



The dining room designed around a fossilized tree at Fera, in Claridge's; opposite, jewelry by Jessica McCormack is handcrafted by "three guys" in London.

The Sovereign State of EXTRAVAGANCE

MAYFAIR, BETWEEN PARK LANE AND REGENT STREET WITH BOND STREET RUNNING THROUGH, JUST MIGHT BE THE LUXURY CAPITAL OF THE WORLD



BY *Patricia Morrisroe*
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I'm looking for Berkeley Square, one of Mayfair's most iconic locations, but there's so much new construction I'm totally disoriented. Yellow cranes obscure the skyline. Scaffolding and tarps shroud buildings. I walk into a Porsche dealership and ask a woman for directions. She's no help at all. A man on the street is equally clueless.

On Bond Street, I query a group of construction workers. "Isn't that the place with the bird?" one says, referring to the famous World War II song "A Nightingale Sang in Berkeley Square."

"Yes, that's it," I say.

"Well, you won't find any birds there," he says. "It's too bloody expensive even for them."

Mayfair, whose name stems from the annual May Fair that began in 1686, has always been an exclusive enclave, the very essence of posh. Today, however, posh has taken on a different meaning with the arrival of Victoria "Posh" Beckham and other high-priced fashion brands that are among the few businesses that can afford the astronomical rents. Lamborghinis, Ferraris, and Porsches line the streets. Models of yachts fill the shop windows. Foreign billionaires buy townhouses and rarely set foot in them. Art galleries fight for clients and artists with increasingly bigger spaces. Mayfair is no longer just a place. It's a global brand, a trophy asset. It's the sovereign State of Extravagance.

In the late 19th century, my grandmother worked as a dressmaker for a "grand Mayfair lady." I never discovered the woman's identity, but several years later, my grandmother was touring India under the auspices of Lord Curzon, India's viceroy. The Curzons were among Mayfair's aristocratic pioneers, following the lead of Lady Mary Grosvenor, whose son Richard helped turn 100 acres of muddy fields into a desirable habitat for the gentry. Soon, elegant Georgian townhouses were being erected in Grosvenor Square and elsewhere.

By the mid-1800s, business moguls, eager to demonstrate their newfound wealth, built opulent palaces. Sadly, most have disappeared. After World War I, wealthy residents couldn't afford the upkeep, and many were demolished. With London in ruins after World War II, the government began turning houses into offices. Mayfair, once the hub of London's social scene, had lost its luster.

Bond Street is so bright I may need to put on my sunglasses. Outside of museum exhibits, I've never seen such over-the-top jewels. There's an emerald and diamond necklace that could be worn as a breastplate, an intricate diamond cuff with a huge ruby in the center, a waterfall of diamonds fashioned as earrings, an enormous cabochon ruby ring. I peer into **S. J. Phillips** (44-20/7629-6261), one of the oldest family-owned antique shops in the world. Several elderly men in dark suits stare back. The window is filled with exquisite antique jewelry that in comparison to everything else looks demure.

The world's largest **Chanel** boutique (44-20/7493-5040) is at 158-159 New Bond Street, where it spans 12,600 square feet across three floors. An early Mayfair advocate, Coco Chanel opened a shop on Davies Street in 1927. She was then the lover of Hugh Grosvenor, the second Duke of Westminster and one of the richest men in the world. The affair led to the romantic notion that the duke ordered all the lampposts in Mayfair embossed with double locking C's as a sign of his affection. Though they do mimic the Chanel logo, the real story is more prosaic: The letters stand for "City Council."

I'm looking down at Berkeley Square from the seventh floor of the new **Phillips** auction house (44-20/7318-4010). I hadn't recognized the square because the last time I saw it—only a few years ago—there wasn't a 73,000 square foot building looming over it. I'm with Matthew Paton of **Paton Arts**, an art consulting firm that advises Phillips and others. He takes me to the ground floor, where a bright magenta 75-foot inflatable sculpture by the Portuguese artist Joana Vasconcelos is on display. It's part of a series of large "Valkyries," and is aptly entitled *Material Girl*, and as seen through Phillips' floor-to-ceiling windows, it's like a gigantic raptor about to swallow Berkeley Square.

