

# Royal Academy of Arts: Charles Saumarez Smith reveals his favourite design haunts

The chief executive of the Royal Academy of Arts talks about London's design scene from architecture to technology and his favourite Grayson Perry print...

## **Stepney based: Charles Saumarez Smith lives in Mile End Road.**

Art historian and museum director Charles Saumarez Smith CBE, 61, is chief executive of the Royal Academy of Arts. Before that, he was director of the National Gallery from 2002 to 2007, and as director of the National Portrait Gallery from 1994 to 2002, he redoubled visitor figures by staging exhibitions by contemporary photographers including Annie Leibovitz, Bruce Weber and Mario Testino.

## **Where I live**

My wife Romilly and I moved to our current house in Stepney in June 2000. When I was at the V&A in my late twenties, we bought an 18th-century terrace house in Limehouse, and lived there for 16 years. But then in 1998, as our sons were getting older, I met [gardener and historian] Todd Longstaffe-Gowan at a Christmas party. He told me he had bought one of two properties in Mile End Road from the Spitalfields Trust, which was restoring them to save them from demolition, and he encouraged us to get involved. One was an old exhaust pipe garage, built to drive straight through it. It was a complete wreck. The top floor was restored and the house knitted back together.

## **My home**

The interior work was mainly done by my wife, who is a jewellery designer. She wanted to retain the historic fabric, which we did with the Spitalfields Trust and the advice of their surveyor. But we've not furnished it authentically — firstly, because we don't have 18th-century furniture and secondly, because my wife's style is to use historical features, but in an imaginative and inventive way.

## **Colours and textures**

Yes, we do colour. We have a miscellaneous collection of essentially inherited furniture. Romilly's grandfather worked for a firm of interior decorators in the Thirties and he acquired some of the furniture from a client who did not pay his bill, so that's in our sitting room. The dining room has bits and pieces that I inherited.

## **My dream property**

Now we have a larger 18th-century house, I don't hanker to move. Our house, even though it's on Mile End Road, is equivalent to houses in Smith Square. Occasionally, I look at houses up in Hampstead and think how nice it would be to live in Downshire Hill.

## **Most coveted object**

I have a very nice small wooden goblet which my wife gave me for my birthday from M Jones Antiques in Beaumaris, Anglesey.

**Work of art:** Charles admires Grayson Perry and bought one of his prints after sitting on his table the night he won the Turner Prize

## **Favourite object**

The thing I'm most pleased to own is one of Grayson Perry's prints, which I bought from Victoria Miro. When Grayson won the Turner Prize, he created a pot decorated with images of all the people who were sitting alongside him at the table that day, and we happened to be among them. Not surprisingly, the pot wasn't affordable, but I am pleased I bought one of his prints instead. I'm a great admirer of Grayson and I think doing the Reith Lectures was very good.

## **My escape**

I'm very keen on the Regent's Canal and Victoria Park/Broadway Market, and walking both

alongside the canal towards Islington and then back down to Home House. I've also been exploring a bit more up to London Fields, Hoxton and Haggerston. Previously, I used to regard Victoria Park as the boundary, but I've now realised there's a whole life beyond. We have friends who lived in Balls Pond Road in the Eighties, and I thought it was like outer space, but now, thanks to the Overground line — which is unbelievably good at connecting all these boroughs — I know you can go up to Dalston, and that Dalston and Stoke Newington are rather wonderful.

**Concrete hit:** Charles Saumarez Smith has developed an interest in brutalist architecture, typified by the Barbican arts centre and flats.

### **Amazing architecture**

I wrote my PhD on Castle Howard, and it probably inspired my interest in English baroque architecture. But I have acquired a greater interest in post-war buildings, which I was taught to detest as a student. My son writes about Sixties architecture and he's converted me to the glories of brutalism. The Barbican is incredibly impressive as a building.

### **Favourite Restaurant**

St John Bread & Wine in Spitalfields.

**Dine in:** Keeper's House restaurant at the Royal Academy

### **Cultural hotspot**

In terms of the dynamics of London, I think Redchurch Street in Shoreditch is a sort-of hotspot, because that is an area where you can feel the changes of the past 10 or 15 years of the East End, from being fairly run-down and seedy with a Sunday market. I enjoy walking along the street, which has a new, incredibly smart, special pasta shop.

In terms of the art market, it's odd. The smaller galleries had to move out of Cork Street when their leases ended and it's not quite clear what the effect will be in the longer term, except that you can feel that a lot of the art market is moving back from the East End because they need to be near their clients. I feel that Mayfair is now beginning to recover its authority as the centre of the art market.

### **Technology**

I'm very keen on my Samsung mobile phone, mainly because I've discovered it takes very good photographs. And I've become a very enthusiastic blogger because of the ability both to write and take pictures easily on that single small piece of technology.

**Small and personal:** Dulwich Picture Gallery in Gallery Road, SE21, is a favourite place to while away a weekend

### **Favourite museum**

I like the Fitzwilliam in Cambridge and the Ashmolean in Oxford, as well as Sir John Soane's Museum and the Dulwich Picture Gallery in London — I like the smaller, more personal ones. The arts Lottery and Heritage Lottery Fund have been fantastic for museums.

### **Secret shop**

My current favourite is a shop called J Glinert in Wilton Way, E8. I bought an outsize Jamaican cheese grater from there. Near where we live, in Wilton Way and Columbia Road, there are these very nice shops which just stock things that are selected very arbitrarily.

### **Favourite gallery**

I love both Tate Britain and Tate Modern, the British Museum, the National Gallery and Hayward. Then, in terms of the commercial galleries, I generally go to what's on at White Cube and Victoria Miro fairly consistently. Cork Street is relatively convenient for us, too.

**Sweet stuff:** Broadway Market, a favourite weekend haunt.

**Typical Saturday**

Until recently, I've gone running every Saturday morning, but I'm going to make it Sunday, partly because I like to use Saturday to explore. We'll often go to an exhibition. I like to catch up on my reading. I used Heywood Hill [bookshop] all the time, because my brother ran it, and now I like Broadway Bookshop in Broadway Market. I have an aspiration to complete the house by putting the library on the top.

By Liz Hoggard, *Homes & Property*, 10 June 2015.