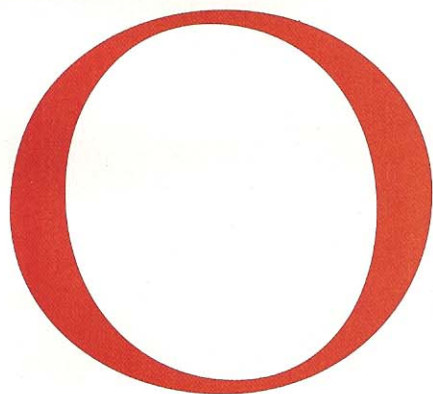


In a dodgy London neighborhood,
Messrs. Knox and Longstaffe-Gowan live
in a world of nuns and skulls and
memorials to dead Victorians.
Christopher Mason gets lost in the

HOUSE OF WONDERS

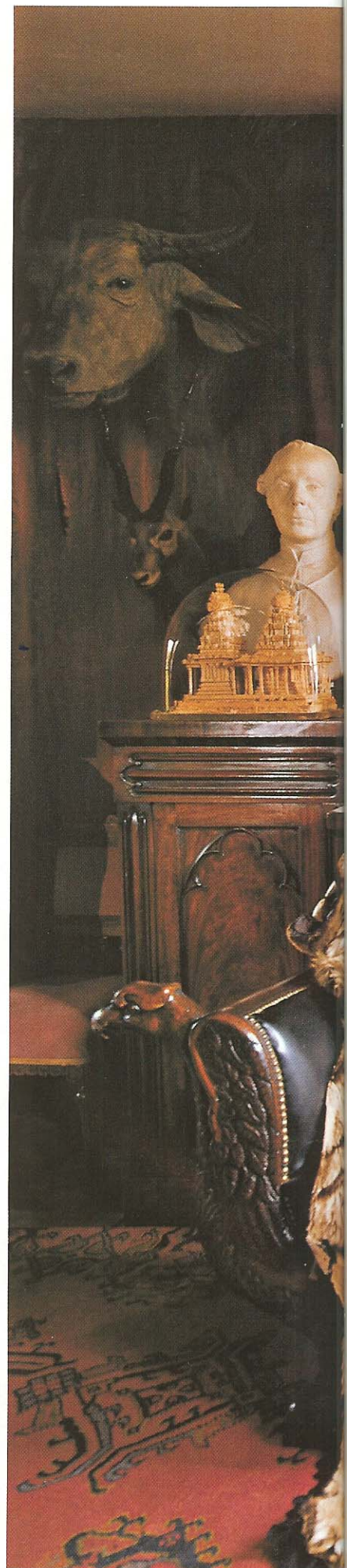
PHOTOGRAPHS BY DERRY MOORE



One half of Jesus' hairdo fell off this morning—I heard a bang," Tim Knox says, peering at an 18th-century painted terracotta head of Christ that sits on a side table in the drawing room, awaiting repair. The semicoiffed Savior is one of thousands of eccentric treasures that fill Malplaquet House, the formerly dilapidated mansion in London's East End that is home to Knox, director of the venerable Sir John Soane's Museum in Lincoln's Inn Fields, and his partner, renowned landscape architect Todd Longstaffe-Gowan.

In an age that celebrates minimalist chic, it is refreshing to visit the couple's exuberantly cluttered four-story townhouse, a repository of their quirky collections, which range from the sublime to the spooky. The miscellany includes a rare portrait by Sir Anthony Van Dyck, Napoléon's death mask, portraits of lugubrious clergymen, a green-horse roof tile taken from the Old Summer Palace in Beijing, and an exquisite pencil drawing of the Virgin Mary done on chicken skin by Sir Robert Strange, an eminent engraver of the 1700s, based on a painting by Guido Reni. "Some collectors are purists about quality and collect only in narrow historical periods," Longstaffe-Gowan says. "But we rather like these mad arrangements of putting things together."

Two of the brightest stars in London's cultural firmament, Knox and Longstaffe-Gowan share a passionate and comprehensive knowledge of the fine and decorative arts. Knox was the head curator of Britain's National Trust, a job that gave him a privileged entrée to the collections of every great house in the kingdom, before he took over as director of the Soane museum in 2005. (Soane, a prominent neoclassical architect in the late 18th and early 19th centuries, designed several of London's landmark buildings, among them the Bank of England; his East London home is now a jewel box of a museum beloved





The Bird Room of Malplaquet House includes a tiger skin, a stuffed water buffalo head, portraits of British brewers, a Gothic sideboard, and architectural models under glass.

by aficionados of classical architecture.) Knox ascribes his early fascination with the power of objects to his first visit to the museum as a student. "It's a very potent place for people who adore historic houses," he says. Longstaffe-Gowan is known for his meticulous scholarship in restoring historical outdoor spaces—the famous Boboli Gardens in Florence, for one. He has also created gardens at Hampton Court Palace and for Charles Saatchi in London and Lord Jacob Rothschild at Waddesdon Manor in Buckinghamshire.

