

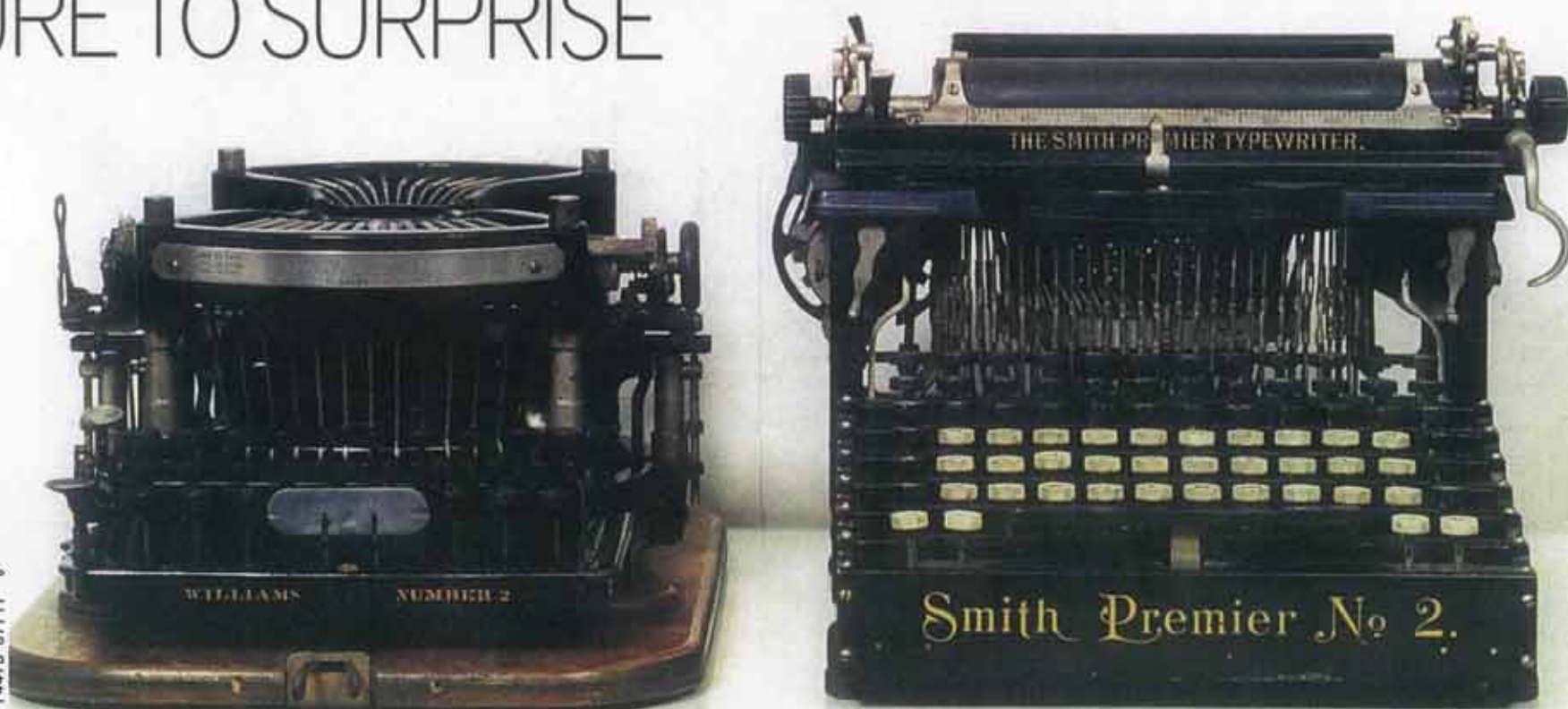
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ART AUCTION

THE INTERNATIONAL MAGAZINE FOR
ART COLLECTORS FEBRUARY 2007



AGAINST TYPE COLLECTIONS
SURE TO SURPRISE



James Spina's vintage typewriters.



