The Magic of Mood

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The legacy of dealer decorators such as Robert Kime, Christopher Gibbs and Geoffrey Bennison is that they recognised that antiques had the capacity to transform the mood of a room.

By Giles Kime

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Anyone born much after the swinging sixties will remember a time when good antiques were treated with the sort of reverence normally reserved for senior clergy and decorated soldiers. Knowledge of their past lent them a glow; names like 'Hepplewhite', 'Hope' and 'Gillow' were uttered in the same hushed tones as 'Major General' or 'Archdeacon.' They still do; pedigree and provenance still rules the world of antiques and rightly, so. The origins of a piece and the hands and houses through which they subsequently passed adds an extra dimension that is transformative and which has the potential to add significantly to its allure.

But it was in the sixties that a new type of antique expert emerged on the scene - and with them a very different type of client. In following decades, Christopher Gibbs, Geoffrey Bennison, Robert Kime, David Mlinaric and Piers Westenholz - most of whom plied their trade around London's Pimlico Road - recognised that as well as having historic and aesthetic value, antiques also offer a unique opportunity to cast a spell over a space. It wasn't just clients such as Lord Rothschild and Weidenfeld who bought into this philosophy but also a new generation from the world of film and music, including Mick Jagger, Eric Clapton, David Putnam and Terence Stamp. 'Chrissie Gibbs sought out the unique, the unusual and the unrelated, so you might have a 17th-century sculpture next to a piece of Arts-and-Crafts furniture on a beautiful rug, creating that soft, sleepy aged sense of beauty,' says the antique dealer Will Fisher of Jamb in London. The emphasis was as much on the whole as it was on the sum of the parts. Richard Coles of Godson and Coles concurs with the sentiment; 'Quality antiques bring depth and gravitas creating focal points in a room, generating a tangible and exciting atmosphere that is timeless, interesting and less liable to date,' he says.

One of the late Robert Kimes's most influential projects was the gentle transformation of South Wraxall Manor in Wiltshire for John Taylor and his wife, Geela Nash Taylor, the founder of Juicy Couture. It was not just structural changes such as re-opening the loggia to the outside that brought this beautiful 15th-century house back to life but the extraordinary mixture of furniture and fabrics that lend the house its highly distinctive mood. 'It had to have some ordinary things in it - and some wonderful things too,' he commented. And so it does; the study is furnished with a French ebony and Boulle desk and a gilt mirror, while the family sitting room is anchored by a pastel Smyrna rug. Elsewhere there are antique pelmets, bed hangings, curtains and upholstery as well as embroidered suzanis. There are 18th-century French twin beds in their original Toile de Jouy fabrics, hand-painted DeGournay paper and the Spanish painted leather walls that provide magical backdrops. The value of these ingredients to the succession of spaces was not just as individual pieces but also as components in an entity that enhanced the mood of the building.

The drawing room at Wraxhall, designed by Robert Kime. *Image courtesy of Robert Kime*, photographer Tessa Traeger.

Key to the South Wraxall project was the mix of styles and eras; European and Middle Eastern, 17th-century with 18th, ordinary with the extraordinary. That perhaps is one the greatest features of the work of the dealer decorators; in their search for magic, they refused to be hidebound by the period of a building. As a result, the alchemy of their work relied on juxtaposing one piece with another, regardless of its origin. It was a dramatic shift away from interior design projects of the past that had been burdened by historicism and involved furnishing rooms with pieces that were from the same period as the houses they occupied.

What has been exciting about this seismic shift in approach is the creativity that it has precipitated at every level of the market; freed from the constraints of connoisseurship, the process of decorating with antiques has become more creative. While academic rigour still prevails, so too does a celebration of beauty for beauty's sake and the form, colour and texture that they bring to an interior.