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City Living

Ceramicist Gary Grant has created a quiet retreat in the capital, ideal for inspiration and relaxation

Feature Olivia Temple Photography David George

A former house of easy virtue may seem an unusual home choice, but in 1978 Gary Grant and Richard Elder were taken with a warren of bedsits that had once seen naughtier days. 'It was not too big and in the right place,' says Gary of the 1837 three-storey house between London's Kentish and Camden Towns, 'and we had friends who lived only three doors away.'

At the time Gary was with the Royal Ballet and Richard was about to join English National Opera, so the location was ideal. 'It was close to town,' says Gary, 'and convenient for getting home after a performance.'

More investigation revealed that the house had not been lived in for some years, that most of the rooms were partitioned and some walls were bulging. Convinced of its potential nevertheless, Richard and Gary decided to buy and go for total refurbishment.

They started with the kitchen on the ground floor. 'There were two bathrooms where the kitchen is now,' says Gary. 'So we decided to go back to the original house layout.' Baths out, bulges demolished and new ▶



Above Gary, second left, takes tea in the garden with friends Adrian Grater, right, a collector of Gary's pottery, and Gillian Quartly-Watson



The kitchen was completely rebuilt to the original Victorian layout. 'We borrowed plans from our friends who lived three doors away. Our house matched theirs exactly,' says Gary. The new kitchen opens onto the garden which acts as a dining room in summer. A friend scumble-glazed the walls and the floor tiles are from Walcot Reclamation. Gary painted the gothic frieze over the door, and the shelf houses part of his collection of assorted china



Above, top left Rose and thistle ceramic walking stick tops made by Gary mingle with malacca canes and vintage umbrellas.

Above, bottom left A lacquer tray displays a selection of the ceramic vegetables that Gary makes and sells.

Above, right Gary at work in his studio on the ground floor.

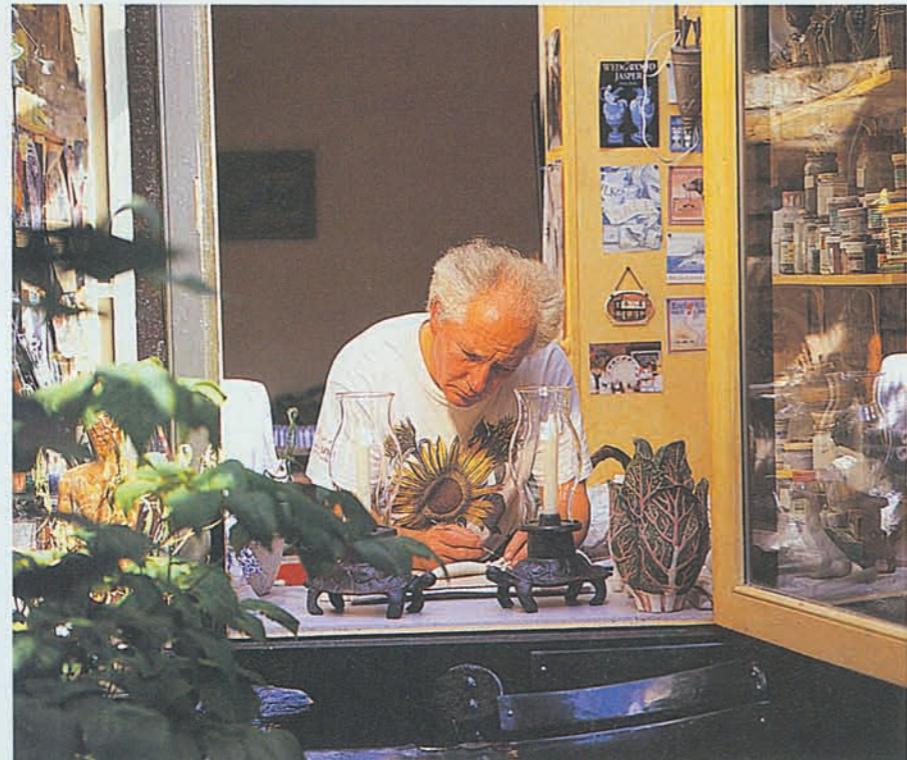
Opposite The bamboo cabinet in the sitting room is home to a colourful array of Wemyss Ware pottery, dating from the 1880s. Gary even has a rare Wemyss Ware button. The cabinet dates from 1870 and was bought in a local antique shop