Behind Phillips is the 18,000 square-foot **Gagosian Gallery** (44-20/7495-1500) set to open in October. It will join other top-notch contemporary galleries, such as **Pace** (44-20/3206-7600), **Hauser & Wirth** (44-20/7287-2300), **Michael Werner** (44-20/7495-6855), **David Zwirner** (44-20/3538-3165), **Dominique Lévy** (44-20/3696-5910), and **Victoria Miro** (44-20/7336-8109). Though Miro still maintains a gallery in northeast London, she and partner Glenn Scott Wright opened a second one on St George Street. "In the past five years,



The elegant yet far from stuffy Connaught Bar is famous for its martini trolley.



there's definitely been a move to Mayfair from the East End," says Scott Wright. "With the moneyed clientele and the luxury retail, a Mayfair gallery is a necessity."

One of the most distinctive is Dominique Lévy's new space at 22 Old Bond Street. It's located in the Venetian-style palazzo that once belonged to the famed art-dealer Joseph Duveen. On Savile Row, Hauser & Wirth has a 15,000-square foot gallery that dwarfs the bespoke tailor shops.

Art is considered such an integral part of the Mayfair experience that **Brown's Hotel** (44-20/7493-6020) hosts monthly Saturday art tours for its guests. Karen Talwar, who owns **Adventures in Art** (917-826-0111), offers her clients special access to private collections, dinners, and artists' studios. "The top experts are gathered in Mayfair," she says. "My clients want to see 'what's next' through their eyes."

Not everyone sees the invasion of the mega-galleries as positive. **Colnaghi** (44-20/7491-7408), in business since 1760 and dealing in Old Masters, moved from its ground-floor space on Bond Street to one above Bottega Veneta. **Eskenazi** (44-20/7493-5464), a leading dealer in Asian art, is one of the lucky ones. In 1993, he bought and renovated a beautiful building on Clifford Street, where his gallery occupies the bottom two floors. Still, he mourns the loss of many of his neighbors. When we walk outside, he points out all the places that have been—or will be—shuttered.

"It's sad," he says.

"I guess change is inevitable," I say.

"Perhaps." He shrugs.

The hydrangeas in **Claridge's** (44-20/7629-8860) lobby are spectacular. In honor of Wimbledon, they're in shades of purple, white, and green, with blossoms the size of footballs. Straight ahead is the Foyer, a Thierry Despont design, with silver-leaf columns and Art Deco chaises and a dazzling chandelier by the American sculptor Dale Chihuly. It is made of 800 pieces of handblown Venetian glass and dangles, like an illuminated sea creature, from the 18-foot ceiling.

Claridge's immediately evokes black-and-white images of the Jazz Age, when London's "Bright Young Things"—the decadent aristocrats and bohemians whose frivolous behavior was a tabloid staple—treated the hotel as their private club. After a \$75 million renovation starting in 1996, Claridge's is back in peak form.

Clockwise from top left: a doorman at Claridge's; a Philip Treacey-design hat; a reflection of the Bentley showroom in Berkeley Square; looking towards the nave of the 19th-century Church of Immaculate Conception; making cocktails at the Connaught; bags on display at Moynat; women in Berkley Square; inside Maggs Bros. an antiquarian bookseller dating back to 1853.



Cod and parsley
mousse, with heritage
tomato, kohlrabi, and
peas from Fera; an
intricately hand-
engraved gun from
James Purdey & Sons.



I'm in a terrace suite that the concierge tells me was the late super-agent Swifty Lazar's favorite. "Ralph Lauren likes it too," he confides. "If he can't get it, he goes to the Connaught." The suite's color scheme is pale yellow, gray, and ivory, with a fireplace outlined in brass, a bookshelf filled with art and fashion books, and a black-and-white marble bathroom with a mirror-paneled bathtub.

Tonight I'm having dinner at the hotel's Michelin-starred restaurant, Fera. Its entrance is through a door curtained with red velvet. Suddenly, I step into a tranquil pale green and gray room, with '30s-style fixtures and an ethereal white tree in the center. It's zen, with a splash of Deco.

