

Everything old is new again as the Johnston Collection gets a fresh set of eyes

The latest reimagining of this intriguing house-museum owes something to *Antiques Roadshow*.

By Ray Edgar

March 7, 2016 – 2.43pm

In silver shoes and check jacket, interior designer Paul Hecker cuts a dandyish figure amid the Georgian and Regency furniture of the Johnston Collection. Standing in the drawing room of the East Melbourne house-museum, Hecker addresses the guides who will relate to the public his firm's vision for the newly rehung collection. He is as candid as his clothes.

"Everything I know about old furniture I've gleaned from *Antiques Roadshow*," Hecker breezily admits. Which is to say knowing next to nothing about the actual objects. What the popular British program teaches its massive international audience is the value of surprise and a good story.



A Hecker Guthrie cutlery arrangement at William Johnston's Collection. ADAM LUTTICK, LUTS PHOTOGRAPHY

The guides laugh appreciatively. They, too, are well versed in William Johnston's Gatsby-esque tale of reinvention. The son of a bootmaker and scullery maid, Johnston left behind his humble Lilydale beginnings to work as a window dresser at Buckley and Nunn department store before forging a successful career as an antiques dealer scouring the post-war world for covetable artefacts and accumulating an extensive property portfolio. Upon his death in 1986 the properties were sold to fund the Johnston Collection trust, the collection culled to focus on the Georgian period, and some 1300 antiques bequeathed to the state.

"We're reading him as a retailer who liked the idea of display," says Hecker.





Milliner Richard Nylon's quirky rehang of the Johnston Collection.

In Hecker Guthrie's hands, Fairhall's stately rooms have been transformed into an emporium, the objects arranged in circular patterns and "Noah's ark" assemblages of pairs spiralling from small Staffordshire figurines to large ceramic vases, with specially designed tags hanging from each group as if for sale once again.

Despite his love of finely crafted objects, Johnston wasn't possessive about them, says collection director Louis Le Vaillant. "A dinner party was a sales opportunity. If you admired something you could purchase it."

"What's on display is what's left over," adds Hecker.

Nevertheless Le Vaillant regards what's on display as "the most significant single collection of Georgian, Regency and Louis XV in a public house-museum in Australasia".



Fashion designers Romance Was Born embraced the opulence of the Johnston Collection.

Alongside the National Gallery of Victoria, the Johnston Collection furnishes the private apartments and some public areas of Government House.

For Hecker Guthrie, one of Australia's most awarded interior design firms, the challenge is dealing in antiques. "We've worked with plenty of period houses, but always with contemporary furniture," says Hecker.



In the Johnston Collection – as perhaps with all museums – demystifying art and design underlies the curatorial approach. But how does an organisation achieve it?

The interior designers are the latest in a long line of creatives – among them artist Rosslynd Piggott, fashion designers Romance Was Born and milliner Richard Nylon – invited to guest-curate the Johnston collection. The Australian Ballet's artistic director, David McAllister, redesigned 10 rooms, each based on a different ballet. The display won a Victorian Museums award in 2014.

Spectacularly immersive exhibition designs that emulate the life, inspiration and studio of artists such as Monet or Dali help capture the public's imagination. For smaller institutions with permanent collections, the need to remain interesting and relevant is a constant challenge. Many smaller museums "reinvent" their collections by using guest curators.

"The leader of this movement to 'democratise' museums was the Brooklyn Museum," says Le Vaillant. "They were one of the first institutions to invite outsiders to rehang permanent displays and instigate the movement away from the traditional art curator's ideas around prestige and elitism in the presentation and interpretation of public collections. In the UK a number of cultural institutions and stately homes – such as the Bowes Museum, Chatsworth House and Waddesdon Manor – have also followed this trend."

Indeed Johnston wanted the public to experience objects as he had. That's why there are no ropes and no wall texts. Hecker Guthrie happily oblige Johnston's non-conformity. Instead of juxtaposing old and new to produce creative tension, Hecker Guthrie treated museum pieces irreverently, recreating the rooms of a working dealer. Tables are stacked like a back room storage area. Rooms are filled with disassembled Egyptian beds, rugs wrap furnishings as if just brought through customs (a technique used to avoid duties on rugs) and drawers are filled with chandelier parts. Not only is it visually arresting, it draws viewers closer into the objects, says Hecker: "You see how the objects are constructed and see them with a different perspective."

***Hecker Guthrie Rearranges William Johnston's Collection* runs until June 28; bookings at johnstoncollection.org**
