

London's summer art scene 2025

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'They've got 20 Canalettos in the dining room!' How to hang a painting like an aristocrat

The Grand Tour changed English interior decorating forever — and that upper-crust spirit of accumulation lives on today



The famed dining room at Woburn Abbey in Bedfordshire houses more than a dozen paintings of Venice by Canaletto © Alamy

Caroline Roux

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The grand houses of England, from Chiswick to Chatsworth, are heady reflections of the Grand Tour tradition, when young, upper-class men headed to Europe, not Thailand, to complete their cultural education. These posh-boys' gap years — from the mid-17th to mid-19th century — involved a months-long trip primarily around Italy, soaking up the ideals of antiquity and the beauty of the Renaissance, while filling their shopping baskets with archaeological wonders, fine objects and paintings which now decorate the rooms of the UK's stately homes. Such was the demand, a roaring trade in fakes was developed to service the need.

The joy of accumulation has influenced the aspirational English interior ever since, though the synthesis of styles and objects might have changed. "You mix beautiful things with beautiful things and your room is done," says Wendy Nicholls, the chairman of Sibyl Colefax & John Fowler, the *ne plus ultra* of London's decorating aristocracy. "I love a Boulle writing table, a Rothko and a big white sofa," she continues — matching the master of French cabinetry with that of postwar American abstraction and some modern comfort.

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Nothing creates a more interesting dynamic than a piece of really good Georgian furniture. You put that in a room, and then you build the room around it. It's a showstopper

Richard Coles

Though the thirst for antiques might have abated over the years, it is far from over, and possibly back in fashion. Ditto old masters and modern pictures. "There are hundreds of wealthy business people who've recently bought houses in the British countryside that are over 200 years old, and have a significant budget and want to express themselves through art," says Philip Mould, who runs a gallery offering 500 years of British art when he's

not showing off his art-sleuthing skills on the BBC TV show *Fake or Fortune?* "The art they acquire should take account of the history of the house. The least successful approach is to say 'I'm a modern person who's made their money in the contemporary world and I want to bring that lexicon to every home I live in.'"





'Rooftops' (1918) by Nina Hammett, part of Philip Mould's sale pieces at Treasure House Fair © Image courtesy of Philip Mould & Company

At Treasure House, an art and antiques fair whose third edition will take place in late June, in a large marquee in the grounds of the Royal Hospital Chelsea in London, you can embark on a grand tour of your own. Why not snap up a fine piece of 18th-century Sèvres porcelain at Adrian Sassoon (from £20,000 to £250,00), a 19th-century realist sculpture by Aimé-Jules Dalou at Bowman Sculpture and a British modernist work from Philip Mould (such as Nina Hammett's painting from 1918, "Rooftops"). "Work produced during the first or before the second world war has such a great combination of modernism and nostalgia," says Mould, referring to the Bloomsbury group and lesser known artists like Jan Buchanan. (He recommends hanging less valuable works over the Aga.)

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Simon Phillips

Second-tier antiques may have dwindled in price, making them a good starting point for younger buyers. But the price of top-level works has held its ground — and, for certain collectors, money is no object. "The thing is," says Simon Phillips, an old Harrovian who took over his father Ronald Phillips's business in the late

1990s, "if you buy something really good for a lot of money, you'll always find a rich person to give you a profit on it down the line." A specialist in 18th-century English furniture, among the pieces he is bringing to the fair is a 1735 console table in carved wood and marble owned by John Paul Getty, with a price tag of around £400,000. "Look, there it is in the drawing room in Sutton Place [the Tudor estate in Surrey once owned by Getty]," says Phillips, pointing to a grainy black-and-white photograph of the piece, published in his latest catalogue, when I visit him in Mayfair. "People like provenance."



Console table, circa 1735, formerly in John Paul Getty's residence of Sutton Place, Surrey © Ronald Phillips, London



No one is suggesting a full set of Georgiana is required these days, but a mix that includes some standout historic pieces. “People are moving well away from the slavish period interior,” says Richard Coles of London gallery Godson & Coles. “But they are also moving away from bland.” At Treasure House Fair, he will be showing an English scarlet-lacquered bureau cabinet from 1720, decorated in gold with village scenes, bridges and birds, and nearly 7ft tall and 4ft wide. “Nothing creates a more interesting dynamic than a piece of really good Georgian furniture,” he says. “And this is magnificent. You put that in a room, and then you build the room around it. It’s a showstopper, it will tell you what to do.” He will also be showing modern paintings by the St Ives artist Paul Fieler from the 1960s. “Because somehow, whether it’s furniture made by Chippendale in the 18th century, or a painting made 300 years later, there’s a shared creativity and genius, a uniquely British sense of progressiveness, that allows them happily to co-exist.”

