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MONTAGU SQUARE: FROM VARDY TO BAGUES

By Timothy Whealon

I first met the owner of this collection when I was studying the fine and decorative arts in London. Our paths crossed again several years later: I had finished an apprenticeship program with Sotheby's and had just started my business in New York. I began assisting him with various auction purchases in America; he was buying sparingly at this time but had a brooding curiosity and an immediate connection with the objects he pursued. One of the first items we purchased together was lot 166, an unusual pair of William IV oak and brown oak stools, *circa* 1835, from the collection of Baron Alain de Gunzberg. The pair were beautifully patinated and bold in their design: similar to the 19th century flat in which my client previously lived, filled with Regency furniture and Zuber wallpaper. My client loved the area around Marylebone, with its charming speciality shops and butchers along Marylebone High Street, the varied tapestry of the area's diverse culture with men smoking out of hookah bottles in and around the neighbouring cafés, and the beautiful Regency squares: Portman, Bryanston, and Montagu.

19 Montagu Square was a shadow of its former self when I first visited soon after my client had purchased the lease. Layers of paint covered the graceful Portland stone cantilevered staircase, its original sash windows were replaced by modern arched windows, the Fonthill Splendens Chimneypiece from Alderman Beckford's Palladian Wiltshire mansion overpowered the drawing room and was surrounded by 20th century French *boiserie*. The Regency staircase ended at the top of the house to bring you face to face with an Edwardian loo hanging as if suspended from the ceiling and depriving the hallway of natural light. But there were also many reminders of its former Regency life:

a beautifully proportioned drawing and dining-room overlooking the garden of Montagu Square, original plaster moulding details in some of the rooms, and the original mahogany doors. My client's desire was to preserve and restore this English Heritage Grade II Listed property while balancing this within the context of late twentieth century life and architecture. Portland stone was sourced from the same quarry as the stone for the staircase; permission was granted by English Heritage to move the monumental Fonthill Splendens chimney-piece from the drawing room to the dining-room; visits were made to Sir John Soane's Museum for inspiration; and we began commissioning and buying decorative arts across the globe.

Both my client and I share a love of the English country house, myself through touring them, studying them and obsessing over every aspect of their layered history. My client's connection was already deeply embedded, having been brought up in a picturesque country house in Cumbria. What intrigued me most about the English country house was how centuries of the fine and decorative arts were contained, seemingly harmoniously within them. It was this inspiration coupled with a desire to create something new within the context of the city and the early nineteenth century architecture of 19 Montagu Square that the project took its roots.

We sought out the rare, the unusual and the beautiful from auction houses and country house sales such as the George III giltwood pier mirror, attributed to John Vardy from the Hackwood house sale (lot 160). Decorative arts were purchased from the best dealers such as Christopher Gibbs, Carlton Hobbs, Devenish and Perrin. Additionally, furniture was



The Dining-Room
© Henry Bourne

commissioned from master carvers like Philip Boorman; lighting from Hatfield's with the oversight of Philip Astley-Jones and restoration was carried out by the best in their respective fields: Peter Holmes at Spink (now Arlington Conservation) and Aasha Tyrell at Carvers and Gilders who lightly cleaned the Vardy mirror. The compilation was fresh, edited, harmonious, and full of history (both ancient and modern).

It did not pretend to replicate a period interior but it did reference many.

For me the collection represents the eye of a true collector, for objects were always purchased for their inherent value: if the object spoke to him, there was no need for a measuring tape, this gentleman could always find a place for the exceptional.