

VOLUNTEER FOCUS

Talking about the wall behind

Joanna Roll, Explainer Volunteer at Kenwood House, finds inspiration in wallpaper to peel back the layers of history

At Kenwood there is so much to talk about that we are spoilt for choice when speaking to visitors. You can talk about the lives of the house's inhabitants, the history around them, the architecture, and the world-famous artworks – and that's not to mention the grounds and the fabulous location between Hampstead and Highgate on the edge of the Heath. But it is this very splendid combination of attractions that can lead to dilemmas for those of us who are trying to explain the house to visitors.



Kenwood House

Three stories to tell

During one of my very first volunteer sessions in the Entrance Hall, a visitor grumbled at me: “You’ve just given me three different names, how do you expect me to remember that!” The names were: Robert Adam (1728-1792) the renowned late eighteenth century architect who transformed the house; William Murray, 1st Earl of Mansfield (1705-1793), the top judge who commissioned him; and Edward Cecil Guinness, 1st Earl of Iveagh (1847-1927), who, in the twentieth century, left the house, grounds and 63 of

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his finest artworks for us, the general public, to enjoy. So, not only were there three of them but at least two had two sets of names! That may sound a bit much to swallow but they are all crucial to the story of Kenwood.

Soon after, I was lucky enough to be volunteering in one of the rooms with some of the best-known artworks. These include a self-portrait by Rembrandt (c1665-1669) and Vermeer's *The Guitar Player* (c1672). A visitor came up to me and asked what the room had been used for – a question that begs a lot of questions. Was she thinking of a particular point in time? If so, which one, did she mean? When the 1st Earl of Mansfield lived here? The room wasn't even built then.

An approach that you might call 'imaginative evocation'

The room was in fact built in the 1790s for his nephew, David Murray, the 2nd Earl of Mansfield (another person with two names) as a dining room. But it hasn't been decorated as a dining room; it is now decorated in a sumptuous domestic style *inspired* by a range of historical sources. These include a large dose of Regency (broadly defined) but the approach has been what you might call 'imaginative evocation' *not* the recreation of a tightly defined historical period or the room as it once was. The overriding aim has been to provide a suitable backdrop for the art collection and to show it at its best.

An intriguing design choice

Another of my formative experiences at Kenwood took place in that same room. The significance of the paintings there is fantastic. They are mostly of a kind that you would expect to see in a national gallery rather than in a modest-sized villa on the edge of Hampstead Heath in north London. It happened several times that, just as I was gearing up to explain the detail of the artworks, a visitor came up to me and instead of asking about the artworks, asked about the wall behind them.

The question went something like this: "What is that flock wallpaper doing here? It looks like the inside of a Victorian pub?"

I knew that it wasn't flock wallpaper and, in my view, it does not look like a Victorian pub. So, I started to think about what it was that each room was actually displaying at Kenwood. This room was an imaginative evocation of a broadly defined historical past designed to show the artworks at their best. In contrast, the Library, decorated in Robert Adam's distinctive neo-classical style, *was* the work of art, not the background to it. After much scientific research based on hundreds of paint samples, that room is now

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intended to look as it did when first created by Robert Adam – an approach to presentation that you might call ‘scientific authenticity’.

Finding a suitable peg

On the basis of these and other rooms, it was clear that different rooms represented different approaches to the presentation of Kenwood. These had also varied over time – in particular, in more recent years, according to the approach or philosophy behind refurbishment projects such as the *Millennium Project* in the year 2000 and *Caring for Kenwood* in the years 2012-13.

A luxurious red mohair velvet wall hanging

Volunteers at Kenwood are given the opportunity to present 15 minute talks to the public and so it seemed to me that a talk outlining the various visions of Kenwood (and in 15 minutes, it could be no more than an outline) might help visitors understand what they were seeing, in rather the same way that uncovering the technique and history of an artwork can improve its appreciation. The so-called flock wallpaper, which is in fact a luxurious red mohair velvet wall hanging, could provide an appropriate peg on which to hang such a story.



Visitors admiring Kenwood's art collection with its distinct wallpaper behind

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For me, the most fascinating aspect of this venture has been to view the house in terms of the visions that have helped determine its character today. They include that of the top judge, the 1st Earl of Mansfield, whose architect created a house that would reflect the taste of an erudite and cultivated man, and that of the 2nd Earl of Mansfield, a top diplomat and statesman, who wanted a bigger house with dedicated dining room for entertaining, a huge service wing and a grander entrance and driveway. Also crucial was the vision of the last private owner, the 1st Earl of Iveagh, who bought Kenwood from the Mansfield family in 1925 but died two years later before moving in. He had built up a wonderful art collection during the nineteenth century, and his Will bequeathed Kenwood House, its grounds and 63 of his finest paintings to the nation with the formal wish that the house should be presented as the fine artistic home of an eighteenth century gentleman.

As far as we know, none of these people installed stamped mohair velvet on the walls. The wall hanging entered the room in the year 2000 as the result of the Millenium refurbishment project. You could say it began with a gleam in the eye of a modern designer, and ultimately represents a contemporary vision of a nineteenth century art collector's vision of the fine artistic home of an eighteenth century gentleman.