OBSESSIONS

This page: Collector Barbara Paca sits in front of one of the William van der Hagen paintings that hang in her East Village office. The panels were originally made in 1731 for the duke of Dorset's party at Dublin Castle. Opposite, clockwise from top left: A book containing a 1739 van der Hagen painting of a party at the castle with some snapshots of the panels Paca carried around for years; three details of various panels.



DATE WITH DESTINY

IT TOOK BARBARA PACA A DECADE TO ACQUIRE A SET OF 18TH-CENTURY PAINTINGS BY WILLIAM VAN DER HAGEN THAT SHE SAW IN THE ATTIC OF AN ENGLISH CASTLE. BUT SHE FINALLY GOT HER MAN.

BY TED LOOS PHOTOGRAPHS BY SEAN DONNOLA

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OBSESSIONS

ON HER FIRST DATE WITH PHILIP LOGAN, the man she eventually married, Barbara Paca did something unusual. Seated in the elegant tearoom of New York's Carlyle hotel, she took a bunch of snapshots out of her coat pocket and handed them to him.

If they had been pictures of relatives, or her house, or even a pet, it might have been less surprising. But these were of an obscure set of 18th-century wall hangings by a painter named William van der Hagen. Paca, a much sought-after landscape designer, did not own these works—they were stashed away in the attic of a grand castle, the property of a famous English lord—but she very much wanted to possess them someday.

It took her almost a decade from the time she first saw them, but Paca got what she wanted. The 13 extant panels (out of 15 originals) today hang in the East Village office that she and Logan, an architect, now share.

Well-painted and infused with rich detail, the panels depict a series of fantastic Roman interiors: Busts on pedestals display eccentric faces, and coffered ceilings pass through archways offering views of grand courtyards. They look like scenic backdrops to a play in which slightly unhinged great men debate the issues of the day over a bottle of whiskey.

That Paca succeeded in securing these paintings didn't surprise Logan, who recognized her single-mindedness and tenacity early on. "I knew she'd get them someday," he says.

Lean and long, with striking red hair that is often swept up in a bun, Paca is an intellectual who can discourse on topics ranging from art history and psychology to international politics. She treats

the world as if it had been laid out for her to study. "I'm a nerd," she says. That's borne out by her academic credentials, which include a fellowship at the Institute for Advanced Study in Princeton, New Jersey (where she studied the iconography of statues in 18th-century gardens) and a Fulbright Scholarship.

But Paca also embraces people and ideas on the margins of society. "Since I was a child, I've always had a high tolerance for very intelligent people who are not quite right," she says. It's a trait that helps explain why she fell so hard for these artworks and the man who painted them.

Paca's obsession began in 1996, when she was in England. She got a call from her friend Tim Knox, who is now director of the Sir John Soane Museum in London but at the time oversaw the collections of Britain's powerful National Trust. "He said, 'There's something strange up at Knole Castle,'" Paca recalls. "You should come take a look."

Knole Castle is the centuries-old home of the Sackvilles, a family that was headed by the duke of Dorset until the title died out and that included among its more illustrious members Vita Sackville-West (1892–1962), the poet and lover of Virginia Woolf. Paca couldn't help but be intrigued. "Theirs is among the largest castles in England," she says. "After the queen and the National Trust, they have one of the biggest art collections."