Fera is Latin for "wild," and chef Simon Rogan, who also operates the two-Michelin-starred restaurant L'Enclume in Cumbria, uses the freshest products from his farm and local growers. I start with a grilled salad of kale, cauliflower, and kohlrabi that's been smoked over embers and combined with truffle custard, toasted sunflower seeds and Isle of Mull cheese. For the main course I opt for John Dory, with artichokes, spinach, and smoked beetroot. It is so beautifully presented I take a picture, and then a bite. "So this is why people become foodies," I think.

I'm looking down at Mayfair again, this time from the top of an 18-room penthouse that will soon go on the market for approximately \$43,000 a week. Curious as to who actually lives in the area, I've contacted Rahim Najak of the real estate firm **Knight Frank** (44-20/7499-1012). Najak says he has only an hour to spare because he's incredibly busy. Many offices have been turned back into single-family homes but often people rent them out, viewing them as investments. British tax loopholes have been especially generous to "non-doms"—non-domiciled residents—and Mayfair is considered a safe place to park money.

Najak explains that the owner has multiple homes in London and takes great pleasure in decorating them. In this case, each room is designed for a specific taste, giving it an interesting if not entirely cohesive look. "Many people who buy in Mayfair are used to living in hotels," he says, "so that's where they get their design ideas."

The vast majority of Najak's tenants come from Russia, the Middle East, and Asia, with an increasing number of American hedge funders. Najak says that the apartment, across multiple floors, would be perfect for a large family. He points out the separate quarters that could house nannies, servants, and even the children.

"So who do you think will buy this?" I ask.

"Probably a single person," he says.

In the late 1980s, my husband and I spent the first part of our honeymoon at the **Connaught** (44-20/3553-9096). I'd caught a bad cold and stayed in bed reading W. Somerset Maugham's *Cakes and Ale* and happily drinking tea and eating warm scones. The room epitomized the English country look, with its brilliant colors, clashing patterns, and wild chintz.