Above The wallpaper in Richard's study has been stencilled with urns and topiary. Gary 'marbled' the mantelpiece



Above The head of Apollo, bought from Nancy Smillie ceramics, Glasgow, peers out from the ivy and white Japanese anemones



kitchen area appropriately replumbed and rewired, they installed a Rayburn from Hoad & Taylor in Horsham, had quarry tiles laid on the floor and picked out a large pine cupboard from a market stall at nearby Camden Lock. Old friend and self-taught creative paint effects artist John Hardy came from Sussex to scumble-glaze the walls a creamy yellow. Gary hand-painted the gothic frieze.

Gary, who is now a potter of note, stores some of his Emma Bridgewater china collection on a high kitchen shelf. Antique willow pattern plates are displayed with Spode and Victorian cheese dishes on the dresser, which takes up one wall of the kitchen. 'I started getting interested in china in the Seventies,' he says. 'I used to browse at Sotheby's in Belgravia after rehearsals and learned a lot from their Victorian and Edwardian china catalogues and previews.'

His own witty and whimsical work is dotted about, but is particularly in evidence in the studio with its own small kiln that he had built at the back of the house. There ceramic garlics, aubergines,

artichokes and tomatoes share the work-bench with juicy-looking strawberries and surreal candlesticks. 'I went on a ceramic restoration course when I retired from the ballet,' he explains, 'but the better you get at that the less your own work shows. I turned to creating pots and found that more rewarding.'

The kitchen opens onto the garden where Gary and Richard entertain in summer. 'It's nice out here, but if we had to do the kitchen again, we'd make it bigger so we'd have somewhere else to eat,' says Gary.

The small square garden, once piled high with rubble, is now a richly verdant plot with a ceramic head of Apollo, by Alec Leckie of The Glasgow School of Art, looking out from an ivy-dark corner. Ivy has also been woven through boxed chicken wire to make miniature hedges, and a shady corner concocted from Virginia creeper with blackberries straggling through. Mossy pots are packed with cotoneasters, and violas and roses to provide occasional splashes of colour. The brick steps are sprinkled with small, sweet-smelling mint ▶

'After a ceramics restoration course I turned to creating pots and found it more rewarding'



Portfolio

Gary Grant and Richard Elder's terraced house in north London

Built: 1837.

Materials: Stuccoed London Brick exterior; lath and plaster interior walls.

Rooms: Kitchen, studio and study on the ground floor; sitting room, deck and box room on the first floor; bedrooms and bathroom on the top floor.

Major problems: Lath and plaster walls which had to be taken down because of bulging. Roof in poor repair. Warren of bedsits with sinks and baths. No garden.

Best features: Style, size, character and location. Potential for a studio and study.

Old style: Warren of tiny bedsits with thin partition walls. The kitchen was two bathrooms and the sitting room was two bedsits, each with a sink and basin. The garden was a heap of rubble and needed a total redesign.

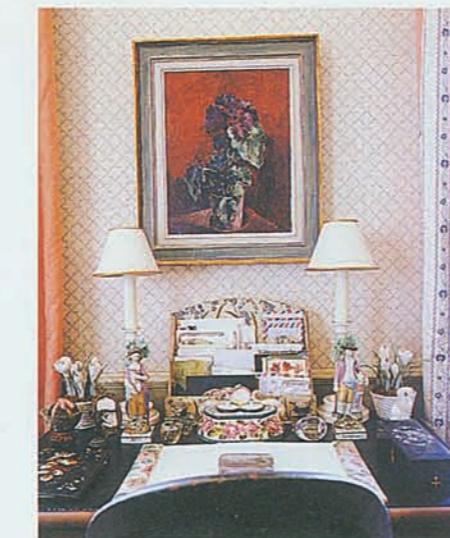
New style: Restored to original Victorian layout with room to live, work and entertain. Full of colour, charm and interest from ceramics both old and new. The now luxuriant garden is almost an extension of the house, providing space for outdoor entertaining.