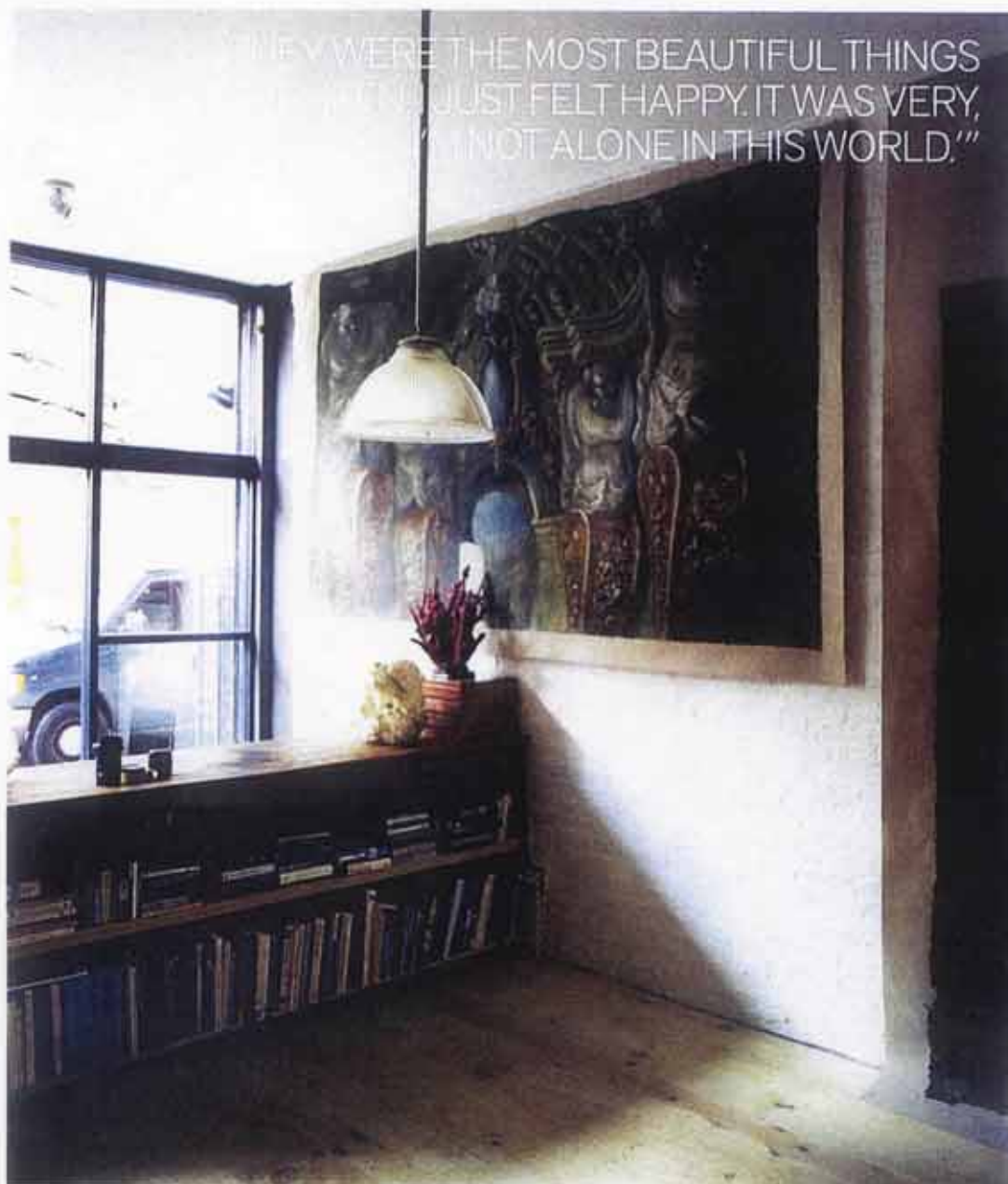
Paca arranged a visit to Knole through Knox and then followed him through the castle's labyrinth of rooms—it is said to boast 365, one for every day of the year, plus a staircase for every week and a courtyard for every month. Finally, up a steep ladder in an attic room were van der Hagen's paintings. "They were the most beautiful things I'd ever seen," she says. "I just felt happy. It was very 'I'm not alone in this world.'"

Overwhelmingly enchanted by the artworks, Paca went far beyond what most aesthetes would dare.

"Somehow I decided they were mine and I had just loaned them to the Sackvilles," she says.