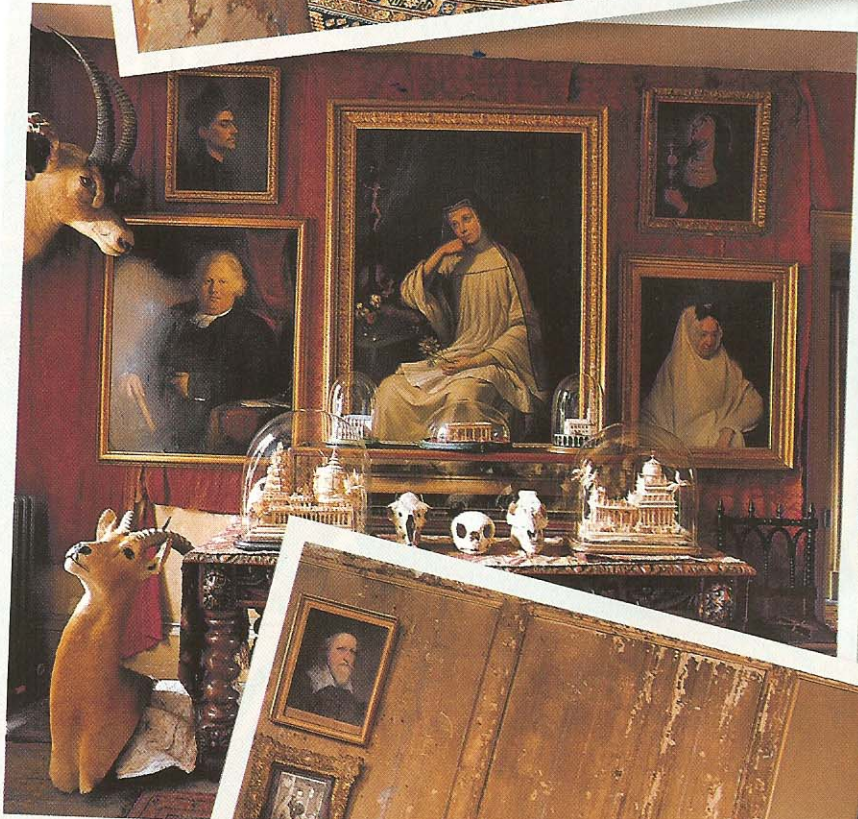
The front entry hall at Malplaquet House—a narrow decompression chamber from the teeming modern world outside—serves as an introduction to the building's numerous curiosities. (Malplaquet is not open to the public, but Knox and Longstaffe-Gowan offer occasional tours to patrons and trustees of the Soane museum and to collectors' groups.) Here the faded, 18th-century paint provides an atmospheric backdrop for a profusion of antlers and artifacts, along with a hieroglyphic text from the foot of the Sphinx. "The inscription was put there by the pharaoh Thutmose IV," Knox says, "and it describes how he restored the ancient monument after falling asleep in its shadow while out hunting in the desert and having a dream in which he was urged to restore it."