Above The rug in the sitting room was bought at a Christie's auction and the chair has been upholstered in a complementary Colefax and Fowler striped material. The bamboo aspidistra stand sports one of Gary's Wemyss Ware plant pots, while the pig is by Plichta (who bought the Wemyss Ware pottery in the Thirties) and used the same workers. Vintage Laura Ashley curtains frame the full-length sash window.

Below The chesterfield sofa with tapestry cushions was bought at auction in the Seventies. The picture above is *Fontainebleu* by Alexander Jamieson (1912). The flower plates on either side are more of Gary's Wemyss Ware collection. 'You can blame choreographer Sir Frederick Ashton for my interest in that. He used to be an avid collector and would ask me to look out for pieces when I was on tour,' says Gary



Above The early 1900s bamboo desk plays host to auction finds and two figurines which used to belong to the Countess of Rosse. The painting is by A Wolmark

plants. 'Richard appreciates the garden and we both use it, but I do most of the planning and planting,' says Gary.

To offset the effect of the blunt side wall of the house next door they had a large garden shed built against it. With finches painted on by Gary and a huge vine (*Vitis coignetiae*) tumbling down over the roof, it looks like an aviary but houses a second fridge and a freezer. 'My cooking tends to be very M&S but Richard likes to cook when we're entertaining at weekends,' says Gary.

Gary and Richard work and cook on the ground floor, live on the second floor and sleep at the top of the house. Richard, who now promotes opera tours, works in the former front parlour which he has decorated with vintage travel posters, sketches and portraits from the opera, and antique memorabilia and mementoes. 'I'm putting together plans for a mobile theatre at the moment,' he explains. 'The aim is to take opera on the road.'

At the top of the stairs to the first floor, wooden steps lead out to a deck which has recently been added above the kitchen. Made of easy-care Western cedar wood, it is surrounded by a trellis which has now become a waist-high ivy hedge. Here carpenter Keith Bryant has made a box border, using old edging tiles from Bath, in which a standard lavender lives happily and black self-seeding violas are dotted around with alpine strawberries, purple and white cranesbill and rue. 'We originally thought of having something more elaborate, hired an expert, then rejected the plans,' says Gary, who likes to keep up with gardening books in a steamer chair which came from The



Above Gary's thistle sconces adorn the walls on either side of the sitting room fireplace. The mantelpiece displays a Prattware vase from 1790, bought at auction, and four antique hyacinth vases from Albi, France which hold Gary's ceramic creations. The bamboo and glass firescreen is a Sixties antique shop discovery. Gary used a marble paint effect on the fire surround and wall

Chelsea Flower Show. Blue-and-white glazed stools with tassled legs act as tables when he and Richard are giving a buffet lunch or supper.

The sitting room is at the first floor front. Gary and Richard have furnished this comfortable room with a chesterfield and a bamboo bureau from about 1870. 'It was made in Camden Town,' says Gary. 'There were quite a few local workshops making furniture here at that time.'

Gary hand-marbled the fireplace surround and made the thistle sconces. He also created the ceramic hyacinths in

the antique vases he and Richard found in France. 'We bought them in Albi,' says Gary, 'then spotted them in a 19th-century portrait by Philippe Rousseau, in a book by garden expert Rosemary Verey.'

With lots of still life paintings full of fruit and flowers and the bright, fresh glaze of the floral Wemyss Ware pottery and plates, Gary and Richard have created a country house-style home in the capital, with a garden view on two floors. 'We came here 20 years ago,' says Gary looking round with a smile. 'I think we've accomplished quite a lot since then.'

Address book

Gary Grant's ceramics,
tel: 0171-267 3886.

Kitchen floor tiles from: Walcot Reclamation, 108 Walcot Street, Bath BA1 5BG, tel: 01225 444404.

Carpentry by: Keith Bryant,
tel: 0181-656 9693.

Wemyss Ware from: Rogers de Rin,
76 Royal Hospital Road, London SW3 4HN, tel: 0171-352 900. **B**
B=brochure available