Knox had been sure Paca would be intrigued because she had spent years researching the work of Samuel and Anthony Charnley, two Irish artists who had been students of van der Hagen's. As it turned out, everything about the man who painted the panels seemed to appeal to Paca. »

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Left: Paca says she gets amazed comments from passersby who see the murals. "I sometimes tell people I painted them," she says. Right: The painting in the medallion is thought to be a portrait of the party-loving duke.



These two views show how van der Hagen's paintings can dominate a room—and why Paca wanted them in her office, not her apartment, which is just next door. Van der Hagen's extensive theatrical training can be seen in the panels' stagelike scenes.

They were intended to be merely temporary hangings on the castle's interior walls.

The party was such a success that the duke threw another two years later, and the paintings were rehung for the occasion. Then they disappeared for some time. The duke must have taken them back to Knoke, because about 50 years before Paca

saw the hangings, a member of the Sackville family rescued them from one of the outbuildings on the castle grounds, and they ended up languishing in an attic.

After Paca decided they were rightfully hers, she wrote the then Lord Sackville, an elderly man, asking to buy them. "It was a one-sentence letter," she recalls: "I want your paintings." The answer was a firm no. That lord died, and two years ago, Paca wrote to Robert Sackville, the current heir in charge of the family fortune.

"We just really got along," she says. She also enlisted the help of some influential friends from the British conservation world. "They told Robert, 'Listen, this girl's really crazy. You should let her have them. She'll just bother you.'"

The deal clincher was Paca's desire to preserve the works as a set. "I told him that I'm never going to break them up, and I'm never going to sell them," she says. In the end, Sackville insisted that she pay slightly less than the figure they'd originally agreed on. Paca ended up spending more to clean the hangings than she did to buy them.

Now that she has the paintings, what will she do with them? "I want to keep them here and just look at them," says Paca, who has hung them in her glass-fronted ground-floor office instead of in her home, which is just next door, lest they overwhelm her domestic life and her other artworks. "They inspire me. They remind me of all of the different disciplines that are part of being a landscape architect."

Someone who has been this focused on obtaining an artwork generally moves on to a new obsession, which has the potential to be the best one yet. But Paca doesn't believe she fits the mold of compulsive collector any better than she fits other molds. "I'll never find anything like these," she says of the paintings. "Owning them was meant to be." ±

Granted, not too much is known about van der Hagen. He was Dutch, worked in Ireland for about two decades and died around 1745. He gained fame as a landscape and marine painter, but he also worked as a scenery painter in the Dublin theater, an experience that clearly influenced the Knoke Castle wall hangings.

Van der Hagen created the works for a grand party given in 1731 by the first duke of Dorset, the forebear of the current Lord Sackville. At the time, the duke was seated in Dublin Castle, serving as lord lieutenant of Ireland, which was then under British rule.

"I think he was bored," says Paca. "For him it was like being exiled to New Jersey. So he commissioned a party." The duke got his friend Edward Lovett Pearce, the great Irish Palladian architect, to arrange the party, and Pearce hired van der Hagen and some other artists.

These were no ordinary Irish painters. Most of them probably belonged to the Hellfire Club, a group of libertines considered "horrible, terrible blasphemers in their day," says Paca. Van der Hagen in particular was known for his carousing and misbehavior. "He would paint on the tablecloths for the barmaids in exchange for drinks," says Paca, adding that when she heard this anecdote, "that's when I fell in love with him."

Van der Hagen may have tipped, but he was erudite, and Paca can spend hours analyzing the content of the paintings, especially what she believes to be sophisticated depictions of madness and melancholia in the busts' faces (one topic of her academic studies). "This is intellectual history," she says, pointing to her prize. "These statues are not just decorations."

Paca speculates that because of the rush to get the duke's fête ready, van der Hagen had to execute the paintings quickly—thus their charmingly dashed-off look. The 15 sections were then carefully sewn together and backed with linen.