

THE ART OF COLLECTING

The Royal Hospital Chelsea’s many lives

LONDON

Still a retirement home for army veterans, it also hosts events like art fairs

BY JILLIAN RAYFIELD

The Royal Hospital Chelsea, a retirement home for British Army veterans, has stood in Southwest London for over 330 years, outlasting monarchs, wars and even, according to a 1969 New York Times article, a “vulgar” invasion of Mod fashion boutiques.

Next week, the centuries-old building, just north of the Thames, will be the site of the third edition of the Treasure House Fair, with dealers from London, New York and beyond selling rare works, including paintings by French and Dutch masters, 18th-century English furniture and antique jewelry. The event will have a fitting backdrop on the South Grounds of the hospital.

“When the hospital was opening, we were still persecuting people for witchcraft,” said Tina Kilnan, the heritage manager at the Royal Hospital Chelsea. And Chelsea was still a small village with only some 300 families, not yet even part of London.

The hospital was founded by King Charles II in 1681 for soldiers “broken by age and war,” as they are described in a Latin inscription on the building. The king was inspired by the Hôtel des Invalides in Paris, a complex that was originally built for the same purpose.

Charles commissioned the architect Christopher Wren to build it. At the time, Wren was helping to rebuild parts of the city after the Great Fire of 1666 and is credited with designing dozens of churches throughout the city, most notably St. Paul’s Cathedral.

Christian Frost, a professor and the head of architecture at London Metropolitan University, said that Wren carefully considered how the hospital would fit in the city as it was being rebuilt. As a result, the hospital has “a slightly strange angle to the Thames,” he said,



ROYAL HOSPITAL CHELSEA

because in Wren’s original plans it was going to be on one end of a large boulevard that cut through the city and linked the hospital to Kensington Palace.

“It’s not just a building; it’s about actually situating itself in the city,” Frost said, adding that Wren wanted to create a bridge between the king and his soldiers.

The Royal Hospital took about 10 years to build, and by 1692, the first 99 of the Chelsea Pensioners moved in. These days, Kilnan said, it can accommodate over 300 of them.

To be admitted, a Chelsea Pensioner has to be over 65 and have served in the British Army. They are still easily recognizable by the traditional bright red uniforms and tricorne hats that they wear for official events and parades.

Some things have become less traditional: Women were first allowed to join in 2009, and there are now 17 among the pensioners, according to Kilnan.

“I often wonder that 330 years later, would anybody have foresaw that it

would still be used for its original intended purpose,” Kilnan said.

In other ways, the site has had to evolve. As early as the 18th century, Kilnan said, the hospital began hosting events to help fund upkeep of the building and the pensioners. Today, those events include Treasure House and the Chelsea Flower Show, as well as show-jumping events and car shows.

Another section of the 66-acre property, Ranelagh Gardens, became a pleasure garden in the 1700s that held events like masquerade balls, fireworks and a performance by a young Mozart (who had not yet celebrated his 10th birthday). Many of these would attract royals or other members of high society.

The draw of the site, Kilnan said, showed how Chelsea “was starting to become really fashionable. And a lot of that was down to the existence of the Royal Hospital.”

Centuries later, the world wars forced the Royal Hospital to evolve further. The building itself was altered both because



PETER KINDERSLEY/ROYAL HOSPITAL CHELSEA

of damage from bombings — one part of the northeast wing was hit in both 1918 and 1945 — and because of war preparations, as when multiple air raid shelters were built beneath the hospital.

The Chelsea Pensioners living through the war years had to adapt, too. Some were evacuated from London, but most were left behind, trying to go about normal activities, occasionally grumbling about disruptions from the bombings. “Was very annoying to be wakened so early and turned out of bed,”



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said one 101-year-old resident in November 1940 after a night of bombings, Britain’s News Chronicle reported.

Martin Cawthorne, the author of “The Royal Hospital Chelsea at War” and a volunteer at the hospital, said in an email that during World War II the property was hit by about two dozen high explosive bombs and a ballistic missile. Many of the bombs failed to detonate, he added, but about 21 people, including pensioners, staff and other residents, were killed because of air raids.

