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## ARTICLES

# Hidden Arts: Discover Melbourne's Secret Collection of Unique Fine Art



It's hard to categorise the **Johnston Collection**. In fact, it's best not to try. Just go with the flow and experience the delight of visiting this most unusual exhibition house. Don't go looking for the address, either: it's secret. The mysteries begin with the arrival arrangements and revelations unfold with each very personal tour. The Johnston Collection is an eclectic array of fine and decorative arts housed in Fairhall, the Melbourne home of its benefactor, antiques dealer William Johnston. Tours are pre-booked online and visitors are met at a designated point and transported to the nearby house. While the reason is to preserve the privacy of residents of this elegant inner-city Melbourne suburb, the result is a suitably mysterious curtain-raiser to a surprising exhibition.

With no walk-ins possible, it's guaranteed that you'll enjoy tours with a small group of like-minded visitors: there can only be a maximum of 22 people in the house for any session, divided into three groups, each with their own guide. Tours can operate with as few as two guests.



The Melbourne-born Johnston began collecting as a boy and became an internationally successful dealer, discreetly buying antiques and art from the country-house gentry in post-War Britain before moving on to colonial-era India. He collected with wit and smarts and lived among those treasures he hadn't yet sold. With no heirs, his vision became to preserve a collection that would continue to inspire, entertain and be relevant for lovers of beautiful things long into the future.

His collection concentrates on the Georgian, Regency and Louis XV periods, and the stories behind each and every piece are described in loving detail by the guides. The magic comes from the way the collection is kept fresh and relevant: A programme of brilliantly conceived exhibitions, lectures, dinners and events continues to breathe contemporary art and crafts into the house.





The Johnston is a place “for audiences and artists to engage with our collection in new and different ways, and to help us to understand his pieces and enjoy them more,” says long-time director and curator Louis Le Vaillant. “The artists who work with us know that all art is made and designed over time, so what we do is make old things new again.” Johnston’s antiques are “a collection to be inspired by, and those objects continue to inform makers and artists and the way that we think about those objects today.”

The genius of Johnston for Le Vaillant and modern artists and makers is that his will specifically called for an “exhibition house”. “He never used the word ‘historic house’ or ‘house museum’,” says Le Vaillant. “It’s given us a lot of flexibility and freedom.”





Last year's *Animal Kingdom* exhibition juxtaposed animalistic pieces and artworks from the collection with fantastic creations from seven young Melbourne artists and makers. Each room offered an explosive display of imagination, flamboyantly bridging old and new.

Kate Rohde's sculptures in the drawing room were a psychedelic festival of resin meeting rococo. She's exhibited here before, and will again. "It's always a really fun experience," says Rohde. "The volunteers are so passionate — and it's the best morning tea you'll ever have when you're setting up!"

The first project she did for here in 2012 went on to "permeate back into my work" she says. "On my first visit, I noticed all these zoomorphic, clawed pieces and took lots of photos, and that inspired the work that ended up being exhibited in *Animal Kingdom*, so it was quite an influential experience."





*Animal Kingdom* was sculptural artist's Troy Emery's first time exhibiting here, and he also found it a treasure trove of inspiration as Le Vaillant took him through the storage collection. "I was able to look through the collection and pick out things that would speak to my work," says Emery. "I had two sprawling animals — fantasy creatures, one covered with a silky gold fabric and one with pearlescent lavender loops. I ended up in a room with these amazing rococo tables as plinths, and it was brilliant. I wish I could exhibit my work like that all the time."

*William Johnston altered his Victorian house by adding a new façade to create the appearance of a Georgian house. The Victorian National Trust has its roots in this area of Melbourne, and the [InterContinental Melbourne The Rialto](#) has been lauded for its fine architectural preservation. After visiting the Johnston Collection, guests might find themselves examining their hotel's neo-gothic architecture and historic façade with new appreciation. It's a pleasant walk back through the Fitzroy Gardens, an urban oasis established in 1848, a few decades before the hotel's original construction. A specially crafted cocktail in [Club InterContinental](#), overlooking Collins Street from the fourth floor, is the perfect place to toast the vision of those who've preserved Melbourne's history with love and inspiration.*



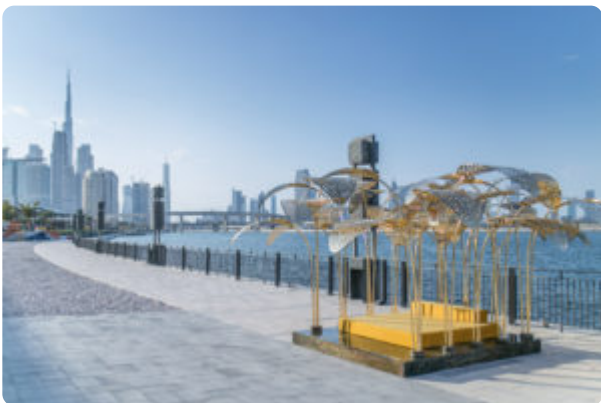
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