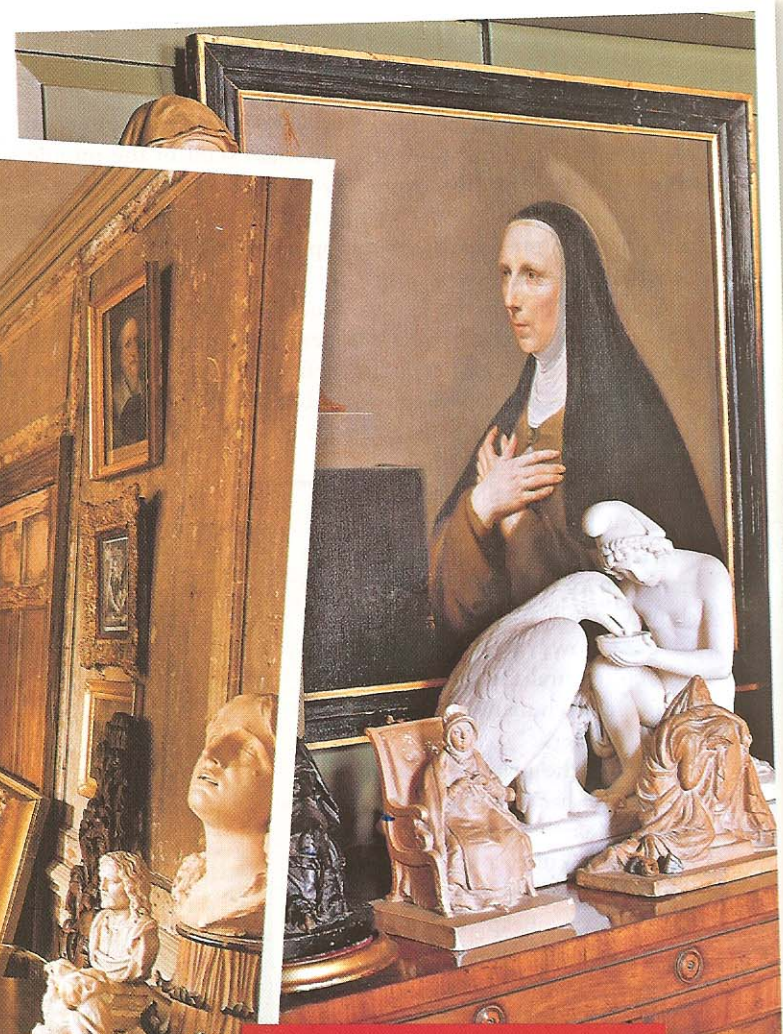
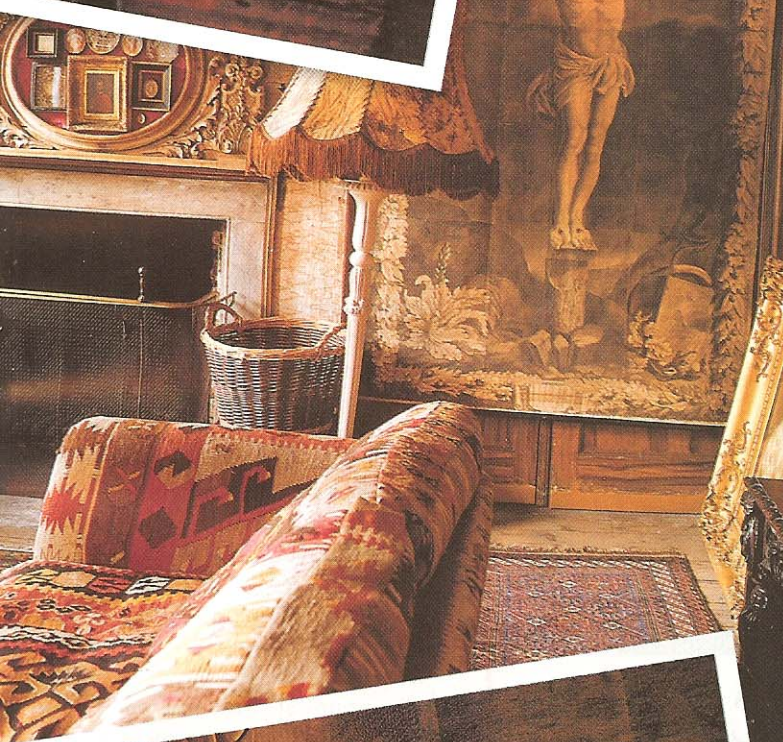
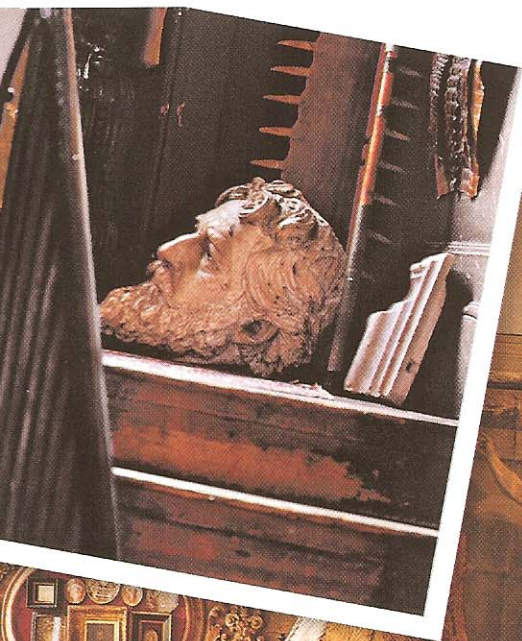
The Egyptian theme continues next door in the Sarcophagus Room, a dimly lit ground-floor reception area where visitors encounter the outer coffin of Sasobek, northern vizier of Egypt in the seventh century B.C., which is a plaster cast of the original in the British Museum. "I have always wanted a mummy case," Longstaffe-Gowan says, "but I'm afraid this is the nearest I could get." The piece sits opposite a sedan chair made for Queen Charlotte in 1785 and used as a taxi outside Windsor Castle until around 1850.

The room is also home to a bevy of paintings of nuns; there's a notably grim portrait in the style of Van Dyck of Archduchess Isabella Clara Eugenia, regentess of the Spanish Netherlands, who took to wearing ecclesiastical garb as a widow. "Our pictures tend to be rather gloomy nuns and monks," Knox says. The couple's religious fixation was inspired in part by Knox's Catholic upbringing.

