Don't be fooled by a rusty stirrup iron – this is a favourite trick to make a new horse look old, along with tying it on with a broken stirrup leather. In reality, the stirrup irons are usually one of the first pieces to be lost from the horse. A stiff and old-looking leather saddle is also no guarantee of age; check the stitching and seat of the saddle to see if it's worn, as would happen if the saddle was old. A carved saddle is a real giveaway that the horse was new, as the vintage rocking horses always had saddles attached, often using brass domed upholstery nails. New saddles also often have a stitched pattern on them, something that is rarely seen on an old horse. Plastic rocking horses, which are often advertised on eBay as being from the 1940s, date from the 1970s onwards, and fibreglass horses date from the 1960s onwards.

Freya, a No. 4 Bartlett with distinctive swan neck and dappling. Value: \$2600-3000.





Left: Jemima, a No. 3 Roebuck c.1910, starting restoration. **Below:** Jemima with hand dappling in the style of the original finish. Value: around \$3500.



the bows flatten at the bottom or crack under weight, usually taking leg joints with them, which in turn can damage or destroy gesso and paint,” she says. As an entry-level English rocking horse, she suggests the Lines Sportiboy - they are common, can be very pretty, are usually inexpensive and offer the added fun of removable saddles.

Other named horses include Bartlett, an Australian-made steed with its distinctive dappling style and swan neck (the firm was established in Melbourne in 1913), and Roebuck, a wonderful bit of Australian toy history that is widely available, inexpensive and appealing to children, with their simple dappling style and bright colours. Roebucks were the first known rocking horse business to be in operation in Australia. Frederick Roebuck began making the horses in his back yard shed but soon opened a factory in Leichhardt in Sydney, and during its peak the company produced up to 2800 rocking horses a year. A far less prolific Australian maker was Brisbane-based Lou Peets (established 1915), whose horses are characterised by a distinctively bold dapple pattern.



Sixpence, a G & J Lines who was fully restored in 2011. Value: \$5000-6000.

One of the best-known of the English makers was Frederick Henry Ayres, whose horses are characterised by their beautiful heads and well-proportioned bodies. Ayres produced a wide range of models and the beautiful top of the range Ayres horses were extensively dappled with realistic, detailed carving and harness.

The firm of Collinson was the most prolific maker of English rocking horses, having been in operation from 1836 until 1993. One popular legend has it that in 1851 Queen Victoria visited the company and chose a dapple grey horse for her family; from that year onwards, Collinson made only dapple greys. As their design was remarkably consistent over time, they can be difficult to date. Their horses are consequently often described as being old when they are not, especially when advertised on eBay. There are a couple of indications of age. Collinson horses made before around 1940 had leather or leathercloth saddle materials; those made later in the century had corduroy saddle seats and vinyl saddle flaps and cloths. Although plainer than most other makes, they are appealing to children and are known for being robust and good to ride.

“The first rocking horse, in particular, is an especially important individual,” says Sasha. “Don’t let anyone push you, or talk yourself, into buying a rocking horse you’re not sure about - if you love it, you won’t need much encouragement. In fact it will probably be impossible to stop you from buying it. And most importantly: Enjoy the ‘ride!’

Reference: www.oldrockinghorses.co.uk
Sasha Douglas runs The Rocking Horse Studio from Gladesville on Sydney’s North Shore. She can be contacted via email: sasha@rockinghorsestudio.com.au or call 0411 799 562. www.rockinghorsestudio.com.au
Note: Values given are those you might expect to pay a private seller.



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