

# THE WORLD OF INTERIORS

NOVEMBER 2023 £5.99

THE WORLD OF INTERIORS NOVEMBER 2023



Artists and Collectors  
at Home

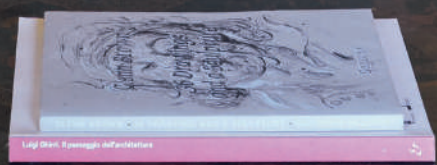


# MANNERIST ON A MISSION

Glenn Brown is known for his unsettling, lush paintings of figures drawn from art history. Certainly, a fidelity to the past is evident in the sensitive restoration he and his husband, Edgar Lagunia, have overseen in their ten-bedroom, art-filled manor house of 1679 – the delft-tiled fireplace, Georgian colours and camelback sofas attest to that. But, asks Amy Sherlock, do the couple make any concessions to the contemporary? Photography: Simon Watson

*Previous pages: the sunny yellow of the ground-floor drawing room (Farrow & Ball's 'Babouche') was inspired by Jasper Conran's reception room at Ven House ('WoI' Oct 2011), in turn taking its cue from Nancy Lancaster's Avery Row apartment ('WoI' Sept 1982). Gillian Wearing's wax 'Sleeping Mask' from 2004 stands on the baby grand piano, in front of George Romney's dreamy rendition of Isabella, Countess of Glencairn. Right: when the couple bought the house, the fireplace was much lower and simpler. Tracing the old plasterwork surrounding it, they realised there had originally been an additional element on top, which they dutifully replaced, working from a Gibbs design. It is now flanked by two elegant c1750s portraits of young ladies by Allan Ramsay, while a large Shiva lingam stone lurks on the hearth*





Lilly Mori, *Spesso gli architetti*





*This entrance hall sits behind a columned portico added to the house as its main door in the 19th century. The painting behind the table is attributed to Abraham Bloemaert and portrays 'Saint John the Baptist Preaching to the Multitude', while, to its left, a 17th-century still life by William Gouw Ferguson shows hunting quarry – a partridge, kingfisher and finch*





‘We said we weren’t going to buy a project,’ the artist Glenn Brown explains. The project in question was a ten-bedroom manor house, sitting in 42 acres of rolling English countryside, uninhabited and at the centre of a bitter and controversial lawsuit between the local council’s planning department and its previous owners.

Nine enforcement notices had been issued for violations of its Grade II listing. Original panelling had been ripped out and fireplaces had gone, as had floorboards and cornicing. All would have to be made good by any new owner. The house had been repossessed and belonged to the bank, meaning prospective buyers were not able to view the interiors. ‘We came with my father, who looked at it and said: “This is ridiculous. It’s a mess, it’s too big, it’s too much work, don’t get involved.” He didn’t even get out of the car.’

And yet. Certain houses have their way. The purchase went through in the first, frosty days of 2010 – when Brown got the keys, a snowstorm had cloaked the house in white, a tabula rasa that presaged the great stripping-out to come. Brown and his husband, Edgar Laguinia, enlisted an architectural historian, Philip Aitkens, along with conservation specialists Nicholas Jacob Architects and a construction company, R&J Hogg, well versed in historic buildings. Work began in short order – closely supervised by English Heritage and the local authority – to restore the house to its early-Georgian glory.

Built in 1679 by one John Bishop, the house passed in the early 1700s to George Purvis, commissioner to the navy. By 1730, it had doubled in size with the addition of a new set of rooms along the rear, a service wing and a coach house that now forms Brown’s tall, bright studio. A further extension at the turn of the 20th century – also restored to its period – was built under the custodianship of a different family, creating a new main bedroom, doubling the drawing room and adding that period must-have, a billiards room.

The restoration work lasted two years and eight months and was an exercise, mainly, in finding things (floorboards,

furniture, cornicing, fireplaces) that were the right fit – literally, in the case of 15 removed Georgian doors that the pair found gathering dust in the coach house. ‘We wanted the house to make as many decisions as possible for us,’ says Brown. They embarked on extensive historical research with all the attunement to balance, proportion and colour one might expect from a Rhode Island School of Design graduate and a painter whose work constitutes its own kind of study in art history. (Glenn is best known for his reinterpretations of historical works in which figures take on an unsettling, otherworldly quality, rendered in a blizzard of fine brush marks in an often acrid palette, like glowing, post-nuclear wraiths.) ‘It was a slow process of taking down walls and discovering what was behind them.’ In a first-floor reception they removed a partition to find a fireplace hidden behind two others – the last of these dated to 1679. Fragile traces of paint were visible. Using these and a contemporaneous reference – namely the late 17th-century fireplaces in Strangers’ Hall, Norwich – Laguinia recreated the decoration, lined in red, with a painted pea-hen in each corner. Brown’s handiwork, meanwhile, is visible in a fireplace on the second floor, in a series of delft-ish blue-and-white tiles.