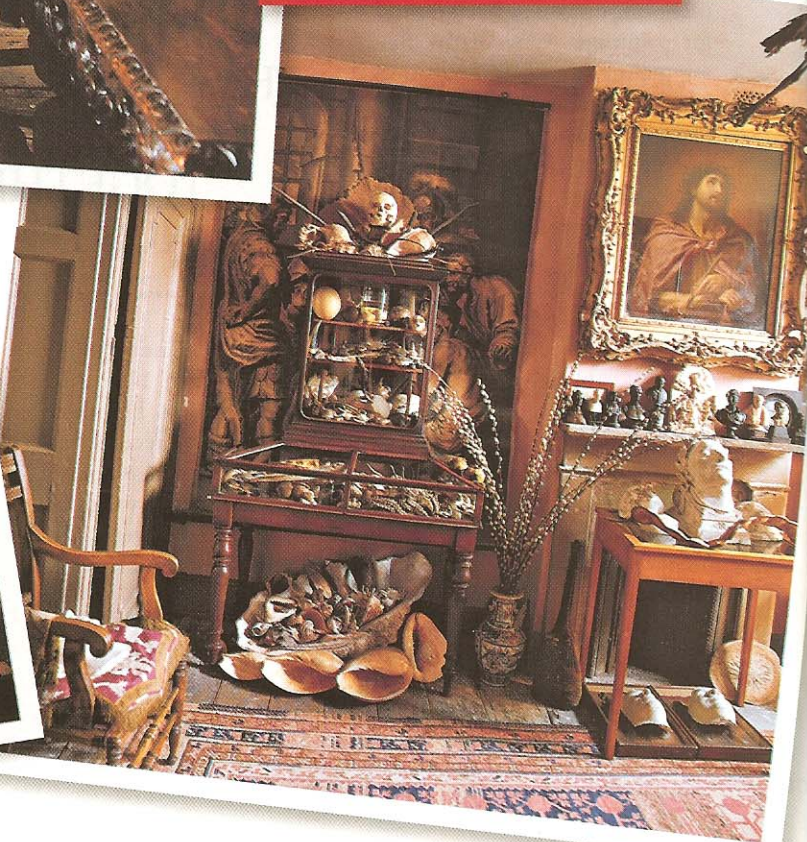
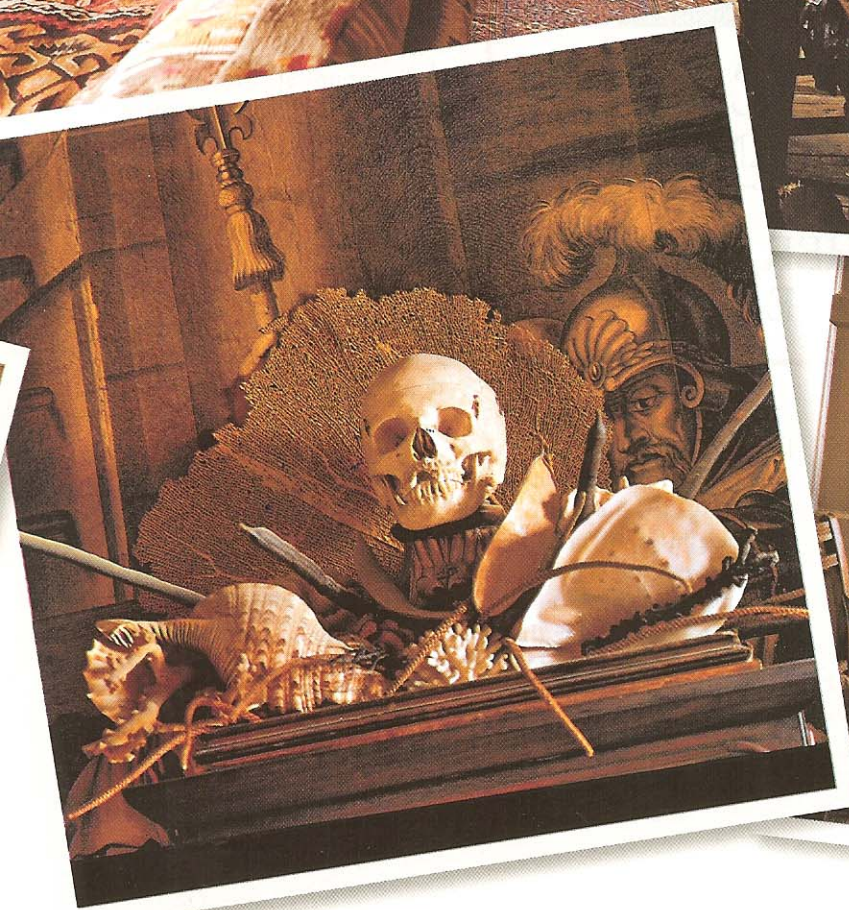
Dominating the room is a huge allegorical chimneypiece showing the house's owners and their dogs, Tiger and Sponge, a pair of miniature smooth-hair dachshunds. The structure was created in situ by Christopher Hobbs, a master craftsman and film designer who excels at decorative plasterwork—a trade that became virtually extinct in London during the 1900s. "He drew it on a napkin when he was here for Christmas," Longstaffe-Gowan says. The execution spanned five months. Hobbs conjured up giant heroic figures holding up both ends of the chimneypiece and symbolizing the places where the two Englishmen grew up: Knox in Africa, Longstaffe-Gowan in the West Indies and South America.

