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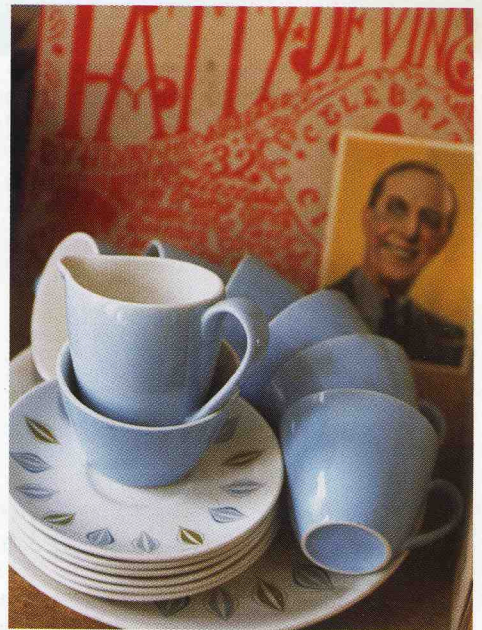


THOROUGHLY MODISH MODERN

The Rennies' lifelong passion for 20th century British design has led to a remarkable collection of homewares, furniture and ephemera

When Karen and Paul Rennie were both working at Sotheby's auctioneers back in 1986, they discovered by chance they had a mutual interest – the Festival of Britain. “We both tried to pick up some bits of ‘50s tat at the same time,” recalls Paul. “Karen was the first person I’d met who was interested in the Festival. My father was an architect and had been involved with it, so I’d grown up with photos of the Festival around the house, and an affinity for the shadowed, serif typography reminiscent of pier-side theatre posters. Karen and I used to go to Camden Market together and slowly we started collecting stuff to do with it.”

What started out as a passion for the Festival gradually evolved to include the designs of the ‘20s and ‘30s, and eventually into a broader interest in what Paul calls ‘English modernism’ stretching from 1910 to the early ‘70s. Nearly



OPPOSITE PAGE: The interiors maximize the impact of the couple's vintage posters, printed fabric cushions and Heal's furniture. The chimneybreast, painted a zingy orange, makes a striking focal point. **TOP:** The building, which dates from the 1740s, is one of only a handful in London to retain its tiled exterior. **ABOVE:** Even on a tight budget, funky 20th century tableware is easy to find – simply check out WI fairs and boot sales.



THIS PAGE, CLOCKWISE FROM TOP LEFT: A vintage curtain, featuring a fun parasol print, is clipped in front of the window to create an informal window dressing; The c1910 sideboard from Heal's is perfect for showing off china collectables, while the poster above it by Edward McKnight Kauffer and the 1930s chrome-framed chair from Broadcasting House make a good marriage of colour – and 1930s design; An album of match box artwork rests jauntily on a sofa strewn with vintage cushions.

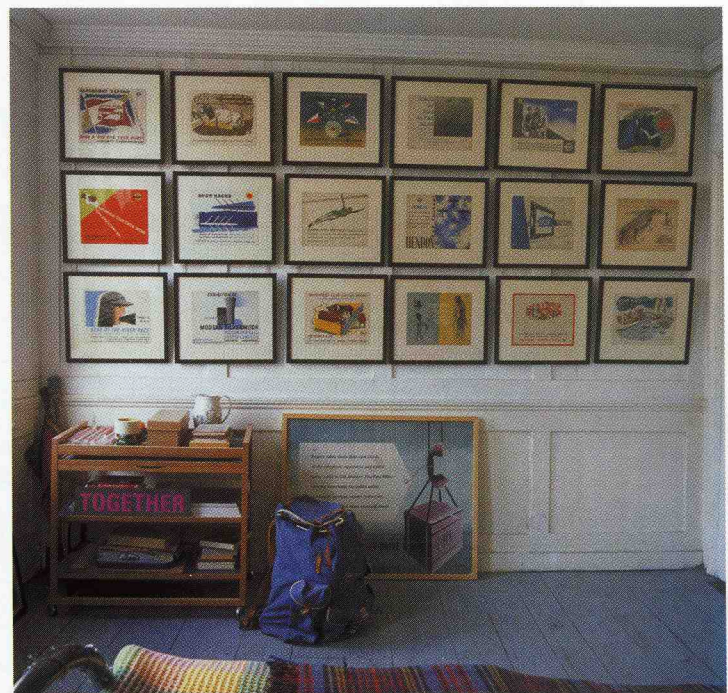
10 years after they first met, the couple amassed enough of a collection to want to sell some of it, and began searching for premises for a shop. A dairy in central London with living quarters above proved the perfect solution. "We chose this place because of the frontage. There are only about four of these tiled buildings left in London," explains Paul.