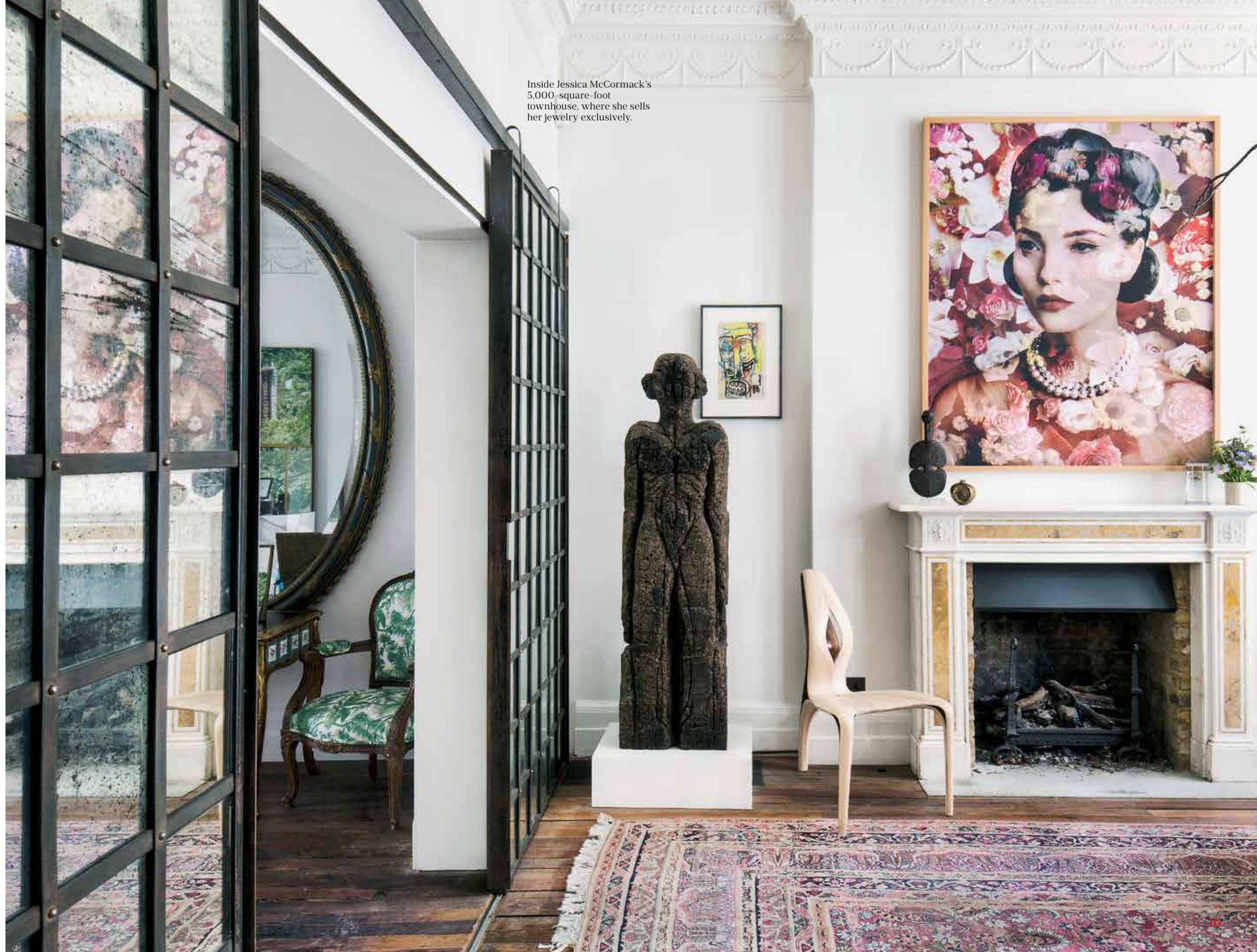
After a \$140 million dollar renovation in 2009, the Connaught kept its defining features—the carved mahogany staircase, the plasterwork and gilding on the ceilings, the original paintings and antiques—but has been brought into the 21st century, thanks to a talented team of decorators, including Sills Huniford and the late David Collins. Not only does it have an Aman spa but also the two-Michelin-starred restaurant, Hélène Darroze.

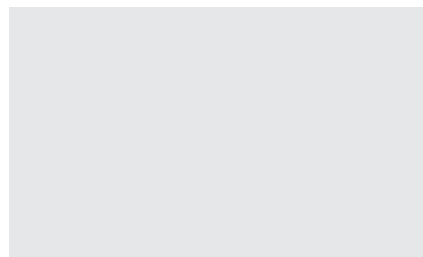
Stepping off the elevator onto the top floor, I'm confronted with a set of elaborately carved doors ornamented with the twin heads of Bacchus, the Roman god of wine and ritual madness. It appears I've been upgraded, though "upgrade" doesn't adequately convey the magnitude of what has happened. I've ascended to the Apartment, which, at 3,068 square feet, is advertised as "an experience like no other." While I can't speak for the single people renting 18-room penthouses, it's certainly unique for me. There's a dining room, a kitchen, two terraces, a master bedroom with a four-poster bed, a guest bedroom, a dressing room, two bathrooms, one with a massive tub, and a huge loft-like living room with a vaulted ceiling and light streaming in from four large windows.

A butler is at my service, willing to perform any task. Past examples include sneaking in a Michelin-starred chef to cook a surprise dinner for a wife, fetching a pair of shoes that were left in Paris, and bringing in zoo animals for a child who wanted to be a zookeeper. My only request is a bowl of fruit, granary toast, and a cappuccino. By the Apartment's standards, I may go down in history as its least demanding occupant.

Outside the Connaught is a "sculptural water feature," picture an infinity pool, that was created by the Japanese architect Tadao Ando. The piece is entitled *Silence* and it sets the tone for the neighborhood. While certainly not quiet, Mount Street retains a charming mix of old and new, though sometimes the juxtapositions can be jarring. Skinned animals dangle from the window of butcher **Allens of Mayfair** (44-20/7499-5831), not far from a stack of Goyard trunks. I'm still thinking of animals when I walk into the historic Audley House, which houses **James Purdey & Sons** (44-20/7408-7208), a purveyor of fine guns and rifles since 1814. Twin heads of water buffalos are mounted on the wall above the main counter. [CONTINUED ON PAGE TK]

Inside Jessica McCormack's 5,000-square-foot townhouse, where she sells her jewelry exclusively.