CONTINUED »





Clockwise from top left: The entrance hall; a 19th-century ceramic head; the first-floor drawing room; a nun's portrait in the study; curiosities in the house's museum; a human skull; terracotta busts in the drawing room; portraits in the Bird Room.



The 12-foot-high chimneypiece was wrought entirely in plaster with the exception of the human skull in the middle, which is real. It was discovered by Hobbs among the ruins of a demolished YMCA on Tottenham Court Road. "We like to think it's the remains of an unpopular aerobics instructress," Longstaffe-Gowan says.

Across the hall, in the Picture Room, visitors are greeted by a huge elephant skull. "I love bones," Longstaffe-Gowan says, standing next to a velvet sofa adorned with the skulls of five animals—a zebra, warthog, porpoise, walrus, and crocodile. The specimens keep company with an ostrich skeleton and a stuffed seal from St. Michael's Mount in Cornwall. More nun images adorn the walls: Queen Maria Anna, mother of the mad Charles II of Spain, is shown in full habit and seems to gaze down at a collection of architectural models, among them a church made entirely of goose feathers.

Most of the original paint in this room had vanished when the couple moved in, so they recreated the color, a vivid shade they call "arsenical green," using limewash, a cheap variety of paint common in the 18th, 19th, and early 20th centuries, made by mixing pigment with slaked limestone and water. "Only the very poor put limewash on the inside of their houses," Longstaffe-Gowan says. "But we like it because it gives a rather nice soft, distressed background for paintings." One of the finest pictures in their collection is a rare double portrait by Van Dyck of Sir Arthur Hopton and his brother, Sir Thomas Hopton, started in 1638 and never completed. The couple chanced upon it at a country sale in Norfolk.

The name Malplaquet refers to the notoriously bloody Battle of Malplaquet, fought in 1709 during the War of the Spanish Succession, but there are several theories on how the house received its name. It was leased in 1744 to Rebecca Brandon, the widow of a merchant who had sold war salvage—uniforms, weapons, human teeth—from the battlefields of that war. However, the name may also refer to the military career of a subsequent tenant, Edward Lee, a retired surgeon.

The building was a crumbling ruin when Dan Cruickshank, an architectural historian and British TV personality (and friend of the couple), suggested they take a look. Their previous flat was chockablock full of antiques, with little space to maneuver.

They fell in love with the 20-plus-room house and bought it in May 1998 for just £250,000—\$410,000 at the time, or about the cost of a one-bedroom flat in central London.

Built on spec and completed in 1742, the house fell into neglect when it was taken over by a variety of businesses, beginning in 1910. "No one had lived here in a hundred years," Knox says. The front garden had been demolished and replaced with shops, among them a typewriter repair store and a metal-foil manufacturer whose heavy presses occupied what is now the Sarcophagus Room. Half the basement had been filled with stones to support the presses. "We had to remove two

hundred and ten cubic yards of rubble," Knox says.

During construction the pair stayed in one room in the basement, where they installed some rudimentary plumbing. At times the noise and filth of the renovations were overwhelming. "We had an unsavory showering arrangement," Knox recalls. "The moment you stepped out, you were covered in dust and debris."

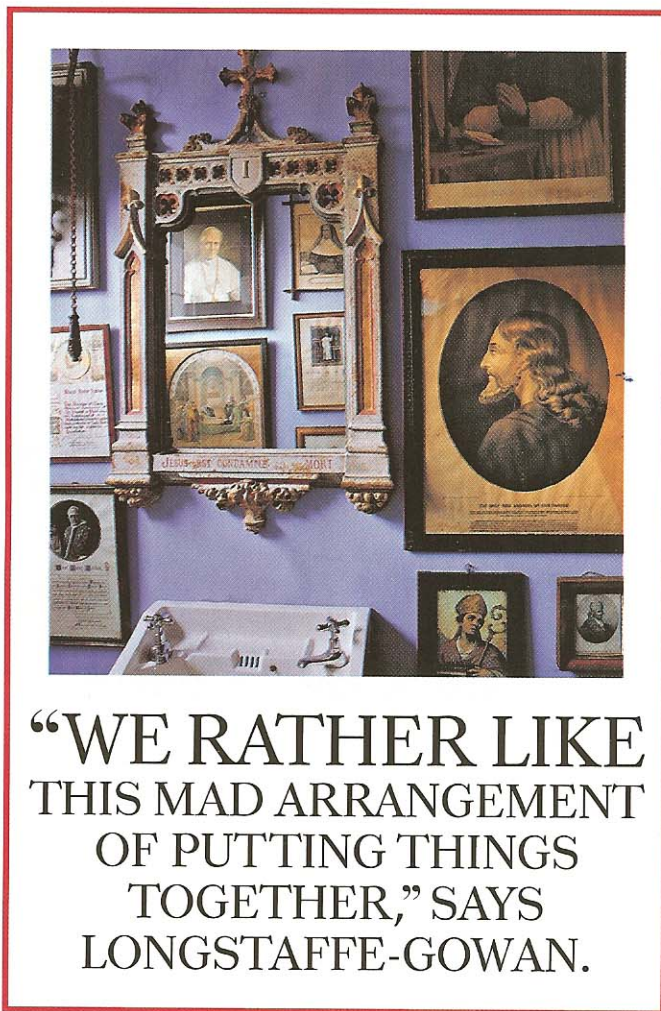
For the first few months the house was filled with shadows. All the windows had been removed and sent for repair and the gaping holes had been boarded up. "So we lived in this sepulchral gloom," Longstaffe-Gowan says. But he adds that remaining on the job site had some advantages: "We could see the progress and scream at the workers to hurry up." The pair spent more than \$400,000 to stabilize and restore the building, taking meticulous care not to remove any of the original surfaces that gave the place its antiquarian charm.

