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A palace for thoroughly modern millionaires

Smaller museums are always of more interest to me if the people who created them are evident in every nook and cranny. Sir John Soane's Museum is one such place, and Eltham Palace, also in London is another.

Whilst having been a home for many Kings and Queens of England over time, the most substantial presence felt nowadays is that of Stephen and Virginia Courtauld, its last private residents.

The earliest mention of a dwelling on the site is from the Domesday survey of 1086 when it was recorded as being owned by one Odo, Bishop of Bayeaux. Edward III and Henry VIII also spent much of their childhood here and notable visitors included Chaucer (who was twice set upon by thieves en route) and Erasmus (who once rose to the challenge set by a young Prince Henry of writing him a poem whilst on a visit).

Only the Great Hall survives from mediaeval times, the rest is a gorgeous, sophisticated and truly modern home in the Art Deco style. Eltham Palace as it stands today is a superior example of 1930s architecture and design at its very best. The Courtaulds were a wealthy and influential couple (he established Ealing Studios) who embraced the spirit of their times and all of the mod-cons it had to offer. The house boasts the then-new centralised vacuum cleaner hidden in the skirting boards and also a very discreet sound system throughout the downstairs rooms which allowed their record collection to be played and heard throughout.

The Palace was clearly both a stage for entertaining and a home for living. The public areas downstairs are sleek and sophisticated. The oval-shaped entrance hall, with its Australian blackbean veneer walls, glass-domed roof and sleek white modern furniture would impress any visitor. A tray is still set for cocktails, with martini glasses and shaker at the ready. This palace appeals very much to our modern sensibilities.

Many of the walls throughout the building are lined with wood, which gives a warm and homely feel to an otherwise large house. The dining room is in bird's eye maple (even the picture frames), Stephen's bedroom in aspen and his library in Indian mahogany. The ceilings are dramatically moulded and lit. In the dining room, the recessed central portion is entirely covered in aluminium leaf on a blue background, which results in a shimmering effect at night when the lights are turned on. And in Ginnie's boudoir, the ceiling is ribbed, coved and mirrored for a stylish and subtle contrast with the pale walls.

The covetable library appears oddly sparse at first, the cupboards for all the books and papers discretely acting as closed pillars. Between each though is a series of recessed alcoves, to house amongst others Stephen's collection of 14 J.M.W. Turner watercolours. To protect them from the damaging effects of light, they were ingeniously protected by vertically sliding shutters, which slipped down in front of them when he was not using the room. The surface was then simultaneously used to hang his collection of woodcuts and engravings by Dürer and Turner. Stephen was a serious art collector; most of the works now hang in museums around the world – including one Turner watercolour he gifted to The University of Melbourne in 1947.

The built-in furniture, such as Virginia's boudoir sofa with its shelves for books, a wireless and telephone, and the beds and bedroom features, all survive. The freestanding pieces have been carefully reproduced from old photographs, and perfectly complete a very evocative picture of the sophisticated lifestyle of the Courtaulds and their guests.

The littlest room in the house provides an altogether different glimpse of the owners. In the upstairs corridor is a small alcove for the sleeping quarters of the Courtauld's pet ring-tailed lemur, Mah-Jongg. Bought at Harrods in 1923, he lived a life of luxury roaming through the house at will, also accompanying them on their travels abroad. When tired of a day's scampering around at Eltham, he was free to retire to this small caged room complete with window, central heating, escape ladder and walls decorated with a bamboo forest scene.

Eltham Palace is wonderfully quiet to visit, somehow slipping through the usual tourist net and avoiding the mass invasions typical of other palaces near London. It is managed by English Heritage, located on Court Road, Eltham and only 20 minutes by train from London Bridge. As is usual for northern European heritage properties, it is open at varying hours depending on the time of year. For details check <http://www.english-heritage.org.uk> There is an entrance fee, a pleasant tearoom and a good store for take-home treats.

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