

18th-century chimneypieces

Original fireplaces with storied provenances are becoming a key element in the renovation or restoration of grand homes, says Jenny Dalton

Will Fisher, founder of Jamb on London's Pimlico Road, describes his love for 18th-century English chimneypieces as nothing short of fevered. For decades he has bought and sold (and often kept) original pieces attributed to leading architects William Kent, William Chambers and James Wyatt. "When you stand in front of something of great quality, the passion resonates," he says. "And the excitement builds when you look at them in their historical context, having once been the most important and expensive element of a house, created by the top sculptors, carvers and architects of the time."

Now is Fisher's time. Chimneypieces – particularly English ones with an 18th-century provenance – are again enjoying their moment in the sun as key elements in the renovation or restoration of grand homes. For Fisher, the buzz is palpable. Jamb's staff regularly field international requests from interior designers such as Robert Kime, Michael Smith, Annabel Elliot and Veere Grenney for particular chimneypieces, which Fisher sources. They and private clients are now buying multiple original chimneypieces per home renovation – often six or seven.

The attraction of the 18th century, says Paul Chesney, managing director of fireplace specialist Chesney's, is that it is the period with the most excitement, as styles vary so widely. This variety was boosted by factors like the introduction of coal, meaning greater delicacy and smaller scale, adds interior designer Guy Goodfellow, as well as the influence of palladianism and neoclassicism – styles clients had admired while on the Grand Tour. Designs range from a palladian Sienna marble mantelpiece (£160,000 from Jamb) with a carved basket of fruit in the centre, to the simple, "almost modernist" architectural one (worth £28,000) in Fisher's own drawing room, via a John Flaxman-carved white marble piece from 1782 with a delicate frieze of Grecian figures and flora (£295,000 from antiques dealer James Graham-Stewart).

Designs usually cost from a few thousand pounds to £250,000 for one with a storied provenance and celebrated architect designer or carver. However, one by architect Robert Adam, who led the neoclassical movement in Britain in the 1700s, with its provenance and papers



A chimneypiece by Robert Adam could command £500,000

intact, could command up to £500,000, says Chesney, who is offering a marble example attributed to Adam for £180,000.

Recent Christie's auctions have seen prices leapfrog estimates. At the Fire and Light sale last year, a "pretty and petite chimneypiece" with carved ribbons, swagging and Cupid's head sold for £18,750, £3,750 above estimate (partly, believes Nic McElhatton, chairman of Christie's South Kensington, because of its smaller size). And in an English Collector sale last May, a George III statuary marble chimneypiece with Corinthian column detailing by Chambers went for £10,500 over its top estimate of £100,000. While 18th-century designs have always sold



Clockwise from above: c1750 marble chimneypiece attributed to Isaac Ware, £500,000 from Chesney's. 1782 marble fireplace by John Flaxman, £295,000 from James Graham-Stewart. George II-style gilded-wood and gesso piece, sold for £18,750 at Christie's. The c1750 marble fireplace in Will Fisher's drawing room

wanted to downplay the 19th-century "makeover" of the house and emphasise its 1780 parts. This meant putting back 18th-century fireplaces. "They work better with the proportions of the rooms, which was key." Knightly sourced four originals from Jamb, including "a grey Bardiglio-marble design with flat columns at either end for one of the bedrooms; it's slightly austere rather than grand, which I like." He'd initially decided on replicas, "but as I became more informed and was able to make slightly better decisions, I found the patina of the antiques just irresistible."

Indeed, although reproductions have dominated the market in recent years, Chesney has observed a shift in demand towards originals. He has launched a new antiques showroom, which includes a design by Isaac Ware, a chimney sweep taken in by Lord Burlington around 1712 who 25 years later was one of the pre-eminent palladian architects. The c1750 piece (£500,000) – with a huge mantel and elaborate bicolour marble carving – is believed to be from Chesterfield House. "It's stunningly beautiful," says Chesney, who adds that a distinct provenance from a celebrated home can add tens of thousands to the value.

"For some clients, a reproduction is never enough," says Owen Pacey, founder of Renaissance London. He will, however, often create a moulded copy of an original when a client wants a matching fireplace at either end of a room – as in a recent Cavendish Square refurbishment. Current stock at his Shoreditch showroom includes an Adam design for around £35,000.

Nicky Wilson and her husband Robert, chairman of Nelsons homeopathic remedies, have renovated Bonnington House outside Edinburgh and put a delicately decorative Kent-attributed chimneypiece into the ballroom. Nicky says she fell in love with it when walking past Fisher's Pimlico store. "I know we could have had a beautiful copy, but for me it's about the provenance and knowing the piece has had a life before. The way marble ages is beautiful; you can't find such integrity elsewhere." ♦

WHERE TO BUY CHESNEY'S, 104-202 BATTERSEA PARK RD, LONDON SW11 (020-7627 1410; WWW.CHESENEYS.CO.UK) AND BRANCH/STOCKISTS, CHRISTIE'S, 020-7839-9060; WWW.CHRISTIES.COM; NEXT ENGLISH COLLECTOR SALE MAY 21, WITH MONTHLY INTERIORS SALES; GUY GOODFELLOW, 13 LANGTON ST, LONDON SW10 (020-7349 0728; WWW.GUYGOODFELLOW.COM); JAMB, 95-97 PIMLICO RD, LONDON SW1 (020-7730 2122; WWW.JAMB.CO.UK); JAMES GRAHAM-STEWART, CORE ONE, THE GASWORKS, MICHAEL RD, LONDON SW6 (020-3490 0406; WWW.JAMESGRAHAM-STEWART.COM); RENAISSANCE LONDON, 193-195 CITY RD, LONDON EC1 (020-7251 8844; WWW.RENAISSANCELONDON.COM). **WHAT TO READ** THE BOOK OF ENGLISH FIREPLACES BY ALISON KELLY; THE FASHIONABLE FIRE PLACE, 1660-1840 BY CHRISTOPHER GILBERT.