At the time, London's East End was shifting from a predominantly poor Jewish enclave

to a haven for bankers and Bengalis, a transition that is largely complete. Now the streets fill each morning with earnest financiers in suits—drawn to the neighborhood for its proximity to the City—and with a large population of Bangladeshi immigrants living on government assistance. It's a far cry from the rarefied joys of antiquity and 18th-century paintings inside Malplaquet House, but the couple seems to relish the contrast. "I like this proximity of decrepitude and decay and brash commercialism," Knox says.

Their appreciation for decrepitude parallels their fondness for the freakish and macabre. In an upstairs bathroom, the walls are covered with embossed pictures memorializing Victorians, "especially people who died in horrible

CONTINUED ON PAGE 285 »



“WE RATHER LIKE THIS MAD ARRANGEMENT OF PUTTING THINGS TOGETHER,” SAYS LONGSTAFFE-GOWAN.

A plaster bust of composer Felix Mendelssohn-Bartholdy, in front of a Pether painting of a ruined abbey. *Opposite: Religious imagery in the bathroom.*



HOUSE OF WONDERS

CONTINUED FROM PAGE 270 »

accidents," says Longstaffe-Gowan cheerily. Among those chronicled are two victims from the saloon steamer *Princess Alice*, which sank in the Thames in 1878; more than 600 people died.

Knox and Longstaffe-Gowan's passions for collecting started early. "I always had a little museum as a child," Longstaffe-Gowan says. "I used to charge admission to my brothers and sisters. There were five of them so I did quite well." The pair met in a nightclub—not an auspicious venue for a relationship that has lasted more than 18 years. "We started talking about marble busts," Knox recalls. "I'd just bought my first one, and it went on from there, really."

They keep separate handwritten acquisitions books, which form the basis of the extensive historical research undertaken before each major purchase. Their tastes are eerily similar, and they confer before buying anything for the house. Some of the most prized discoveries are now on display at major museums: A marble bust of Sir Walter Scott by the Danish sculptor Bertel Thorvaldsen, which the pair chanced upon under a table in London's Portobello Road market and purchased for £150 (now roughly \$300), is now in the National Gallery of Scotland. Another spectacular find was the finished original of John Flaxman's marble relief *The Adoration of the Magi*, which they discovered, unattributed, at a Christie's sale. It's considered to be his masterpiece, Longstaffe-Gowan says, and is on long-term loan to the Ashmolean Museum of Art and Archaeology in Oxford, England.

Knox leaves the exteriors to Longstaffe-Gowan, who is renowned for his sublime interpretations of classical landscapes for clients. His own Eden is a wild affair. "I never wanted an eighteenth-century garden to go with the house," he says. "I wanted everything to be overgrown." The front garden is a riot of plants that offer privacy from the busy road—rose, wisteria, olive and fig trees, bushy evergreens. The back garden is a similar tangle of clematis, boxwood, and varying types and heights of ferns. "I knew they would thrive, even with thirteen-foot walls," Longstaffe-Gowan says. "Ferns were around before the Ice Age. I've always loved them."

Though the back garden once stretched more than a hundred feet and led to a scenic orchard, a deal struck with the Spitalfields Trust, Malplaquet's previous owner, allowed a local organization to convert a portion of the land into low-income housing. The property is now only ten feet deep, but it abounds with lush greenery.

After the tour Knox invites me to take the underground a few stops to his office at Sir John Soane's Museum. Soane was a proud, inveterate collector who once threw a three-day party to celebrate a major acquisition (the sarcophagus of Seti I, the Egyptian pharaoh, in 1824). These days the party spirit continues the first Tuesday night of each month, when Knox keeps the museum open late and lights it with candles. "It's a bit of a scrum," he says, "but people seem to like it."

Many visitors marvel at Soane's ability to create a sense of vastness and tranquillity while cramming a sea of ancient and modern portrait busts, architectural drawings, and Old Master paintings into the small rooms. That example has clearly provided tremendous inspiration for the museum's current director. Does he have any tips to pass on to aspiring collectors?

