

INTERIORS

Where the wild things are

How a sombre grade II listed house in Chelsea was given the wow factor by a family's extraordinary art collection



The dining room, with lifesize zebra and 18th-century portrait by Jean-Baptiste Perronneau
BÉNÉDICTE DRUMMOND

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The arts curator Marie-Laure de Clermont-Tonnerre owns work by some of the world's most celebrated artists, but it was a lifesize zebra by an unknown artist that turned heads when she moved into a new home in Chelsea, west London, five years ago.

“It came on a big pedestal and wouldn’t fit through the door,” she says. “So it sat outside the house until we figured out what to do. Meanwhile everyone in the street was looking at us as if we were crazy.” These days the zebra, which belongs to her husband, Swiss-French financier Jean-François, stands by a grand stone fireplace.



Marie-Laure de Clermont-Tonnerre
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The couple share the grade II listed ahouse, built in the 1880s by the architect Sir Ernest George, with their two teenage children. A grand red-brick mansion block that curls around a large garden, its original features were the main draw, from the stone floors to the wood-panelled hallway and the clay chiminea fireplaces. “It’s a fairytale home full of character. I call it an arts and crafts house,” says de Clermont-Tonnerre.

When they arrived, however, it was “a very sombre place. Everything was white and grey. Nobody wanted to live here.”



Engraved black painting by Pierre Soulages in the living room
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De Clermont-Tonnerre has brought it alive with her mix of modern and traditional art. But it's the story behind the objects that matters most. The floors in the living room are covered with rugs handmade by her friend, the British designer Allegra Hicks. In the hall is a towering copper wire totem by the French-British artist Alice Anderson, whom de Clermont-Tonnerre discovered. In the dining room hangs an inherited 18th-century pastel portrait by Jean-Baptiste Perronneau; it is so rare that the Louvre Museum dispatched a photographer to take a picture of it. "Every object is personal to me," she says.

The architecture, she explains, was inspired by the "great burghers' houses of Antwerp". "The living room and dining room are beautiful in the mornings when the light bursts through the stone-framed windows," she says. Upstairs are five vast white bedrooms with large Tudor-style casement windows and more wood panelling. And then there is the wooden-encased bath, which de Clermont-Tonnerre is "still undecided about".

Through a secret wooden door in the hall, down a narrow staircase and into the basement is the modern kitchen.



Stone-framed Tudor-style window in the dining room
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The family is used to living in a home with bold interiors. Before moving, de Clermont-Tonnerre lived in a flat in west London that once belonged to Kylie Minogue. “It was a funny place. The walls were blue, the dressing room was pink and the bathroom was gold. It was very art deco,” she says. While the singer had no trouble with the flat’s low ceilings - Minogue is 5ft tall - de Clermont-Tonnerre’s 6ft 3in husband struggled. “Let’s just say he’s much happier here.”

The two met in Paris when they were 19, but their “love story” began when, aged 25, they went on holiday with a group of friends. “He was romantic and determined that we had to live our lives together,” de Clermont-Tonnerre tells me.

The zebra aside, the couple have similar tastes in art but a different approach to buying it. Jean-François, de Clermont-Tonnerre says, is impulsive, while she prefers to “digest” pieces she discovers.

“If he likes a piece, he buys it. He’s the same when he’s buying a house. He says that life goes too quickly. I, on the other hand, need to think about it. And if I’m still thinking about it weeks later, I’ll take it.”

She credits her husband for bringing two of the most important pieces into their house. In the living room hangs a black painting by Pierre Soulages, a family friend. Opposite are two works in ink by 20th-century Chinese-French painter Zao Wou-Ki, one of the highest-selling painters of his generation.

With so much priceless art, how does de Clermont-Tonnerre protect it from the family’s dog and two kittens? “In life you can’t control everything. That’s our philosophy,” she tells me. “This is as much a family home as it is a celebration of art.”



The kitchen, with photograph by Massimo Vital
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Philippe Hiquily sculpture in the living room
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Alice Anderson artwork in the hall
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