

Nicki Huggins The Comeback of the American Glider

THE GLIDER FOR PRESIDENT

Translated by J. de Boer

John F Kennedy once said: *“If I haven’t had a woman for three days, my head starts to ache.”* But not a single of his many liaisons could alleviate the terrible backache. Instead he turned to his rocking chair; the one he used at his summer house in Massachusetts was actually sold for US \$96,000 at an auction in 2005.

It was in neighboring Pennsylvania that the first ‘gliders’ were built. Nowadays these are hugely popular and sought-after items. “People want to hang onto them, as a connection with previous generations” says restoratrice Nicki Huggins.

“Glidens are an important part of our history” according to Nicki Huggins. “These chairs were mostly built in the north eastern part of the US. They are very popular at the east coast, because many Americans go there for their holidays in the summer. Gliders are largely unknown in Europe. The first gliders were built after the First World War, made from steel. They actually looked like sofas that could swing back and forth. They used new techniques for working with metal that were developed as a direct result of the enormous demand for weapons the Americans produced during World War I.

“Simultaneously society was undergoing a social change”, explains Huggins. “For the first time family life was taking place outside. An important milestone was the introduction of the metal Spring Chair at the World Exhibition of 1933 in Chicago. This specially designed outdoor furniture item shares an important design quality with the rocking chair: it’s ergonomic and therefore very comfortable.” Nowadays these spring chairs are in great demand. They were designed for Howell Manufacturers by Wolfgang Hoffmann, son of the famous co-founder of the Wiener Werkstatte, Joseph Hoffmann.”

Nicki Huggins is the woman behind *Retropatio*. She collects and restores old rocking chairs and sofas, called *gliders* or *porch swings* in the US. Retropatio became a successful company eight years ago. The reason for the success was simple: hardly any new gliders are made anymore. “The factories did not keep data, designs or catalogues. They weren’t thinking ahead. Americans were not consciously thinking about their

history. **Now people want to keep these items intact, for the generations to come. I'm very glad to see Americans finally giving their furniture to their children.** "And then there's a new 'ecohype'. Those people who are interested in eco-friendly products partly look to the past for a better future. The idea is that we shouldn't exhaust (natural) materials /resources for new things – especially if what we've got is perfectly in order still. People yearn for authenticity; and for something that forms part of their family history."

Fireflies

Huggins lives in the Los Angeles hills in a modern and industrial house - which was the reason for collecting old gliders . "I had our house designed in such a way that we have as much space *outside* as *inside*. And because the house is so modern, I wanted the interior to be warm, to get a sense of equilibrium. If you want to make your house warmer – and add a sense of history to it – you've got to think: antiques. I started to think about American antiques and outside furniture and suddenly I thought of gliders. I was raised in the South and gliders are very popular there. Everyone's got a porch ... and so everyone's got a glider. I realized that for many Americans gliders evoke a sense of nostalgia. Gliders are associated with summer and family, with barbecues, fireflies and happy days. People have fond memories. That's why they don't want to lose the gliders. And that was the start of my 'glider story'. In the beginning I stacked them up in our garage. My husband asked me what I was going to do with them. I could only say: Honey, trust me, one day..."

Swinging Sex

Huggins spent a long time criss-crossing the US in search of old gliders. People very often don't want to let go of their old furniture, because they form part of the family history. And that can be taken quite literally at times... "The funny thing is that I've heard on more than one occasion that children were conceived on a glider. 'My daughter was conceived on that glider, you cannot have it!' Just the fact that people would actually say that to me.... Some of my clients can go to extreme lengths in their requests . One man wanted a glider identical to his car. This car, a Chevrolet Camaro, had a blue paint finish that changed into green....". "Gliders appeal to every social and economic demographic in society, old, young, black, white. The very first glider that I restored I named *Gulf Breeze*, I've still got it. The first three gliders that I restored, I never sold. They've become part of my own history. My kids are already claiming them."

Antique spotters

If you want to get an American glider now, you've got to be lucky. "There's a long waiting list. One day there won't be any gliders left. Antiques 'spotters' know this. Soon it will be spring, then they will scour the country for gliders, in porches, in gardens. They will approach the owners and if the owners do not want to sell, they will come back in the winter. That's the time the gliders aren't used very often and people will be more inclined to sell. So every spring I get a whole new load of gliders from all these 'spotters'. These gliders will be fifty to eighty years old, but more often than not they'll be better built than most new chairs. *The red chair in the picture dates from the 1930s. That says it all. I think that a proper restoration – with all the modern techniques - of an old glider in no way diminishes the integrity of the original item. And it guarantees a longer 'shelf' life. Initially I thought: I'll just restore them and that's it. Americans have always had a throw it all away mentality. That's no longer an option due to the state of the economy. People have to think about the value of any item. And how to ensure you can use and keep your property for eighty years...*"