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THE WORLD OF INTERIORS





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Richard's studio, which is at the front of the house on the first floor. All the work facing his desk is his own. Behind the door hang other prints and drawings alongside two owls: one stuffed, the other drawn by a friend. Richard hasn't redone the floor since he covered it with grey boat paint in the 1950s



Top: Richard is particularly proud of his stork – a plastic garden ornament he assembled himself. Above left: a small bookshelf on the door displays his collection of 1930s Beatrix Potter books. Above right: once a secondary studio, the downstairs sitting room is fitted with a sink. On the washing machine, in whose porthole a view of Venice can be seen, stand pots by Theresa Edwards. Opposite: Richard encrusted his mother's plain dressing-table mirror with shells before hanging it in the hall. Above it is a child's lamb mask, bought from a party shop





Top: a dab hand at what he calls 'hasty marbling', Richard has renewed fittings and furniture across the house, including the bathroom's tub and fireplace (above left), upon which is a hoard of Roger & Gallet soapboxes. The scent of their former contents still lingers. Above right: a terrier painted by Judith Downie peers into the drawing room. On the far wall, a pair of antlers makes for a witty response to an Italian sign declaring a hunting ban on the door at left. Opposite: a piece of broken Staffordshire stands on a reclaimed basin in the downstairs loo









IN THE MIDDLE of all the expensive real estate in Primrose Hill stands one house that is something of a puzzle. Part of a once-smart Victorian terrace, it remains resolutely ungentrified. Downstairs, blinds made of mattress ticking are permanently drawn. In the window, two notices, one in French, the other in Italian, bring a touch of *Alice in Wonderland* to the house. The French sign peremptorily states that the house is closed '*dimanche et jours de fête*', and that tradesmen must make deliveries before ten in the morning. The Italian one sounds more sinister, warning of a '*gatto mordace*' – a cat that bites. None of these things makes you any the wiser as to what really goes on inside this mysterious place.

Unsurprisingly, neither of the way-out messages is intended to be taken too seriously. But the house does have a secret. For more than 40 years it has been home to the artist Richard Beer, who, as well as being a great painter and printmaker, an inspired raconteur and a faithful friend, rarely fails to see the sunny side of things. Over the years he has made his house the setting for a collection unlike any other.

Like many, it began by chance. Back in the 1960s, after studying at the Slade, Richard was making ends meet by teaching etching at Chelsea College of Arts, and was already living in the house with a friend. The two of them shared joint ownership, which was fine until the friend got married and Richard had to buy him out. In the end it was Richard's widowed mother who found the money by selling her cottage in Hampstead Garden Suburb and moving into the basement flat, where she lived happily until her death 18 years later.

But Richard still had a problem – what to do with the rest of the house, which was cold and empty. Help, however, was at hand. The 1950s and 1960s were the golden days of the British junk shop, and just round the corner was the Inverness

Street Market, where a dealer called Reg, who specialised in house clearances, sold everything on his stall at knock-down prices. Richard went to town, buying almost anything he could afford that would cheer up his house. He'd also travel across the country in search of bargain booty (Norwich was a top destination): an old enamelled advertising panel for Colman's Mustard, a taxidermied fish or sundry defunct clocks that he couldn't afford to have mended, for example. The latter are still on show in the kitchen, proving that, in this house, time really does stand still.

He says he started to collect in earnest after being 'seduced by a sardine tin' at the Clignancourt *marché aux puces*, Paris's largest flea market. He was there with Anne Rees-Mogg, who also taught at Chelsea, and it was she who spotted a plaque advertising sardines and made him buy it. It still takes pride of place in the kitchen, alongside other brightly coloured cans.

From here, Richard's collection took off, together with his painting. He had always been a great draughtsman, and as he was obsessed with architecture, he began to spend his holidays abroad, sketching shops, cafés, churches and street scenes, along with anything else that caught his fancy. Once back home he would use the sketches as the basis for the etchings and large oil paintings that, along with his teaching, paid the bills.

Life was not always easy, and he never bothered too much with artistic fashions or publicity. But he had many friends, some of whom even bought his pictures, and he has resolutely continued to paint what he loves, particularly wherever the sun shines – especially Barcelona, Rome and Venice. But his true passion is for the Baroque architecture of southern Italy and Sicily, and in the depths of the London winter I have always found his paintings a wonderful reminder that places such as Lecce and Ragusa still exist.

But one should not forget Richard's ever-expanding assemblage of trinkets and treasures, which has kept pace with his painting and now all but fills the house. Many of the exhibits – like the small wooden Pinocchio in the bathroom or the resplendent figure of the *carabiniere* in the sitting room – speak Italian. So, presumably, does Cesare the cement retriever, whom the artist discovered in a builder's yard near Siena. Others, such as the Staffordshire bust of Neptune or the impressive picture entitled *Saved*, depicting a St Bernard rescuing a child from drowning, are resolutely British.

As sole curator of his own museum, Richard knows where everything is and whence it came. And as every object is associated with a place or person, each one deposits something into his memory bank, on which he draws to avoid loneliness.

I once asked him if he'd made any provision for the collection after his death and received an uncharacteristically sharp reply: 'For me the house is the setting for my life, and the objects are the scenery. So when I die and the performance is over, the scenery will simply be dispersed as it would be in the theatre.' It would be a dreadful pity if it were ■

'Richard Beer' is at Abbott & Holder, 30 Museum St, London WC1 (020 7637 3981; abbottandholder.co.uk), 27 April-7 May

Previous pages: the kitchen is testament to the painter's skill at arranging his myriad treasures. Among his greatest finds are the £5 cooker (Elizabeth David owned the same model, he says proudly), the ten-shilling stuffed fish and the clock above it ('It looks like a pork pie!'). This page, top: a paper lobster scurries behind a lamp fashioned from the flour bin of an Easiwork cabinet. Opposite: Richard bought his Thonet chairs for 12s 6d from a church hall. Originally a 'nasty' brown, he repainted them matt black to match his grandmother's table



FULERI

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Sagapita S.L. **Espadan**

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VERMOUTH BIANCO
MARTINI & ROSSI
TORINO

CINZANO
VERMOUTH

RICARD

CHOCOLAT
PUPIER
LE MEILLEUR CHOCOLAT FRANÇAIS

BACI
ITALIA

Huile d'olive