

**DRAWING ROOM**  
Facing the sitting area of drawing room is a small dining area, where a Sixties suzani tablecloth provides pattern and colour to the muted palette. The plaster sculpture of the Tower of Pisa is from/by ??

**HALLYWAY (opposite)**  
Virginia decorated the hallway with a Turkish Kayseri runner circa 1920, which directs the eye to a rug sourced from Joss Graham mounted behind Perspex. Sitting below is an oak bench sourced from Spencer Swaffer Antiques in Arundel



# Unexpected beauty

Interior designer Virginia Howard had no intention of moving from Knightsbridge to Pimlico, until a balcony flat in a nineteenth-century garden square changed her mind

TEXT ANTHONY GARDNER PHOTOGRAPHS DAVID OLIVER





**DRAWING ROOM**

The Italian marble bust was designed by George Carter and inspired by scagliola plinths at Holkham Hall in Norfolk. The 'Tangier' rug is from Robert Stephenson



**DRAWING ROOM**

A pair of French armchairs covered in Claremont's 'Mirabelle' linen sit on either side of the chimneypiece from Jamb. Six of Picasso's *Faunes et Flore d'Antibes* prints are hung above the sofa

The interior designer Virginia Howard was not intending to move from Knightsbridge to Pimlico; you might just as well have suggested relocating to Acapulco. But when a friend told her of a first-floor balcony flat in one of London's prettiest garden squares, laid out by Thomas Cubitt in the 1830s, she was persuaded to take a look. 'And in five minutes I'd made up my mind to buy it. It was one of those life-changing moments.'

Although the flat had been the piano nobile of an elegant, Grade II-listed stucco building, not everyone would have seen its potential. 'It was dire,' says Virginia. 'A ghastly Sixties development. They'd crammed in three bedrooms, and lowered the ceilings to save on heating. I wanted to bring back all the classical details, so there was a lot of work to be done.'

In the end, it took two years to complete the work. Her decisions about space were bold. The hall, for example, was substantially enlarged to give an instant impression of airiness, whereas other designers might have made more of the kitchen that leads off it – now a narrow, streamlined galley. Two meagre bedrooms were knocked into one generous one, filled with light from the floor-to-ceiling windows, while the third was added to the drawing room as a dining area. This left no room for the home office she occasionally needs, so she devised a wall cupboard that opens to reveal a little workstation. The ceilings have been raised throughout to their original height.

Detailing has always been important to Virginia: 'It ups the whole game – particularly when you're working in a small space, because everyone can see it more easily; I spend hours and hours on it.' So, as you enter the flat, you notice the beading on the front door, the cornice she has added to the hall and the double doors into the drawing room. Sir John Soane has been a strong influence, as have two twentieth-century designers, John Fowler and David Hicks.

'What I really love is bringing old buildings to life for the twenty-first century,' says Virginia, whose interior-design commissions have included the eighteenth-century Southill Park in Bedfordshire. 'I feel most comfortable working with classical houses, but one has to move with the times and add modern elements.'

With her own flat, she has created a traditional backdrop but then enhanced it with the unexpected. Of the drawing room, she says, 'I started with a neutral palette and then added the warm elements: a suzani tablecloth from Uzbekistan, ikat cushions and red Claremont linen on the nineteenth-century French chairs.' A mirror with antique glass adapted from a Henry Holland design at Southill works remarkably well with a Nigel Carew-Jones acrylic [Perspex?] table and a set of Picasso lithographs ('a birthday present to myself: I wanted to move away from the big oil paintings you might expect').

Similarly, the hall, with its walls painted in Paint and Paper Library's 'Thames Mud', is enlivened by an ikat rug framed in Perspex. And in the bedroom, the pale green and yellow 'Tree of Life' curtains and headboard – made in her own colourway by Bernard Thorp – are offset by paintings of the Silk Route by Harry Holcroft and a bold abstract by Breon O'Casey.

So does she have any regrets about leaving Knightsbridge? It seems not. 'In a square like this you can believe you're in the country. I've come to love Pimlico, because it's such an easy-going place to live: it's not as stuffy as some of the so-called smarter areas. There's a bit of everything going on here' □

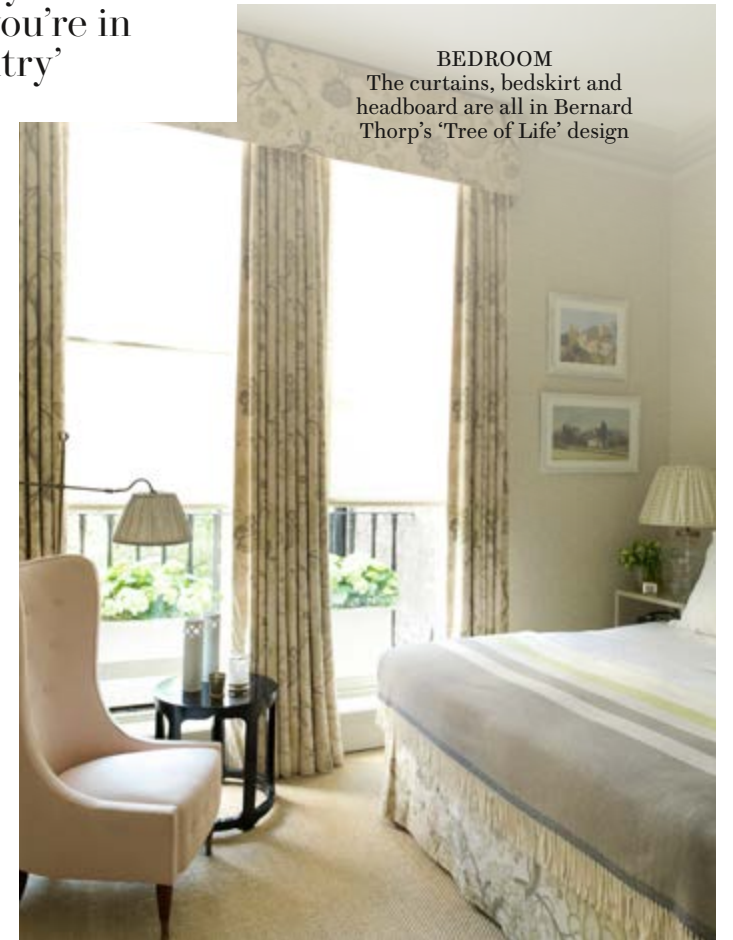
Virginia Howard: [virginiahoward.co.uk](http://virginiahoward.co.uk)



**HIDDEN OFFICE**

In the dining area, Virginia created a workspace inside a wall cupboard

'I've come to love Pimlico. In a square like this, you can believe you're in the country'



**BEDROOM**

The curtains, bedskirt and headboard are all in Bernard Thorp's 'Tree of Life' design