When the Rennies moved in, the building was completely unmodernized, unheated and the décor was '1940s Georgian' – lots of green and brown mid 20th century shades on the original interior surfaces. "We removed the wallpaper and carpet, and stripped it back to the fabric of the building – which dates from the 1740s," explains

CLEVER INVESTMENTS

Paradoxically, pre-Second World War British transport posters are in fact rarer than limited-edition prints. Though they were mass-produced, the print-runs were relatively small, and most were pasted up – indeed fulfilling their intended use – so very few remain. However, post-war railway posters are more readily available and thus are more affordable. "Posters are an ideal area for new collectors, because you can start collecting with a modest budget," says Paul. "If you want Toulouse Lautrec but don't have the money now, you can buy interesting, cheaper works and trade up quite quickly." To start collecting, Paul recommends a budget between £500 and £1,500, and suggests buying one good item a year. "A decent collection cannot be built up overnight. You need to look at what comes up at auctions – it's only by doing this that you start to realize what is rare and unusual."





TOP RIGHT: Paul and Karen stripped the Georgian house to its fine bones and have used the white walls, original floorboards and bare windows to set off their collections. ABOVE RIGHT: A dramatic display illustrating the progress of commercial art from 1935 to 1955 fills a bedroom wall. RIGHT: A collection of vintage ephemera creates a colourful display – and the iconic Penguin bookcover artwork makes an appearance.

Paul. “Because we’ve got a lot of things, we don’t need much decoration as such. Our idea of decorating is to paint a room white and fill it with a variety of interesting objects.”

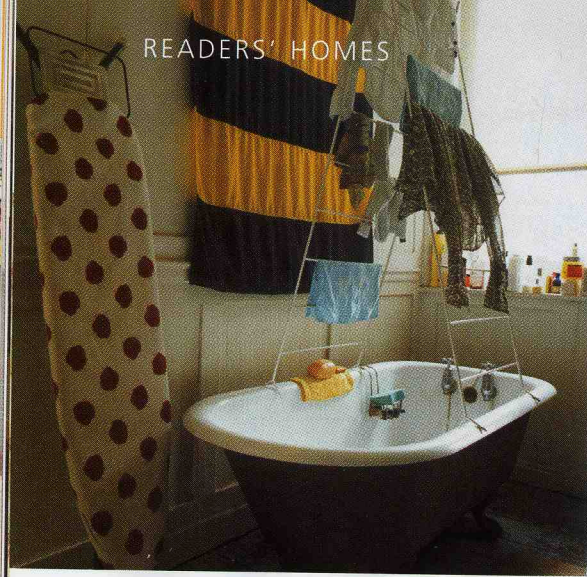
MIX & MATCH

These they have in abundance. Transport and advertising posters fill the walls, brightly-coloured graphic packaging and ephemera colonize windowsills and mantels, and albums of luggage and clothing labels catch the eye on coffee tables and sofas. Any remaining space is filled with vintage fabric hangings, piles of old books, snugly throws and rugs, and humorous touches such as a 1950s Eric Ravilious jug stuffed with seaside rock. “We believe a collection should be around you, not in a box,” says Paul. “We don’t have a lot of space,