"If you collect nuns, the world's your oyster," Knox says with a grin. ■

DEPARTURES

MAY/JUNE 2007



The

Culture

BERLIN'S ART SCENE

POP ART JEWELRY

**LONDON'S HOUSE
OF WONDERS**

ITALY'S ABRUZZI REGION

CAIRO REDUX

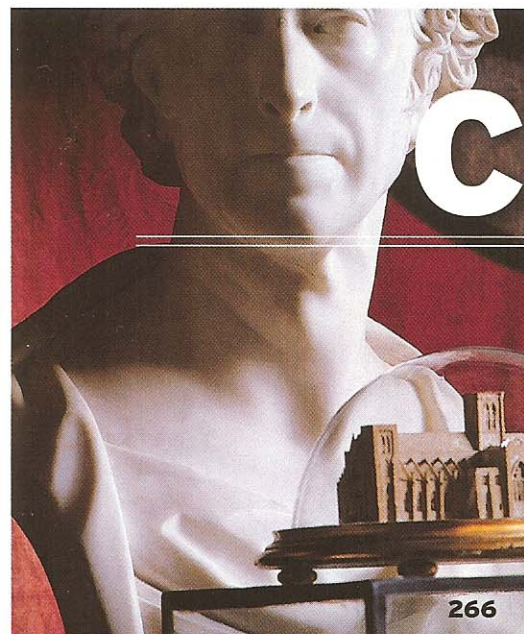
JODHPUR'S HIGH STYLE

**PLUS A SPECIAL
A TO Z ARTS GUIDE**

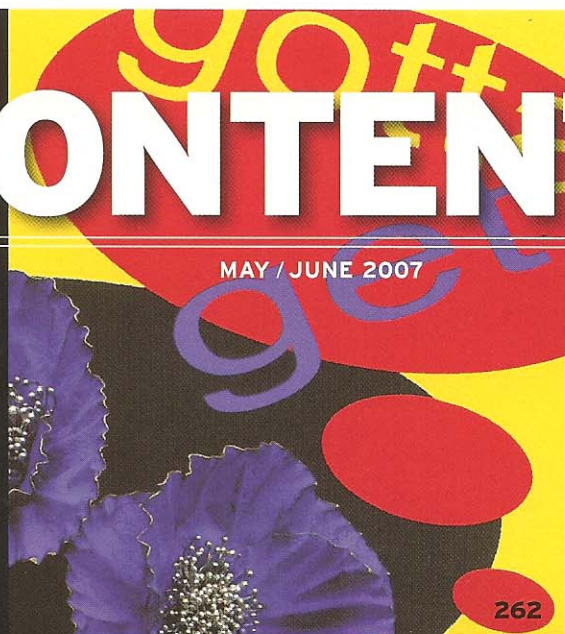
I S S U E

CONTENTS

MAY / JUNE 2007



266



262



242



258

Features

242 BERLIN ERUPTS

Like New York in the sixties, Berlin has become the new center of the art world.
BY STEPHEN WALLIS

250 THE MAGIC SHOW

Eight tricks to spring fashion.
PRODUCED BY BERNARD SCHARF
STYLED BY CHRISTOPHER CAMPBELL
PHOTOGRAPHS BY TORKIL GUDNASON

258 CHEF TAKAZAWA

At his Tokyo restaurant, 31-year-old Yoshiaki Takazawa serves just ten guests a night the meal of their lives.
BY JOSHUA COOPER RAMO

262 BOOM!! JEWELRY GOES POP

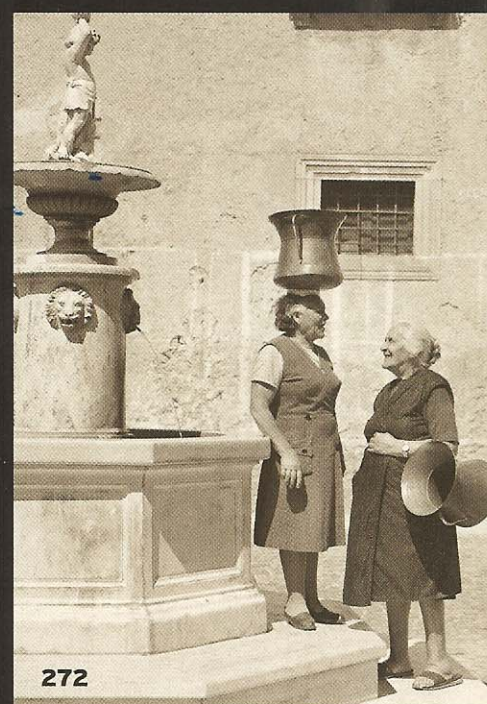
Gems that take their cue from Warhol and Lichtenstein.
BY STELENE VOLANDES
PHOTOMONTAGES BY ALEXANDRA PENNEY

266 HOUSE OF WONDERS

In London's East End, a tangle of ferns hides a 17th-century townhouse crammed with Flemish paintings, animal skeletons, nuns' portraits, and other oddities.
BY CHRISTOPHER MASON

