



# THE NEW GEORGIANA

The appealing designs of the Georgian period are enjoying a renaissance as designers and craftsmen adopt and adapt the style for our homes today

Did the Georgians make us who we are today? Undoubtedly. When Georg Ludwig, Elector of Hanover in Germany, became George I – our first constitutional monarch – exactly 300 years ago, it heralded the start of modern life as we know it. As demonstrated by the exhibition *Georgians Revealed: Life, Style and the Making of Modern Britain* at the British Library earlier this year, the Georgian dynasty – which gave us three further King Georges and lasted until the 1830s – saw a complete transformation of our cities and towns, our homes and gardens, and even our leisure time. From drinking tea





to following fashion, popular culture began its inexorable rise, and, for the emerging middle classes, conspicuous consumption became the name of the game. It would be fair to say that our politics, culture, commerce and society as a whole changed forever.

#### CELEBRATED REVIVAL

It is no wonder, then, that we find Georgian life and times – and, specifically, the architecture and interiors – so compelling. “I think it’s the most beautiful period of English history,” says Gillian Newberry of Bennison, which specialises in hand-printed fabrics based on eighteenth and nineteenth



century designs. “The designers, the craftsmanship, the furniture, the fabrics – it can fit in anywhere.” She is not alone in her views. Jonathan Sainsbury, founder of Jonathan Sainsbury Ltd, specialists in making furniture inspired by the eighteenth and nineteenth century, says: “Georgian style is considered one of quality and taste. People are building Georgian houses again, and not only adopting the interior style but also the lifestyle – open fires, huge kitchens, sitting at a table for supper rather than in front of the television. A Georgian house full of sofas and pictures is very cosy. You feel cocooned. It’s very comfortable living.”

Whilst Georgian could hardly be said to have been entirely out of fashion in recent decades, a more specific resurgence of interest seems to have begun in 2010, with the major exhibition *Three Classicists* at the Royal Institute of British Architects. Three young architects and designers – Ben Pentreath, George Saumarez Smith and Francis Terry – showed drawings and objects that demonstrated their passionate belief in a classical language of architecture, aided and abetted by a book and a series of talks and events. Fast-forward to the present day and the Georgians are seemingly everywhere, from *William Kent* at the V&A to *The First Georgians* at The Queen’s Gallery, Buckingham Palace (see ‘Find out more’ below). It appears to be part of a trend away from pared-down minimalism towards more intricate forms, more daring colours and lush, decorative surfaces. “Neo-classicism is incredibly beautiful,” says Max Rollitt, furniture maker, antiques dealer and interior decorator. “It has such a quality and balance; it’s very well thought-out. It creates these very grand pieces of architecture with something about them that’s so pleasing to the eye. We have wanted plain styles for such a long time, ▶

**LEFT** The sitting room in Ben Pentreath’s Dorset house, a former parsonage built in 1820, in which an underlying Englishness and sense of comfort prevail. Photograph by Jan Baldwin.

**ABOVE** Columns, beautiful plasterwork and elegant symmetry are characteristic of the Georgian style. Deep greens are also typical of the 18th century. A Dip In The Lake super emulsion, £39.50 for 2.5 litres, Fired Earth.





## DEFINING THE STYLE

At this point, it is worth taking a brief look at what we mean by the term 'Georgian style'. An era that lasted more than a century inevitably produced more than one all-encompassing and easy-to-define style. Whilst we instinctively think of Robert Adam and his Graeco-Roman architectural influences, all Doric and Ionic columns, dominating the latter part of the eighteenth century, there were a range of other styles that went in and out of fashion. As Julius Bryant, co-curator of *William Kent: Designing Georgian Britain*, explains: "The closer you get to Georgian style, the more diverse it becomes. It starts with Baroque, goes on to Palladian, then Rococo, then neo-classical, then Greek Revival. Perhaps the easiest way to define it is to say that it is not Victorian." However, despite the diversity of styles that come under the Georgian compass, it is possible, he says, to come to an overall idea of what Georgian style stands for. "The prevailing mood of the period is one of classical revival, of symmetry, order, balance, space and calm – in contrast to Victorian clutter. The centrepiece of a room would be a fireplace with a prominent mantelpiece, and then lovely floorboards, Turkish rugs, and furniture made from walnut and mahogany, with carved edges, stable and strong."

The eighteenth century, of course, was the era of the master cabinetmaker, and the well known names were Thomas Chippendale, who favoured the curves of Rococo mixed with Chinese and Gothic designs; George Hepplewhite, who produced a smooth and streamlined classicism; and, later, Thomas Sheraton, whose pattern books featured stricter, classical forms and straight lines. Decorative light fittings (great advances having been made in gas and oil lighting), fine plasterwork and intricate, ornamental mirrors were eye-catching features in high-ceilinged, beautifully proportioned rooms, their tall sash windows decorated with festoon blinds, draped curtains or, from the 1780s, French rod curtains that drew horizontally, the forerunners of modern ▶

## CLOCKWISE FROM ABOVE LEFT

This Georgian townhouse belongs to Will Fisher of Jamb, who relishes an eclectic mix of objects and the interactive nature of pieces that have been loved over generations.