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For an architectural historian like Gillian Darley, it is concerning that the more private money is invested in grand old houses, the more it will be in the service of ripping their hearts out. “I do have a fear of old houses being knocked about, even the lovely rounded corners of rooms in old Devon cottages, which are like that because the plaster was applied by hand.” (Certain uninformed decorators have a tendency to straighten it all up.) “For some people, a building being listed [in other words, unchangeable] is an impediment to spending money how they want,” she continues. “Though the other side of that is an increasing amount of money being put into restoration and a need for expert craftspeople being employed to revive interiors, and seriously valued for their skills.”





Wardrobe in the form of a doll's house, built by Edmund Joy in 1709, on view at Treasure House fair © Thomas Coulborn & Sons Ltd, UK



Spencer House in London is an example, where the mid-18th-century interiors by John Vardy, and then James “Athenian” Stuart (the soubriquet referred to his pioneering of neoclassicism), had suffered all manner of knocks in the 20th century, being rented out over the years to Christie’s and the Ladies Army Naval club. Once Jacob Rothschild took on the lease in 1985, a lengthy (and exorbitantly expensive) restoration was conducted by the decorator David Mlinaric, which included the historically accurate recreation of many of the lost features.

This dazzling almost-country house in London (it overlooks Green Park) will host a one-day, invitation-only fair in June, called Studiolo. The event is named after the highly decorated room in a Renaissance palace that contained the owner’s most desirable objects (also invitation-only). “The idea of putting art and objects into a real interior is about imagining how you might like to live,” says the fair’s co-founder Sebastien Paraskevas, as we sit in the library where an 1810 mantel clock by Thomas Weeks, decorated with gilded nymphs and lions, ticks the time away. Works from 10 galleries will be hung on a zigzag of screens running through the grand dining room, with objects — from a 17th-century bronze by Francesco Fanelli of a leaping horse to ever more desirable ceramics by the 20th-century potter Lucie Rie — placed on plinths. Nothing will interrupt the dramatic 18th-century history paintings that hang on the walls.

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Meanwhile at Treasure House, the interior designer Daniel Slowik has also been entrusted with creating a more readable context for work — a fantasy room of an English country house filled with pieces from some of the fair’s exhibitors. (An extended version of the project will be on view at the showhouse exhibit WOW!house in Chelsea Harbour until July 3.)



The lavishly decorated ceiling at Spencer House in Mayfair © Jarrold Publishing/Spencer House

“What my clients want is something that looks like it’s been there for 100 years, and in most real homes that means layers,” say Slowik, whose early memories of big houses were people smoking everywhere and dropping the canapés on the carpets, while kids rode bicycles down the halls. “I suppose you contrive that by mixing things up, and putting a loose cover on a Victorian chair so it furls up a bit. But really, you have to make a house work for modern life. If the kitchen is miles from the dining room, it no longer works when you no longer have servants.”

Simon Phillips believes that the dining room is still a given in the realms of upper-crust living. (He also believes that glass should never be placed on fine English furniture.) “A dining room is essential in a great house,” he says. “It’s where you display the silver and the paintings.” He mentions Woburn Abbey, home to the 15th Duke and Duchess of Bedford, where he has stayed on several occasions, as a wonderful example. “They’ve got 20 Canalettos in the dining room!” (For us mere civilians, Woburn is set to open to the public soon.)

But Thomas Woodham-Smith, the co-founder of Treasure House, sees other changes. “Everyone made the dining room part of the kitchen,” he says. “It started off with refectory tables, but now people are bringing back the polished mahogany. They’re thinking ‘Why not have a Gillows Imperial?’” An original 18th-century version of this peerless, extending English table will set you back around £250,000. But if you have that sort of cash, why not indeed?

June 26–July 1, [treasurehousefair.com](https://www.treasurehousefair.com)

June 26, [studiolo.art](https://www.studiolo.art)

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