

When the days start to lengthen the house is at its most beautiful. On those evenings, a gentle breeze blowing through the windows, it just begs to be explored, strolling from room to room, an *aperitivo* in hand, accompanied by the sounds of Nina Simone or Monteverdi. The house is full of sounds, the old floorboards squeak, the paneled doors creak, the stairs groan and there is the continuous singsong of a multitude of birds, inhabiting the trees in the courtyard and along the canal. The effects of light are infinite, changing with the seasons and the times of day: the setting sun bounces off the gently rippling water of the canal, creating sparkling highlights on the ceilings.

It has been three years since our renovation of the house was completed, in sleepy yet beautiful Gouda. After a hundred years of blissful neglect, it is among the most authentic Dutch houses in existence. Although a house has stood on this location since the 13th century, which has been known as "*De Roos*" (the rose) since at least the 17th century, all one sees now dates from around 1740, when it was transformed in accordance with the rules of the reigning Baroque by the town's postmaster general, who conducted his business here. His family lived underneath these ceilings for decades and we imagine them promenading about on the cool Carrara marble slabs of the immensely long hallway, just as we still do today.

We were instantly swept away during our very first visit, having so far looked in vain for a suitable period home to present the 17th- and 18th-century pictures we collect and also deal in. There are stuccoed ceilings with Classical goddesses and putti, a majestic oak staircase made by local carpenters and delightful chimney pieces, carved from marbles with poetic names like Rouge Royal and Blue Turquin. Even the sash windows with their wobbly greenish glass in the staircase hall are original, ingeniously providing a filtered light to internal rooms. In addition to paintings, we are passionate about decorative arts of the 18th century. Every piece blossoms beyond its inherent natural beauty within these interiors, while the objects repay the compliment by enhancing the architecture. Now that we regrettably cannot absorb

a single large piece of furniture anymore, focus has shifted to collecting smaller objects, such as glass, silver and porcelain. Quality and craftsmanship are essential. They can be found in both the great and also more humble objects: from monumental mythological paintings to lovingly repaired brass kitchen utensils, it is their authenticity and honesty that appeals to us.

Every space in the house has its own unique character and color. The upstairs tapestry room, painted in three shades of purple in the characteristic Dutch manner, is an ode to the period of William and Mary, circa 1700, who ruled both Holland and England. Its three tall windows overlook the canal, or rather the foliage of the ancient trees lining it, a screen of green, rhyming with the woven trees of the faded verdure tapestries.

The room mostly contains carved Baroque furniture, Auricular tables and blue-and-white porcelain, the unequalled whiteness of the Kangxi wares contrasting beautifully with the muted Gobelins. The walls in the most luxuriously finished rooms on the ground floor are densely covered with paintings, hung on opulently patterned damask. Rococo reigns in all her majestic curvaceousness in the red salon, while the blue dining room is filled with the elegant Neoclassical furniture of Louis XVI.

There is so much more, the unique and tall kitchen with its original cupboard wall with incorporated chimney, an example of Dutch efficiency, hung with 17th-century blue-and-white tiles from China and Delft alike; the intimate green and red library, mainly used in winter, lined with early books, covered in leather and vellum, and the atmospheric attic, accommodating the working library. Our bedroom and the adjoining slender bathroom, formerly a corridor, are dedicated to Empire, the walls hung with plaster casts and enormous gilt framed prints.

So far, the house has educated and enchanted us, and we hope it will continue to be equally generous for many years to come, while the paintwork fades and peels, the fabrics mellow and tear, and we keep wandering from room to room and watch the effects of light sparkle on the ceilings.

The Dutch Opulence

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