Louis XIV's palace at Versailles had huge influence on grand houses in Europe. Versailles wall light in antiqued brass, from £154, Jim Lawrence.

In this 18th-century London townhouse by Max Rollitt, the entrance hall has been designed around a mid-18th century map of London.

An early Sheraton period mahogany serpentine sideboard, circa 1790, £8,750, Haughey Antiques, (member of LAPADA).

The Spitalfields Kitchen, from £40,000, Plain English.

but now I think there is room for more decoration in interior style. Colours, too, are becoming more luxurious, richer and deeper." Sainsbury agrees. "I do think that people are getting a little tired of modern, modern and yet more modern," he says. "I feel that we are moving away from minimalist houses, which are exciting but not very comfortable. The Georgian style is one of comfort and ease."



The dining room in Will Fisher's Georgian townhouse has been faithfully designed, with an open fire, an alcove cupboard with doors, and exposed floorboards.



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curtains. Wallpaper – block-printed in complex patterns and many colours, often in damask or toile designs – came to supplant wooden panelling as a wall covering, whilst finishing touches might include a classical bust or two, groups of Wedgwood Jasperware and some Rococo silver.

### CONTEMPORARY ADAPTATION

It is easy to see how this elegant, gracious and tasteful style, once the very cutting edge of fashion, has become a timeless part of our interior vocabulary. Although, whilst it may be relatively straightforward to create a fully Georgian-style room, especially within the confines of one of this country's many beautiful Georgian townhouses or country homes, how easy is it to use Georgian in a more contemporary way? Is this a style that requires strict boundaries, or might it lend itself to a more eclectic interpretation? "Using Georgian pieces gives a sense of longevity and establishment to a room, which is very important visually," explains Will Fisher, antiques dealer and owner of Jamb, which sells antique and reproduction chimney pieces. "Georgiana can undoubtedly work really well with other styles of furniture, but you need to keep to sympathetic timbers, and to be wise in your choice of what replicates well and what doesn't. You can mix things that are quite severe and modern in style with things that are figured and luxurious. When you put something of that ilk in a modern environment it shines." The key to success, says Fisher, is both discipline – it is as much about what you leave as what you put in – and choosing pieces with a similar aesthetic. "You can combine two



A traditional slipper bath, Apollo doubled ended, free-standing bath, from £2,786, Albion Bath Company.

things – like an imposing, monumental eighteenth-century bookcase and a 1950s leather Knoll sofa, for example – really well," he explains. "They come from completely different moments in time, but share the same aesthetic principle."

What can work incredibly well is altering the Georgian original to make an impact in a modern home. Newberry, for example, will sometimes re-scale and re-colour an original fabric, whilst Sainsbury might give a reproduction piece a different finish. Oversized damask or red lacquer Chippendale commode – the results are impressive and eye-catching, successfully combining the best of past and present. Sainsbury, who often incorporates period pieces in modern homes, says his secret is not to try too hard to blend a Georgian piece in. "Don't try to make it look like everything else," he states. "And make sure it's of outstanding quality. It's like making soup – too many ingredients and it will all go wrong. Two or three great ingredients and it will be fantastic." ■

### MORE GEORGIAN INSIGHTS

*To find out more about how the Georgians lived, consider these useful resources*

#### EDUCATIONAL EXHIBITIONS

##### WILLIAM KENT: DESIGNING GEORGIAN BRITAIN

Examining the life and work of William Kent (1685-1748), the leading architect and designer of early Georgian Britain. Until 13 July at the V&A. [vam.co.uk](http://vam.co.uk)

##### THE FIRST GEORGIANS: ART & MONARCHY 1714-1760

Exploring the reigns of George I and George II, shedding light on the role of this new dynasty in the transformation of political, intellectual and cultural life. Until 12 October at The Queen's Gallery, Buckingham Palace. [royalcollection.org.uk](http://royalcollection.org.uk)

#### INSIGHTFUL TOURS

**INTRIGUE AND STRIFE AT GIBSIDE**  
Discover the rise and fall of Gibside's families, including Mary Eleanor Bowes, one of the 18th century's richest heiresses, whose torturous marriage to conman 'Stoney' Bowes was a cause célèbre of

Georgian England and the recent subject of bestselling book *Wedlock*.

Daily guided tours of this National Trust property in Tyne & Wear, until 2 November. Normal admission charges. For more information, please call 01207 541820

##### SCANDAL AND ROMANCE

A spectacular evening event bringing the Georgian Parker family's past scandals and romantic associations to life with actors and narration. 6 June and 11 July, 6.30-9pm at the National Trust's Saltram, in Devon. Booking essential, tickets £12. For more information, please call 01752 333500

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The book of the recent exhibition, unravelling the contradictions and

concerns that link the Georgian era so closely to our own.

*Georgian Style and Design for Contemporary Living* by Henrietta Spencer-Churchill (Cico)

Bringing the practical comfort of 21st-century living to the elegant and timeless classical proportions of 18th-century design.

*The Georgian Group Book of the Georgian House* by Steven Parissien (Aurum Press)

The definitive resource for lovers of Georgian architecture.

#### A PROPERTY OWNER'S RESOURCE

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