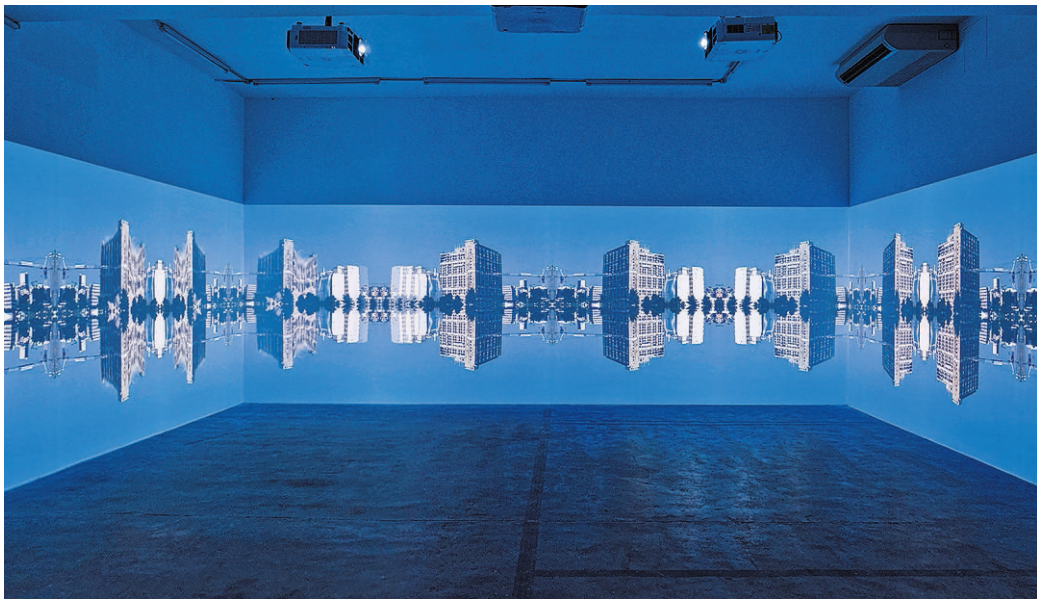
But, he said, given how many times the building was struck, “in many respects, it is remarkable that so much of the Royal Hospital survived the Second World War.”

Kilnan said that the Wren structures were later rebuilt, and mostly indistinguishable from the originals: “The buildings are scarred, but it’s now very much part of our history.”

And, she said, “that main magnificent building is pretty much as it was when Wren walked the corridors.”

**Tour of duty**  
The Royal Hospital Chelsea, above left, was founded by King Charles II in 1681. The hospital has been a home over the years, including 1910, above, for soldiers “broken by age and war.” Left, British Army veterans at the hospital in their traditional bright red uniforms and tricorne hats.

Celebrating 40 years



COURTESY THE ARTIST AND SFEIR-SEMLER GALLERY BEIRUT/HAMBURG

**SFEIR-SEMLER, FROM PAGE S2**  
militia” — will project on three walls videos of building implosions in Beirut. The videos, on a 10-minute loop, show buildings collapsing and rising again as the film is shown in reverse. It is the latest in his “Sweet Talk” series that began with photographs in 1987 during the height of the country’s civil war and evolved into video in 2019, Raad said.

“You can’t tell if the buildings are going down because of a missile, an airstrike, a natural disaster or a controlled implosion,” Raad, 58, said in a recent phone interview. “They’re in constant motion.”

Raad sees more than just the simple and destructive force behind that motion. He said that it was about experiencing and documenting history.

“I tend to think a lot about what a ruin is, and I often think about the physical condition of a building and if certain buildings get stuck in a certain place and time,” Raad explained. “It can be ancient or a newer building that suffered from war. You patch it up or destroy it and then it’s not a ruin. Or is it?”

Much of his artwork reflects his years of living through Lebanon’s civil war and how buildings became unsafe because neighbors could be your enemies, he said.

“If you lived in a city like Beirut that is constantly under siege with a car bomb almost every day for 17 years, you have to know if your neighbor has a daughter or son and if they’re dating someone and who that person is,” he said. “All the walls between apartments become invisible. Walls disappear.”

Farid, another of the gallery’s artists, will present a new chapter of her ongoing project “Elsewhere,” also in the Unlimited sector. Farid, who is Kuwaiti and Puerto Rican, began the project in 2013 with hand-woven tapestries mapping the Arab and South Asian diaspora. The

new chapter of the project, with 18 tapestries focused on Cuba, portrays the country with color-splashed shop fronts, mosques, scenes of nature and inscriptions portray a hodgepodge of cultures and city life.

“There’s an idea in the Caribbean that it is a place of social and racial confluence of Indigenous and people from Spain and Africa, but there are all these other migrations from China, India and the Arab world,” Farid, 39, explained in a phone interview. “I was noticing architecture from the Middle East in the Caribbean, and I found it interesting how these architectural forms arrived.”

Farid is also a filmmaker and was on a trip from her home in Kuwait to southern Iraq in 2022 when she found a cooperative of weavers there. She said that she now employed about 80 of them part time to help with her work. This adds to the multicultural element of her approach, she said.

“They have a tradition of doing flat weaving for blankets or floor pieces, and they do chain stitching to expand the life span of the tapestry and as a form of embellishment,” Farid explained. “It’s just a way of thinking about the back and forth, how elements migrate and how they migrate back and how they get interpreted.”

For Sfeir-Semler, this year’s Art Basel is about celebrating her journey but also that of the artists and the world of Arab art as a whole, no matter where that celebration is taking place.

“I exhibited Walid Raad in my Hamburg gallery starting in 2004 and then started researching and traveling the Arab world and looking at talent I could support,” she said. “It was something in my DNA. It is what you would in German call heimat, which is not about your home country. It’s something else. It’s the place you feel for despite how long you’ve lived somewhere else.”

**Implosions**  
An installation view of “Sweet Talk Commissions (Solidere: 1994–1997),” a video work by the artist Walid Raad that will be featured in Art Basel Unlimited. In it, videos on a 10-minute loop show buildings in Beirut collapsing and rising again.