

GEOFFREY BENNISON

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Geoffrey Bennison

Extravagant patterns and remarkable objects define exotic English rooms

It is a curious thing that, like so many of the greatest, Geoffrey Bennison became an antiques dealer and decorator almost by chance. Born in 1921 in the north of England, he had originally wanted to be an artist. In the 1940s he won a wartime place at the prestigious Slade School of Art, then was evacuated from London to the delights of Oxford. There he came under the influence of the eccentric Lord Berners—wit, writer, musician and collector—whose house at Faringdon may have given the young man his first glimpse of grand and unusual decoration. Art historian John Richardson, a Slade contemporary, recalls that Bennison was widely held to be the star of his generation. With a precociously developed painter's eye for color, a meticulous Ingres-like drawing style and an evident flair for theatrical design, he might have achieved great things had he not been struck down by tuberculosis.

Seven years in and out of hospitals followed. After Bennison returned to London, cured but broke, a friend suggested that he gamble his diminishing funds on setting up an antiques stall in the tough street market at Bermondsey. He flourished, and within months he had taken on a second stall. Major dealers, collectors and decorators gathered at dawn on Fridays to fight for his treasures. For four happy years he honed his ability to find wonderful and idiosyncratic objects—and then, at the perfect moment, he opened his first shop in Islington. With a later move to Pimlico Road (where he eventually owned three shops), he established himself as the central character of London's most fascinating street of antiques dealers.

Bennison's eye for the rich and splendid, his love of the eccentric and his predilection for vastly overscale pieces made entering the shop unforgettable. From dense theatrical gloom, distressed baroque mirrors gleamed; always there were columns of rare marble, ancient or seventeenth-century busts and other sculptures, faded brocades and Moroccan or Turkish embroideries, gilt Kentian tables, old leather or lacquered screens, impossibly large chandeliers, and exquisite Ziegler carpets underfoot. Amid these wonders he held genial court, especially at teatime, during which he would entertain duchesses and decorators—usually haranguing the former to "open the handbag and blow the cobwebs off the checkbook."

By the beginning of the 1960s Bennison had begun to take on a few decorating commissions. For Terence Stamp's rooms in London's Albany, he arranged a subtly subverted version of the classic, masculine, club-like interior that he dubbed "the new Trad." Then followed two chic Chinese restaurants, the Lotus House and the China Garden. Publisher George Weidenfeld wanted a library with a contemporary feeling; Bennison gave him brass bookcases, busts, a robust nineteenth-century library table and a Francis Bacon above the chimneypiece.

His first American job was the refined apartment of the celebrated theater director Peter Glenville. Later would come other projects abroad, most notably in France. But he always turned down more clients than he accepted; he wanted to work for people who desired—and could afford—the very best, and, even then, only for those with whom he felt a real empathy; no wonder that those who succeeded in commissioning him came to be known as "the happy few."

For the French Rothschilds, David and his father, Guy, Bennison decorated several houses in which his most sumptuous creations are to be found. In David de Rothschild's Paris apartment, with its superb enfilade of rooms, he ignored the original bright scagliola decoration. He installed a dark entrance hall with busts on pedestals and heavily draped walls hung with a vast equestrian portrait from the Palazzo Labia, once owned by Charles de Beistegui. Beyond lay a glittering seventeenth-century mirrored dining room in the style of Daniel Marot. Better than anyone, Bennison responded to and reinvented *le goût Rothschild*, achieving in these rooms an effect of ineffable, somber grandeur. But even in the most lavish schemes his sure taste prevailed, avoiding any hint of kitsch—or, as he would put it (with his love of deflating pomposity): "No cherubs, dear."

For many years Bennison's own exquisitely arranged apartment in London was an unlikely aerie high above Piccadilly Circus, where he had assembled a perfect mélange of quirky and beautiful objects gathered over many years of dealing. His flat in Brighton was also a place of curiously raffish charm. Then, just a few years before his death in 1984, he moved to the top floor ("the nursery," he called it) of a grand house on Audley Square.

There, under low ceilings, he created rooms that felt more like an Irish-Georgian country house than Mayfair. Pictures were massed between groaning, untidy bookshelves. His own deliciously faded-looking fabrics and old crewelwork draperies were mixed with Moroccan textiles, and all these elements were held together by his favorite Red Riding Hood red, a beautifully subtle scarlet described by Bennison's friend and fellow antiquarian Christopher Gibbs as the color that lines the insides of old Moroccan chests.

This interior, with its Caravaggesque light, its perfectly judged drama and easy comfort, was in many ways the culmination of the designer's ideas concerning decoration. His sense of color was unfailingly sure: He would sit for hours in a room just watching the play of light, and he mixed his paints himself. "Never," he said, "trust a painter or a color chart." When it came to objects, his philosophy could be summed up in another of his memorable phrases: Always put "something mad on top of something very good, or something very good on top of something mad." On Geoffrey Bennison's death, as all dealers perhaps ultimately wish, his things—the very good and the very mad—were dispersed in a great sale.

