



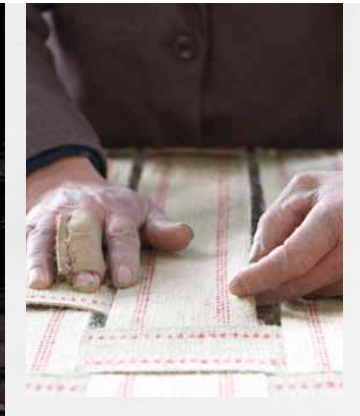
A LIFELONG PASSION  
FOR OLD-WORLD  
CRAFTSMANSHIP GAVE  
RISE TO A DUTCH  
DYNASTY DEVOTED TO  
RECREATING ANTIQUES  
IN ALL THEIR GLORY.

A FAMILY AFFAIR:  
**THE LEGACY OF  
VAN THIEL**

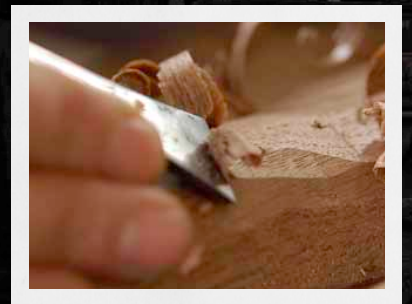
STORY BY LAURA SILVERMAN / PHOTOGRAPHY COURTESY OF THE VAN THIEL FAMILY



Left to right: the Van Thiel family's original Queen Anne Wing Chair, Rudy Van Thiel Sr., center, with colleagues at an antique market, an artisan securing a chair's webbing.



Clockwise above, left to right: Frederik Van Thiel, Rudy Van Thiel Jr., Rudy Van Thiel Sr., an artisan hand-planing and hand-carving the reclaimed walnut.



SHORTLY AFTER DAWN ON A CRISP SPRING DAY IN RURAL FRANCE, THE VENDORS AT A SMALL COUNTRY MARKET HERALD THE ARRIVAL OF A FAMILIAR FIGURE. "ATTENTION! LE FOU EST ARRIVÉ!" LOOK OUT, THE MADMAN IS HERE! RUDY VAN THIEL SR. HAS ARRIVED.

Rudy's reputation precedes him. Known all over Europe for buying up everything in sight - the contents of old attics, abandoned estates, entire lots at auction - he follows his nose or a tip from one of his many unofficial scouts: wandering gypsies, tinkers and door-knockers. The patriarch of Van Thiel Antiques has a legendary appetite for acquiring whatever's in his path, including treasures often passed over by other dealers. Van Thiel and his two sons, Rudy Jr., 32, and Frederik, 29, have a rare ability to see beyond the decay and disrepair to the potential that lies beneath. Their vision has made them innovators in a field that, by its very nature, clings to the past.

"In a little shop in Newcastle there was this sign hanging on the wall," recalls Rudy Jr., manager of the family business, "We Buy Junk and Sell Antiques. I liked it so much that the proprietor gave it to me and I hung it behind my own desk." He continues, "While an 18th-century chest of drawers can look pretty battered before it's reclaimed, after restoration it's transformed into a fine antique." It's not merely a question of beauty being in the eye of the beholder, however. The Van Thiels' operation - dedicated to reproducing antiques as well as restoring the originals themselves - is able to handle the considerable volume they source because of the extraordinary infrastructure they've built.

It all began more than four decades ago when, as a young man of 14, Rudy Sr. could be found riding his bike in the Dutch villages around his parents' home, carrying back to his father's garage assorted antiques and vintage finds he'd been able to strap on his bike. His first purchased piece was an old bugle bought in Bruges while

on holiday. Over the years, after starting his own family, he passed on that passion to his sons, who were literally brought up in the business with an almost innate understanding of antiques.

Seven years ago, the Van Thiels relocated from Europe to China, where the two sons run a 300,000-square-foot workshop with 700 employees, including highly skilled artisans capable of sophisticated restoration work. This has enabled them to evolve from finding and restoring antiques to manufacturing exact replicas of the vast array of furniture, objects and art they collect in Hungary, Germany, Holland, Belgium, France, England, Scandinavia, Egypt, Spain, India and Indonesia. But while their manufacturing operations are state-of-the-art, it's their buying trips to foreign lands - and the personal relationships they forge there - that anchor the family business. Whether negotiating a purchase over dinner in a Romanian farmhouse, Irish pub or French café (often solidified with just a handshake), the Van Thiels' operation has thrived by following and celebrating history.

It's precisely the Van Thiels' deep appreciation and knowledge of fine antiques that informs what is so unique - even revolutionary - about their business. In their process of reproduction, every piece of furniture is bench-made precisely like the original - down to the selection of materials and the tools themselves. Reclaimed woods are chosen for their aged and burnished patina, while the craftsmen meticulously recreate many of the same types of planes, chisels and saws that were used by 18th- and 19th-century artisans. And last but certainly not least, "the finishing is really our strength," notes Rudy Sr. "The finish makes the piece." It is evident that

Van Thiel prizes the authenticity of the process as much as the authenticity of the finished product.

"In Europe, real craftsmen are a dying breed, and it's becoming more difficult - and much more expensive - to restore antiques there," says Rudy Jr. "But in China, people are still raised in villages where entire families are carpenters and they are trained from childhood with a great respect for the craft." The decorative arts have a long and important tradition in China, nowhere more evident than in places like Beijing's venerable Forbidden City, where gilding, carving and lacquer are widely incorporated. For the Van Thiels, it's been a matter of helping to translate these Chinese techniques in order to recreate Western designs and finishes.

It was the Van Thiels' predilection for authenticity that led to the creation of the Deconstructed Collection.

The inspiration was a chair that Rudy Jr. inherited from his grandfather. Ready for an update, the English mid-19th-century ladies' wing chair had been liberated of its ancient red velvet and was standing in a corner, its original horsehair stuffing and burlap upholstery fully exposed. The elegant frame, the details of the construction and the carefully wrought handwork were instantly captivating to the Van Thiels. They were awed by its unexpected beauty.

"It suddenly opened us up to something that I don't think people realize is there in an old wing chair: all the work is inside," recalls Rudy Sr.

They had, of course, seen similarly undone furniture before. Virtually every antique is laid bare before restoration, and at the Porte de Clignancourt, Paris' renowned flea market, such stripped-down chairs have become highly coveted - wobbly relics whose naked underpinnings allude not only to their rich history but also to the human hands that fabricated them. The Van Thiels were seized with the notion of a collection that would faithfully recreate this look - down to the iron springs and rusted braces - and yet be fully functional and up to modern standards of living.

The Deconstructed Collection celebrates the unique nicks and imperfections that are part of every antique's legacy. All 16 pieces - including an ottoman, a chaise and a settee - are hand-made in naturally distressed walnut; the frames are exposed down to the studs; and the burlap and cotton textiles, whip-stitched and secured with small tailor's tacks, are dyed to look appropriately aged (though also treated to be stain-resistant). The result is a stunning authenticity of form that belies its very pragmatic function.

After more than 40 hours of craftsmanship, a chair from the Deconstructed Collection captures all the character and personality of the original antique but is also perfectly calibrated, incredibly comfortable and ready for years of use. It's the ultimate example of, as Rudy Jr. laughingly said, "what happens when antiques dealers start making upholstery," and a telling illustration of how what's old can become new again.