Walls were scraped back to reveal the original paint colours – with results that did not initially overwhelm. ‘A lot of the colours were quite drab. But we found out that this was done on purpose, to show off the fabrics,’ Laguinia explains. Now as then, richly coloured curtains and upholstery enliven the rooms – some of them loomed by Gainsborough in Sudbury, where weft threads were already shuttling back and forth at the time of the house’s final expansion. The restoration threw up other pleasing continuities: the builders used Bulmer bricks from the same quarry as the original structure, while the lead statues in the garden that, bleary-eyed in the breakfast room, you might confuse for real people, are made by H. Crowther, in Chiswick, which has been in business since the 1880s. The many bathroom fixtures chart a wondrous timeline of British

plumbing ingenuity from the early Victorian period onwards.

There are, of course, certain concessions to the contemporary – in the spacious kitchen, for instance, and the breakfast room itself. ‘Georgians didn’t have dining rooms,’ Brown explains. ‘They would have had folding tables that they packed away in different rooms.’ A morning room on the ground floor has rather comfier seating than the exquisite hump-back George III number, purchased from the Cowdray Park sale at Christie’s, in the butter-yellow drawing room. ‘People complained that all the sofas were too precious to sit on,’ says Laguinia.

Nowhere does the contemporary more thrillingly announce itself, however, than in the art lining the walls, where Georgian society portraits and Hogarth prints hang alongside Italian Baroque etchings, long-fingered Mannerist beauties, Symbolist works by Odilon Redon, modern masters from Nobuyoshi Araki to David Hockney, and several of Brown’s YBA-adjacent contemporaries, including Gillian Wearing and Anya Gallaccio. Fittingly, given their air of temporal dislocation, there are many of his own works too, as well as those that have inspired them – in particular, paintings by the Bolognese brothers Ubaldo and Gaetano Gandolfi, Dutch Mannerist Abraham Bloemaert and Henri Fantin-Latour, whose roses putrefy in a composition of Brown’s that now hangs in the main bedroom.

For Brown, Mannerism – a style ‘massively overlooked in Western art’ – offers a profoundly modern way of looking at the world. ‘Classicism tries to create something that is perfect, tries to dominate nature, whereas Mannerism tries to be in harmony with nature and enjoys the distortion that you get. It’s about the way it feels to be human.’

This house, too, may have a dining table (and even, hidden in a room under the eaves, a widescreen TV), but its Georgian spirit has been captured beautifully. *A permanent, rotating display of the artist’s works, and those of his influences, can be seen at The Brown Collection, 1 Bentinck Mews, London W1, Thurs–Sat, 11–6*

*The breakfast room is on the site of what was once a brewhouse. The Chinese and Japanese blue-and-white porcelain that is found everywhere in the house, echoing Georgian ‘Porzellankrankheit’ (an obsession with china), is here installed on individual corbels, while the table is laid with Wedgwood “Queen’s Plain”, after the firm’s original, industry-defining cream “Queen’s Ware” favoured by George III’s consort, Charlotte*



*Above: a 'Head of Woman', her head tilted and fingers improbably long, by Cornelis van Haarlem guards the entrance to the first-floor reception room. The 1730s extension, which doubled the breadth of the house, enclosed what was originally an exterior staircase. Opposite: flanking the fireplace are two likenesses of elderly gentlemen by followers of Joseph-Marie Vien, France's last 'first painter to the King', above self-portraits by the artist Philip Ackerman. He uses distortion bordering on grotesquerie, redolent of the 16th-century Mannerists*





*Above: the bed in the main bedroom is based on the one at Handel's House in Mayfair, though its proportions have been scaled up to accommodate a king-sized mattress. The De Gournay wallpaper nods to fashionable block-printed or hand-painted Georgian examples, fragments of which have been found in situ. Opposite: in the yellow bedroom, 'Shallow Deaths' (2000), a work by Brown based on an Auerbach painting, glows against a Farrow & Ball paper. Nearby, the Italian Renaissance painted-plaster bust on the wardrobe has the air of a death mask*





*Above: the rib-cage shower, like all of the antique bathroom fittings in the house, is from Mongers, a salvage yard in Hingham, Norfolk. By necessity, the house's sanitaryware is Victorian, given that flushing loos were not patented until 1775. Opposite: the exquisite William & Mary-style tester bed, incorporating fragments of 17th-century damask, was bought from the Cowdray Park estate sale at Christie's in 2011. Visible beyond is an image of a penitent Mary Magdalene garlanded by flowers, attributed to the circle of the Neapolitan Luca Giordano*

