



TAKING SILK

When a barrister couple got hold of this north London town house, it was in dire need of sprucing up. So, seeking counsel, they charged folk-art and antique dealer Robert Young and his wife, Josyane, with the task, safe in the knowledge that duo's eye for luxury and ad-hoc approach to design would get things back in order. They were right – now, sturdy Windsor chairs, oak furniture and fine fabrics take the stand. Matt Gibberd delivers his verdict. Photography: Tim Beddow

Hanging from a picture rail, Thomas Jones's oil painting of Lake Avernus in Italy makes a grand backdrop to the dining table, a rare twin-stretcher trestle dating from c1620. It is flanked by two 18th-century oak forms, or benches



Top: alongside the everyday jumble of hats and coats in the entrance hall are paintings by Pre-Raphaelites of the Liverpool school and an early 19th-century walnut longcase clock. Above left: the entrance itself is set within a brick courtyard. Over the door hangs one of a pair of glazed wrought-iron lanterns dating from the late 19th century. Above right: beside the staircase, an open fire roars beneath a painting of Lake Ullswater by Julius Caesar Ibbetson. A domestic chopping block stands to the left, a copper log bin to the right

Top: in the breakfast room, a mix of early 19th-century and mid-Georgian Windsor chairs surround a small refectory table made of sycamore and fruitwood (c1730). They are presided over by an early 19th-century English oak housekeeper's cupboard with its original painted arch dial clock. Above left: the kitchen, with its deep butler's sink, adjoins the breakfast room. Utensils hang from antique butcher's hooks above the sycamore dairy table. Above right: the red-brick rear elevation of the house overlooks the lawn and a newly planted beech hedge



The main sitting room is on the first floor. A large sofa, commissioned from Clarke & Reilly, faces a grey-veined marble fireplace (c1770). On a Georgian three-drawer dresser, decanters stand in an 18th-century brass-bound ale coaster



Above: a 19th-century Empire-style glass chandelier hangs over an enameled cast-iron roll-top tub in the master bathroom, which also contains fine English cut-glass wall sconces and a large 19th-century gilt-framed French mirror. Opposite: above the dressing room's chequered floor hangs a 1920s continental beaded-glass chandelier, reflected in the mirrors of the newly built, Rivière-designed fitted cupboards. Beside the daybed, which was upholstered in antique silk fabric by Clarke & Reilly, stands a japanned tripod table





ROBERT YOUNG went to deliver a dining table to some clients one day and wound up re-designing their entire house. The table in question is a wonderfully structural, early 17th-century trestle with provenance to Easebourne Priory on the Cowdray Estate in West Sussex (Young's antique business specialises in such rarities). As he was being given a tour of the house, he saw that the contractors were about to take an electric sander to the wooden floor. He gently explained that a more subtle methodology might be appropriate – one using fine wire wool, a vinaigrette of oil and white spirit, and plenty of elbow grease. The clients trusted his judgement, and so began a happy three-year affiliation. 'It set me off on a rather difficult course with the contractors,' Young says, laughing. 'It is a real hands-and-knees job. The waxes and varnishes are removed by hand, one square foot at a time. But it grew to be a very good relationship, and after the first month they just got it.'

Robert Young is synonymous with the finest folk art and vernacular furniture with just the right amount of knobles and wobbles. Alongside the antique business, he and his wife, Josyane, run the interiors consultancy Rivière. Their workload is loosely divided into hard and soft: he specialises in the plasters, paints, colours and architectural elements, and she deals with silk curtains, historic trims and wooden tassels. 'It's like that game where someone draws a head and someone else draws a body – we hope that when it joins up it works,' says Young. The clients, a pair of barristers whom we shall call Mr and Mrs C, have added a limb or two themselves – a

central part of the brief was to incorporate their collection of predominantly 19th-century English art. 'They were really involved, but in the most enthusiastic way,' says Young. 'We became incredibly fond of them.'

