

Geoffrey Bennison

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December 1999

<https://www.architecturaldigest.com/story/bennison-article-012000>

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.

GEOFFREY BENNISON

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October 2024

<https://www.countrylife.co.uk/interiors/tea-and-sympathy-what-the-world-of-interiors-owes-to-geoffrey-bennison-274603>

Tea and sympathy: What the world of interiors owes to Geoffrey Bennison

Forty years after Geoffrey Bennison's death, the collection that bears his name epitomises his contribution to classic English taste. Giles Kime pays tribute.

Deep within the chromosomal make-up of classic English decorating in the post-war era was a strand of DNA best known by the genetic code MDAM (make do and mend). It arose out of necessity, in a world where rationing was still in place and there was, compared with now, little choice. Fabrics were dyed interesting colours, furniture brought to life with a lick of white paint and both fabrics and walls stencilled (remember those?).

As a result, interior decorators were required to think on their feet, either commissioning their own designs or doing a bit of DIY, particularly when it came to jobs such as mixing paint. The totemic Roger Banks-Pye, of Sibyl Colefax & John Fowler, is reputed to have flicked ash from his cigarettes into mixtures to lend it texture.

At Hovingham Hall in North Yorkshire, the childhood home of the Duchess of Kent, the interior decorator Guy Elwes used a paint finish made from beer to lend a deep, soothing glow to the dining room where it's still in place more than half a century later. Even in the 1970s, choice was pretty meagre compared with today, leading antique dealer Geoffrey Bennison to dye his fabrics in Assam tea, giving them a lived-in look that could never be achieved with a brand-new design.

Bennison was the first of a small band of antique dealers — together with Robert Kime and the former Olympic skier Baron Piers Von Westenholz — who morphed into decorators, creating layered interiors heavily laden with mood. In 2017, a Christie's auction of the collection of publisher Lord Weidenfeld was a reminder of Bennison's ability to imbue a space with a sleepy grandeur with the help of expensive antiques. 'Shabby is chic and quite *à la mode*, but it doesn't come cheap on the Pimlico Road,' is the inscription on a caricature by the illustrator Lawrence Mynott.

Bennison's work was the subject of a book, *Geoffrey Bennison: Master Decorator* (Rizzoli), written by his assistant, Gilly Newberry. Perhaps his greatest achievement was to demonstrate that if you want to achieve a pleasant, comfortable interior, old (and slightly threadbare) is gold.

The hugely influential tastemaker died in 1984. As with so much of the work interior designers created in that period, few of his projects survive. However, his legacy remains in the extensive collection of fabrics he created, now available from a shop founded by Mrs Newberry and her husband (also called Geoffrey). His name remains above the door, a reminder of a period of English decorating that was not only highly inventive, but also extremely pragmatic.

