

## ANCIENT & MODERN

### SILVER MIRRORS, SILVER WOOD

Over the entrance doors, which would have let in a troop of Indian elephants, there was a broad stained-glass panel showing a knight in dark armour rescuing a lady who was tied to a tree and didn't have any clothes on but some very long and convenient hair. The knight had pushed the visor of his helmet back to be sociable, and he was fiddling with the knots on the ropes that tied the lady to the tree and not getting anywhere. A chain-mail helmet with a cross nose piece hung over the stairs. It was probably Persian. Then in the drawing-room were cabinets of satinwood in the Adam style as seen through late Victorian eyes - roses and bows with perhaps a cupid on a cloud. The walls were covered with horns and Victorian hunting trophies. Pots for plants made out of elephants' feet, wicker-work furniture from tropical outposts, decorated the room. Thrones made of horns of Portuguese bulls stood near tropical ferns in bamboo vases and hookahs, surrounded with screens covered with pinned up photographs and cuttings.

A lobby hall reached the whole height of the house, and the simple staircase, of white painted wood, was of Chinese Chippendale design. None of the rooms possessed the disadvantage of being cottagey, and each window seemed to have a more dazzling view than the last. The long rococo halls, giddy with plush and whorled designs in gold, were peopled with Roman fragments, white and disassociated; a runner's leg, the chilly half-turned head of a matron stricken at the bosom, the blind bold sockets of the eyes given a pupil by every shifting shadow so that what they looked upon was an act of the sun. The great salon was of walnut.

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Over the fireplace hung impressive copies of the Medici shield and, beside them, the Austrian bird. Here were the precious Holbeins - the finest extant - and the Ozias Humphry in its original oval frame, while prominent above the Jacobean fireplace, with a row of lamps shining footlight-wise beneath it, was the youthful portrait of the present mistress from the hand of Ingres. Garbed in Greek draperies, she was seen leaning her head against a harpsichord, whose carved support rose perpendicularly from end to end of the canvas like some flower-wreathed capital.

Less redoubtable perhaps were an infinity of Morlands, fresh and fragrant, in their oblong, cross-ribboned frames, a Longhi or two - a Piazza, a Punchinello in a little square, and a brilliant croquis signed Carmontelle of a Duchess trifling with a strawberry.

Other bizarre sketches were hung in the larger, adjoining room, as well as in the corridor, both of which had woodwork of red cedar. There was Bresdin's Comedy of Death in which, in the fantastic landscape bristling with trees, brushwood and tufts of grass resembling phantom, demon forms, teeming with rat-headed, pod-tailed birds, on earth covered with ribs, skulls and bones, gnarled and cracked willows rear their trunks, surmounted by agitated skeletons whose arms beat the air while they intone a song of victory. The painter could delineate, and tint with his hand, that which his eyes beheld, with blameless accuracy. What his eyes did not see, the soul, the mind, the habit of his model, he accurately omitted.

The Good Samaritan, by the same artist, is a large engraving on stone: an incongruous medley of palms, sorbs and oaks grown together, heedless of seasons and climates, peopled with monkeys and owls, covered with old

stumps as misshapen as the roots of the mandrake; then a magical forest, cut in the centre near a glade through which a stream can be seen far away, behind a camel and the Samaritan group; then an elfin town appearing on the horizon of an exotic sky dotted with birds and covered with masses of fleecy clouds.

And everywhere ranged fortuitously about were faïence flower-tubs bearing large-leaved plants that formed tall canopies to the white, pensive statues grouped patiently beneath. The varied whiteness of the marble and flannel and vellum and the healthy pallor of flesh, gained purity from the notes of the reddish-brown hair and the translucent violet of the amethyst.

The furniture of the petit salon had belonged to Marie-Antoinette; paintings by Boucher, Fragonard, Watteau, Hubert Robert and Greuze hung on the walls, the rock-crystal chandelier had graced Madame de Pompadour's boudoir, the most lovely knick-knacks were scattered on the tables or displayed in cabinets: gold and enamelled snuff-boxes, ashtrays of amethyst, topaz and jade with gem-incrusted gold settings.

Other objects of beauty stood on a sideboard beneath a lovely painting by Cranach over a large fifteenth-century Flemish tapestry. A pair of crystal and jewel cups attributed to Benvenuto Cellini were flanked by large gold birds studded with rubies of Indian or Burmese workmanship. Yung Cheng plates with nasturtium-coloured borders and purple-blue irises, leafless and tumid, and those supremely decorative flights of kingfishers and cranes trailing across a dawn sky - Dresden plates daintier and of more graceful workmanship, with drowsy, bloodless roses fading into violet, with ragged-edged tulips the colour of wine-lees, with the rococo elegance of a pink

or a forget-me-not - Sèvres plates meshed with the close guilloche of their white fluting, whorled in gold, or knotted with a golden ribbon that stands in gallant relief upon creamy smoothness of the paste - finally a whole service of silver plate arabesqued with those myrtles of Luciennes that were not unknown to the Dubarry.

There were so many objects that at times some of the less pleasing ones that had been gifts had to be disposed of.

- Volker Eichelmann, October 2014

This text is composed of extracts from Djuna Barnes, Cecil Beaton, Raymond Chandler, Frederick Baron Corvo, Ronald Firbank, Joris-Karl Huysmans, Marcel Proust, Sir Francis Rose, Stephen Tennant, Denton Welch and Prince Felix Youssouppoff.