I make my way to the Long Room, where gun sales associate Edward Benson shows me a selection of shotguns that cost \$150,000. “You can choose any wood, such as Turkish walnut,” he explains, also pointing out the intricate metal engraving.

“Who buys such expensive guns?” I ask.

“We sell locally and to American ranchers.”

“American ranchers?” I say. “Who? Ted Turner.”

He smiles discreetly.

Jessica McCormack's (44-20/7491-9999) boutique is directly across from the Connaught on Carlos Place. She refers to the 19th-century townhouse as “the House.” There’s a self-playing piano, overstuffed sofas, dark wood paneling, and paintings by Rick Owens and Louise Bourgeois. McCormack, a 35-year-old former New Zealander, creates designs that mix ladylike Victorian styles with elements that are strange, even subversive. Rihanna bought McCormack’s first piece of jewelry, a diamond wing earring that extends halfway up the ear.

One of her most unique ideas is the creation of a “party jacket”—a diamond frame that can envelop an existing ring, creating a more elaborate look. Much of her work is bespoke and all is made in-house.

Afterward, I visit **Maggs Bros. Ltd** (44-20/7493-7160), the famous bookstore at 50 Berkeley Square. The concierge at the Connaught had printed out directions for me. I take a wrong turn and wind up at the American Embassy, which, in 2017, will be relocated to the former site of a railyard in the South Bank’s grimy Nine Elms neighborhood (See “Building Battersea”). The existing embassy, along with its grounds was sold to Qatar’s Sovereign Wealth Fund.

“Can you point me in the direction of Berkeley Square?” I ask a guard standing in front of a statue of Ronald Reagan.

“No,” he says. I can’t tell if he doesn’t know where it is, or if like the Buckingham

Palace guards he isn’t allowed to speak.

Finally, an elderly man offers to walk me there, correcting my pronunciation, as if I were Eliza Doolittle. “It’s *Berkeley*, not Berkeley,” he says. I’m pretty sure I said it correctly, but there’s no sense arguing with him because he’s one of the few people who seem to know his way around.

Maggs Brothers is in a townhouse that is reputedly haunted. If I were a ghost, I’d haunt it too. Maggs has close to the largest collection of antiquarian books in the world. Polly Beauwin, who is in charge of autographs and manuscripts, gives me a tour. I’m shown illuminated books from as early as the 11th-century, rare Japanese photo books, first editions of Beckett and Joyce, and letters from Napoleon.

“You must meet Carl,” she says, bringing me out of the main building and into a converted stable block. “Carl” is Carl Williams, one of the few book dealers to specialize in the counterculture, which includes, in his description, subversion, extremism, psychedelia, the errant, the carnivalesque, madness, the occult, erotica, and punk. As Robert Mapplethorpe’s biographer, we forge an immediate bond and could have talked all afternoon.

But I have to find Bob’s bench in Mount Street Gardens. The bench isn’t of any historical significance, except to Bob, who lives in my New York apartment building and asks all his friends to take their pictures sitting on it. Bob’s bench, which bears a plaque with his name and an inscription, is probably the cheapest piece of real estate in Mayfair.

Not far away, I notice a beautiful Gothic Revival-style church. It’s the Jesuit Farm Street Church, and an English and German priest are about to concelebrate a Mass in honor of the 75th anniversary of the Battle of Britain. During the summer of 1940, the Royal Air Force waged a desperate but ultimately successful air campaign against the Luftwaffe to prevent a Nazi invasion of Britain. I get teary as I watch the elderly white-haired men and women walk down the aisle. Several are with their grandsons who are dressed in blue blazers and crisp white shirts. There’s a wonderful choir and suddenly I’m singing along—singing for the Mayfair that survived the war, singing for the Mayfair that was, and is, and will undoubtedly go on, even without the nightingale in Berkeley Square. ♦