The house was constructed as one of a pair in a north London village in 1670, with two or three acres of gardens at the back and the odd hirsute highwayman trotting past at the front. A high street developed alongside it in the Georgian era, and nowadays it has a bustling ambience with bistros and big buses. Mr C's Bristol automobile parked on the cobbled driveway hints at the venerable wonders within. 'We bought the house from a photographer, and before that it belonged to the pianist from *That's Life!*,' Mr C explains. 'It was very modernised, with carpets everywhere and a TV in one of the fireplaces. It took a lot of imagination to see that it could be a beautiful house. We uncovered the old fireplace in the hall, for example. Robert thought there would be one, and we discovered it through experimentation.'

Even the older parts of the house are largely the result of alterations made in the 18th century, and the clients have added their own layers to this onion of eras. 'It's like an old English house where generations have made additions,' says Young. They set about creating a handmade, unfitted kitchen, for example, which was built up gradually using salvaged antique elements and an original deep butler's sink on ceramic supports. They made a dairy table from sycamore wood with metal legs, and the contractor found some reclaimed timber for the worktops. Presiding over the 18th-century breakfast table is an



early 19th-century oak housekeeper's cupboard incorporating the original painted arch dial clock from Ludlow.

Mr C's museum-quality artworks – which include a group of oil sketches by Frederic Leighton, paintings by William Davis and Daniel Alexander Williamson (two of the Liverpool Pre-Raphaelites) and a canvas of Virgil's tomb by Joseph Wright of Derby – lend an air of unexpected melodrama. 'He wanted to retain the period of the house, while adding a 19th-century art collection,' says Young. 'We thought it was a very unlikely combination, so we made it flexible and put in picture rails. It's great because he can chop and change.' In the bedroom, with its 17th-century carved tester bed, a Holman Hunt is juxtaposed with a delightfully banal painting of the side of a house by George Price Boyce.

Mr and Mrs C each have a room to escape to. His is called the Coleridge Room, on account of the literature lining the shelves. It's a mock-grandiose title for a diminutive study. From here, to quote Thomas Carlyle, Mr C can look down 'on London and its smoke-tumult, like a sage escaped from the inanity of life's battle'. It contains all manner of eccentricities: a lizard creeping out of formaldehyde, delicate pieces of netsuke and tangerines made of ivory. Mrs C's refuge is a somewhat jazzier affair, a dressing room with a 1920s beaded-glass chandelier and bespoke mirrored cupboards that endlessly reflect a chequerboard floor. She needed a certain number of drawers for hats, knickers, rings and other accoutrements. 'We tried to make it in keeping with the architecture while meeting very specific requirements. Then

we put that ridiculous daybed in and it became a bit Biba-ish: Sixties decadence with a reference to the traditional architecture.' In order to soften the modernity of the joinery, Young employed what he calls 'fat' paint: layer upon layer of thick, brush-painted undercoat that disguises the nature of the timber underneath.

The walls throughout the core of the house have been decorated with similar ideals, in a textured paint containing chalk dust that feels like the original distemper. The brickwork around a fireplace is ingrained with the soot of a thousand fires, or at least it looks that way until you realise that it has been mocked up by paint specialists DKT. The original panelling has been delicately distressed in the sitting room on the first floor, where an early Georgian dresser cuddles up to a large sofa commissioned from Clarke & Reilly. The silk curtains are in two-tone green. 'I used to have a pair of trousers like that,' says Mr C, who has demonstrated remarkable magnanimity throughout the entire process. He even let Robert loose on the garden, and very beautiful it is too. A series of hedged chambers provide a sense of ceremony and formality, with a kitchen garden, a scented garden at the back to catch the sun and an area for the couple to play badminton, which resounds with the thwacking of shuttlecocks on a summer's day. 'I felt I could trust Robert and Josyane. I like the things they sell,' Mr C explains. 'Folk art is, of all things, unpompous. I relied completely on their taste and imagination' ■

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The master bedroom contains an early 17th-century, panelled, inlaid and carved tester bed. At its foot stands an English roundel-carved blanket chest dating from the 16th century. A high-backed wainscot chair sits against a wall hung with fine 19th-century watercolours

Top left: a collection of 19th-century prints adorns the guest bedroom, which has a classic Victorian brass bedstead. The fabric curtains, bedspread and cushion cover are all antique. Top right: the loo is fitted with an original low-level cistern fashioned from mahogany