

Will Bennett meets the Antiques Roadshow's new recruit, Lennox Cato

The Georgian and Regency furniture on Lennox Cato's stand at the annual fair of the British Antique Dealers' Association (Bada), which opens in London tomorrow, will be typical of the traditional pieces in which this quintessentially English event has always specialised.

Britain's grandest dealers will be offering pictures, silver, clocks, furniture, ceramics and other antiques for sale at the fair, near Sloane Square, until next Tuesday.

Cato sits on the governing body of Bada, which represents Britain's 400 leading antique dealers, and at home in Edenbridge, Kent, he is a Conservative member of the town council and a school governor.

But while this might appear to be the classic profile of a member of Britain's antique-trade establishment, he could hardly be less typical.

He is the only black member of Bada and his childhood was utterly different from those of his white colleagues.

When he was just two months old, his West Indian natural mother, who was struggling to bring up five children, agreed to let a white woman with whom she had had a chance conversation adopt Cato and his brother.

It was a casual arrangement which would never be allowed by the authorities today, but it was to change Cato's life. His adoptive mother's husband was Dicky Compton, one of the Brighton antique trade's great characters, often seen sporting a Russian Cossack hat.

Cato, who kept his original surname, grew up in the cut-and-thrust world of the town's antique shops. He inherited no money from Compton, but from an early age his adoptive father instilled in him the art of the deal.

"I was always thinking on my feet," recalls Cato. "The boy may now have left Brighton but Brighton has never left the boy."

At 14, he spotted a clock in the window of a house on his way to school; on the return journey that afternoon he knocked on the door and bought it from the owner.

He made a profit and two years later left school to work full time in the antiques trade. At 19 he set up his own shop and a decade later bought a Georgian house in Lewes just before the market for art, antiques and property slumped in the late 1980s and early '90s.

Having survived what he admits was a difficult period, he and his wife Sue now sell 18th- and 19th-century furniture and decorative art from a shop in Edenbridge, a few miles from Tonbridge, and at fairs.



Lennox Cato: 'There is nobody else black in the trade at this level, which is ridiculous'

His clients have included Irina Abramovich, wife of the Russian billionaire owner of Chelsea football club, and the American chat-show host Oprah Winfrey, yet the overwhelmingly white art and antiques world sometimes struggles to come to terms with the only black face in its upper echelons.

"You do encounter prejudice - if you said that you don't, you would be lying to yourself," says Cato. "Sometimes you speak to someone on the phone and make an appointment to visit them and when you turn up you can see the look on their faces."

Cato has become used to people walking up to his stand at fairs and asking if the boss is around or assuming that his wife, who is white, is in charge.

He is philosophical about such snubs. "I forget that I am black," he says. "I have been told that I am like a coconut, black on the outside and white in the middle."

He recently joined the BBC's hugely popular television programme Antiques Roadshow as one of their furniture experts and hopes that this may encourage others from Britain's ethnic minorities to get involved in the business.

"At the moment there is nobody else black in the trade at this level, which is ridiculous," he says.

Cato, who at 44 is younger than many of his Bada colleagues, is equally passionate about the need for the antiques trade to change its image and working methods in an age when traditional collectors are less numerous than they once were.

Last year he was one of the speakers at a conference in London which examined how the trade could adapt, and he is also a member of a Bada "think-tank" which is looking at the future for dealers.

He believes that dealers have to look after their existing clients better and use modern communications methods to reach out to potential new buyers.

"It is difficult because the business is changing," he says. "But the Bada is the most important organisation and has to lead where others will follow."