272 MY FATHER'S VILLAGE

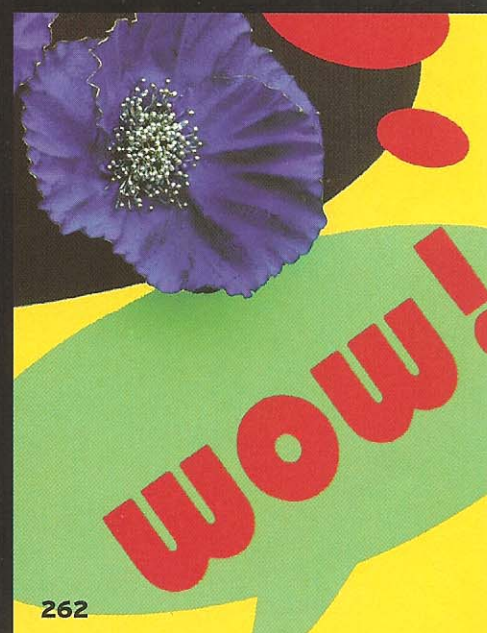
An American-born son travels to Italy's Abruzzi region and discovers the town his father fled decades ago.
BY NORMAN THOMAS DI GIOVANNI
PHOTOGRAPHS BY KEN GRIFFITHS



272

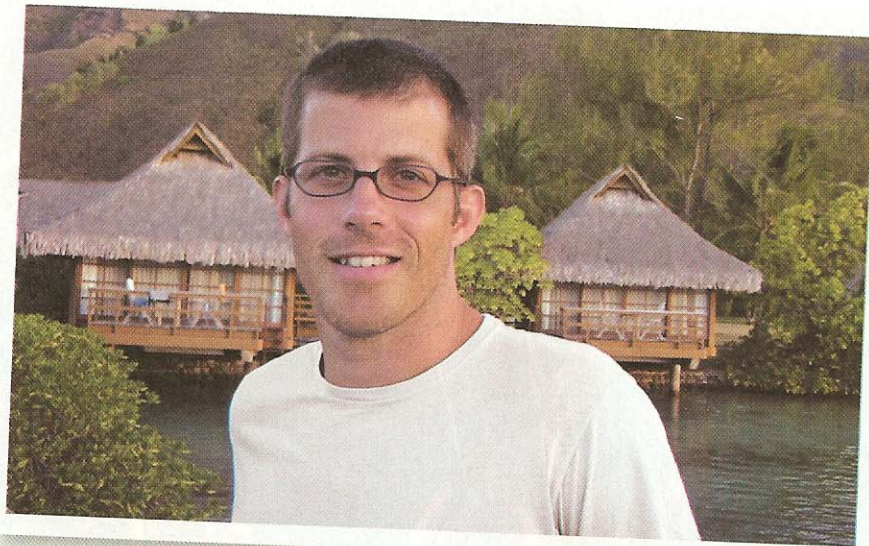


242



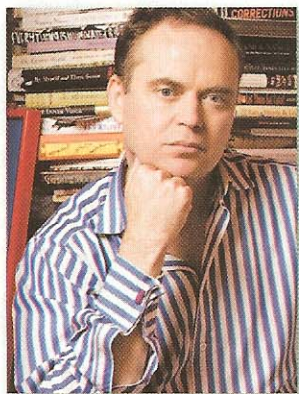
262

IN THIS ISSUE



STEPHEN WALLIS

As DEPARTURES' arts and culture editor, Wallis obsessively tracks what moves culture around the world. Besides spearheading this issue's special section, "What You Need to Know: The List from A to Z," he also reported on Germany's burgeoning art scene for "Berlin Erupts." "In New York your main reference for contemporary art galleries is the sterile boxes of Chelsea," Wallis says. "The art spaces in the former East Berlin are nothing like that. I spent a lovely hour in the courtyard of the Kunst-Werke's exhibition space, where I had lunch at the café designed by artist Dan Graham and took a ride down Carsten Höller's famous slide running through the building's façade."



CHRISTOPHER MASON

"No living room is quite complete without a stuffed goat under the table"—that's the number one decorating tip Mason learned while researching "House of Wonders." The writer had heard that the curiosity-filled Malplaquet House was perhaps one of the most intriguing residences in London. He came away knowing that it is.



TORKIL GUDNASON

During a break in shooting "The Magic Show," photographer Gudnason climbed into one of the contraptions on the stage. "It took me one minute to get in," he says, "and fifteen minutes to get out." Though he tried a few tricks on his own, Gudnason was most impressed with the disappearing rabbits. "And they come out of only *the* best hats," he explains.



CHRISTOPHER DICKEY

"When I first lived in Cairo in 1985," says Dickey, "it reminded me of the sci-fi epic *Blade Runner*—so dense, so complicated, so decayed." Some 20 years later the Egyptian capital has undergone profound changes, as he reports in "A New Cairo." "Everything seems to work better," he says. "The traffic may still be terrible, but at least now it moves."