

Cabinets of CURIOSITY

Three hundred years after Thomas Chippendale was born, two of the cabinetmaker's admirers—LORD SNOWDON and SIMON PHILLIPS—met to discuss his legacy

Photographs by JAKE WALTERS

At Masterpiece 2018, the entire stand of leading English furniture dealer Ronald Phillips was devoted to the work of Thomas Chippendale, in celebration of the tricentennial of the world's most famous cabinetmaker. After the fair, Simon Phillips, proprietor of Ronald Phillips, and Lord Snowdon, founder of furniture maker Linley and honorary chairman of Christie's, met in the former's gallery to discuss the legacy of Chippendale.

Phillips – The furniture was either by Chippendale or attributed to Chippendale. This celebration was 10 years in the making so we were pleased with the result, and so it seemed were our clients as the selling was very good. Chippendale is arguably the best of the best, the name that everybody has heard of, and the major pieces he made for the stately homes of England bear comparison with the greatest works of art and architecture. However, his most influential work was his book of drawings, *The Gentleman and Cabinet-Maker's Director*, that everybody follows to this day.

Snowdon – From a furniture maker's perspective, I look at the *Director* because the proportions of the designs remain very relevant today. He is still the master—whether it's in my summer school or in the workshops—so all we can do is try and learn. Whether it's making the correct joints, the correct carvings or upholstery, he knew the best methods. You learn from that, then make contemporary pieces based on the proportions or the ideas of the past, always utilizing history to go forwards. His principles remain valid today. Having sat

on sofas that he made over two and half centuries ago, I know that they're incredibly comfortable; they work ergonomically as much as aesthetically. They have relevance today because they're functional pieces.

P – That's one thing that everyone forgets: these things were functional. The fact that they've lasted so long as well shows the quality. They have stood the test of time because they were the best, and without a doubt they still are. You pull out a drawer of one of these pieces and you could have made it yesterday, couldn't you?

S – Well, I couldn't make it as well as him, but there is no doubt that quality endures. I go fairly regularly to Dumfries House, one of the great houses that Chippendale made furniture for, where there is a lovely architect's table. You open the drawers and it's exactly as it was when it was made. The precision and perfection is such that it hasn't dated. His work is still very pleasing to the eye: the delicious padouk cabinet in Dumfries House, in the blue drawing room, is just a lovely object. The Dumfries commission is the largest and most complete surviving from his *Director* period.

P – The Dumfries House collection is sensational, and it was going to be sold at Christie's. But Prince Charles got a consortium together and it was pulled at the last minute. I think he did a brilliant job; it was fantastic that it was kept together.

S – But it was down to the wire. There were trucks going down the A1 with the furniture in it, on its way to be exhibited.

Lord Snowdon, honorary chairman of Christie's (left) and Simon Phillips, photographed on July 25, 2018, at the Ronald Phillips showroom in Bruton Street, W1



P – Had the collection been sold, it would have been such a loss to the nation. Chippendale was one of the greatest artists this country has ever produced. The tercentenary has certainly created interest, but I think that it was a disgrace that nothing was done in London. There was an exhibition in Leeds, close to his birthplace in Otley; the country houses put something on, but, apart from what we did at Masterpiece and the sale of some important pieces at Christie's, London did nothing.

S – The great thing about what we did at Christie's and you did at Masterpiece was to enable people to get close to the pieces in a way that would not have been possible in a museum show. The opportunity to sit on the Brocket Hall settees on your stand, and experience them as they were intended, was unique. It was also an opportunity for new, young collectors to come and re-evaluate what they knew about the subject. At Christie's we also had a huge influx of people coming from all over the world. I was talking to people in baseball caps from China and Japan who were absolutely fascinated by the design and the precision.

P – It is amazing to think that these pieces have survived a quarter of a millennium in such fine condition and the reason why the furniture is today still as good as the

day it was made is down to the careful choice of timbers used for the construction. Chippendale was very proud of his stock of exotic timbers. It was a big blow to Junior when the timbers were sold off in auctions triggered by the financial crisis following the death of Thomas Chippendale Senior.

S – That would have been a disaster for the business. As someone who has worked with wood for longer than I care to admit, I understand how crucial materials are and with Chippendale you get what you pay for.

P – The door of our brass-mounted fustic secrétaire cabinet is a good example. Chippendale uses exotic black rosewood as the constructional timber. Other workshops would use less expensive material such as mahogany or even Honduras cedar.

S – Working with the best materials is the greatest luxury. Superior, correctly selected woods enable the workshop to execute fine designs more accurately. Rosewood has exceptional strength allowing the cabinet-maker to produce a thinner, more elegant door frame. In addition, rosewood distorts very little over time.

P – What fascinates me are the things you don't see. We had a secrétaire à abattant with original Chippendale weights. He used

this ingenious lead weight counterbalance that made opening the drop-down writing surface simply effortless—you could operate it with a fingertip. No other workshop did it and no-one would do that today.

S – There's no technical reason why you couldn't do it. The technical know-how exists. It is just a question of whether people are prepared to pay for it.

P – Chippendale was in fact one of the most expensive cabinetmakers of his time. He was questioned about his pricing by many of his clients on many occasions. Letters, preserved and published by his biographer Christopher Gilbert, are evidence. Today, the original bill adds value because then you get absolute proof that it is by Chippendale. But it is amazing the history that these things come with, like the aforementioned secrétaire à abattant. When we took it to pieces to repair it, we found letters that had slipped down the back so then we could trace its history. They are still in the top drawer of the piece and they'll go with the piece to whomever buys it.

S – So it is still available?

P – Yes, but if you want it, you will have to be quick as there's a lot of measuring going on on the other side of the pond! □

Simon Phillips (right) in conversation with David Snowden on a sofa made by Thomas Chippendale for Brocket Hall