DESIGN ICONS

A few decades ago, if you spoke of ‘retro’ interiors, most thought of the space-age designs of the ‘60s and ‘70s. However, by the end of the 20th century, the charm of mid-century style finally got the recognition it deserves. From the striking minimalist look of original pieces by Charles and Ray Eames, Arne Jacobsen and Mies van der Rohe – amongst others – to the sleek shapes of the more mainstream furniture turned out by companies such as Ercol, the styles of the ‘40s and ‘50s are very desirable. Serious collectors pay handsomely for the work of iconic designers of the period such as Isamu Noguchi and Le Corbusier, although it is possible to create the look on a smaller budget using junk store finds, replicas, and contemporary pieces with similar lines.





TOP LEFT: A bright yellow and blue signalling flag hangs above the clawfoot bath, giving the bathroom a fresh, simple appeal. **ABOVE RIGHT:** Paul bought his prized London Underground bird posters of 1932 from someone who had found them in an attic in California. "They had some mouse and water damage, but I had them conserved and framed. It's rare even to find one on its own, so to find all four was a real coup." **ABOVE LEFT:** An Eric Ravilious jug, filled with sticks of rock, makes for a quirky feature. **BELOW RIGHT:** The Rennies also keep an eye peeled for interesting vintage clothing – which although functional, can create a highly decorative touch too.

so everything is in constant rotation – when we buy something, we sell something else."

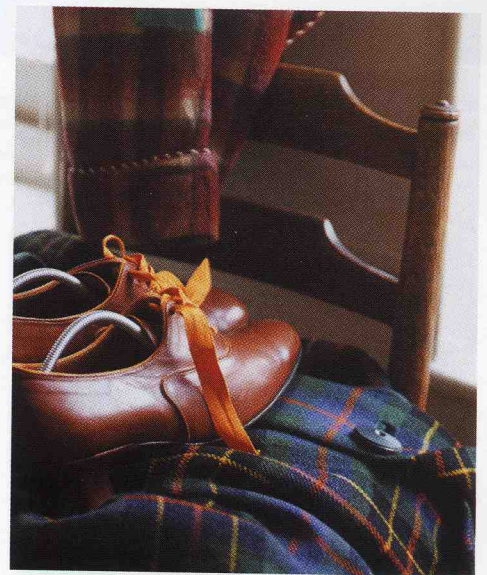
Since the walls are wood-paneled, Karen and Paul had to develop a special hanging system before they could display their collection of artwork. The best display is in the bedroom: a 1932 set of four bird posters by Clifford and Rosemary Ellis for London Underground hangs above the couple's bed – to Paul's knowledge, only the London Transport Museum and the Victoria & Albert Museum also have complete sets. "I like the scale of them and also the completely solid, beautifully chalky colour," says Paul.

AD ART

On another wall, a further 18 framed and closely spaced posters make a striking display. "It took years to create," Paul explains. "We bought one every two years or so and had them all over the house – until I realized we had enough to hang them all together." Remarkable as a whole and individually fascinating, these works now tell another story over and above what they each depict: the development from early commercial art

to what is now known as 'graphic design'. Most of the furniture is originally from Heals. "The store was about furnishing the garden suburbs," explains Paul. "The art market pooh-pooched this sort of design because it was mass-produced, industrially organized – but this meant it was cheaper." Pieces of post-war Scandinavian or metal furniture complete the look.

"I feel the 20th century has been about the arts trying to enhance the life of the ordinary people, not just the privileged classes," says Paul. "We love all of these beautiful objects that we own, but their cultural value is far greater than their monetary worth, and collecting them has been an antidote to the quick-fix approach that abounds today. It's a form of gardening, really, a slow, nurturing process that has taken 25 years."



INFORMATION FILE

Karen and Paul have recently relocated their business to Rennies Seaside Modern in Folkstone, Kent. For further details on the vintage art and furniture they offer call 01303 242 427 or visit www.rennart.co.uk.

USEFUL CONTACTS

- Christie's South Kensington 020 7930 6074 or www.christies.com
- The Conran Shop 020 7589 7401 or www.conran.co.uk