

# Changing of the Guard

Russian-born fashion mogul Leon Max  
moves into Easton Neston and  
brings the English Baroque  
masterpiece back to  
award-winning life

TEXT BY MITCHELL OWENS  
PHOTOGRAPHY BY OBERTO GILI  
PRODUCED BY HOWARD CHRISTIAN

The east façade  
of Easton Neston, in  
Northamptonshire,  
England. The 1702 house  
by Nicholas Hawksmoor  
is owned by fashion  
designer Leon Max, who  
restored it with Ptolemy  
Dean Architects and  
Spencer-Churchill Designs.  
For details see Sources.





In the drawing room, the painting over the mantel is from the school of Sir Peter Paul Rubens; the canvases on the far wall are by Luca Giordano (top) and Enoch Seeman. The George II marble-top mahogany table hosts 19th-century Chinese jars. The carpet is a 19th-century Aubusson.



Max at ease in the library, which was created in 1967 by architect Roderick Gradidge and designer David Hicks.

Visitors to Leon Max's country house in Northamptonshire, England, might be forgiven for thinking that George I still rules the sceptered isle. Gilt-wood consoles in the manner of William Kent gleam in a dining room. A majestic canvas from the school of Sir Peter Paul Rubens depicting a mythological boar hunt graces a salon swathed in silk damask. Marble busts representing the seasons populate a gallery where a vast arched window frames an ornamental canal glittering in the verdant distance.

"The English countryside is one of the most agreeable places in which to put down roots," says Max, a Russian-born, California-based fashion entrepreneur who launched the popular women's-wear label Max Studio in 1979 and opened its first London boutique last November. "Guys on Wall Street are killing themselves to have a place in the Hamptons," he continues with a smile, "but this is a much better idea." →





**Left:** Circa-1800 French riverscapes share the garden hall with antique marble busts depicting the four seasons; the painted benches were designed in the manner of 18th-century British architect William Kent. **Below:** The Red Dining Room features a Regency pedestal table surrounded by circa-1860 chairs in the Queen Anne style. Seascapes by 18th-century British artist Samuel Scott overlook an Irish Georgian mahogany table and a Dutch Baroque cabinet-on-stand. The ormolu chandelier is 19th-century French, the walls are covered in a custom-made silk-wool damask copied from an 18th-century document, and the carpet is a circa-1840 Aubusson.

This is Easton Neston, the 1702 masterpiece by Nicholas Hawksmoor, an ingeniously inventive architect who also had a hand in Blenheim Palace and Castle Howard. From its stone lions marching along the roofline to its wildly attenuated windows, the ashlar building represents the domestic high point of the English Baroque, a flamboyant style that flowered briefly before Palladian stateliness became all the rage. Architectural historian Nikolaus Pevsner called it “perhaps the finest house of its date” in the nation, adding that the edifice, commissioned by Sir William Fermor, first Baron Lempster, “combines grandeur with urbanity to a degree rare in England and perhaps only matched at Chatsworth,” the 297-room seat of the dukes of Devonshire. Easton Neston, however, works its magic on a much smaller scale. Though the 36-room dwelling, about an hour northwest of London, appears to be only two stories high, it is laced with mezzanines that provide four levels of living space, totaling about 32,000 square feet.

Despite the gilded Fermor motto carved above its main entrance—*Hora e Sempre*, Latin for “Now and Always”—Easton Neston was imperiled by the time Max arrived on the scene in 2005. That year, financial pressures forced the third Baron Hesketh, a Fermor descendant, to unload generations of Georgian family portraits, Gobelins tapestries, and more at Sotheby’s. (The sale brought \$16 million.) He also put the house and 600 surrounding acres on the market, declaring that the annual upkeep, which amounted to about \$3 million, was too steep to bear. →



Graced with a wrought-iron balustrade, the Great Staircase ascends from a hall outfitted with Georgian antiques, Italian Renaissance statuary, and paintings by, among others, 17th-century artist Sir Peter Lely and his studio. On the gilt-wood table stands a pair of Louis-Philippe oil lamps.





For Max, the offering couldn't have happened at a more propitious time. An architecture aficionado whose previous addresses include works by Greene and Greene and Richard Neutra—Max's primary residence these days is a Spanish Colonial Revival castle in Los Angeles—he had long toyed with the idea of an English redoubt. That a "landowner friend had converted a little chapel next to his beautiful Georgian house in Gloucestershire into an estate office" only strengthened the notion, Max explains. "I thought I'd find a grand old estate, set up my design studio on the property, and live there for part of the year."

While attending the Sotheby's auction, which was held at Easton Neston, the fashion designer was hooked, especially by the triumphant axial hall that stretches 100 feet from one side of the house to the other. "I figured I'd just clean it up and move in," says Max, who purchased the property after the asking price (\$34 million) had been lowered to what he calls "a much better figure." That enthusiasm was somewhat naive, since beneath the palatial beauty lurked a dodgy infrastructure. "The wiring dated from the 1920s, as did the plumbing, and there was asbestos," Max says. "It seemed a good time to revamp the place."

Two exceptional British allies joined him in what turned out to be a three-year renovation. One was Ptolemy Dean, a traditionalist architect recently named Surveyor of the Fabric at Westminster Abbey, an advisory position that, neatly enough, was once held by Hawksmoor. The other was interior designer Lady Henrietta Spencer-Churchill, who, as the daughter of the 11th Duke of Marlborough, grew up at Blenheim Palace. "I met her at a dinner party about 15 years ago," Max recalls. "We got into a heated discussion about what I consider to be dishonesty in decor, such as creating aristocratic patinated interiors in California. Henrietta got miffed at me at the time, but she was a natural for this commission." First impressions forgotten, Spencer-Churchill is now firmly in Max's camp. "Some very skeptical people questioned what Leon was going to do to the house," she recollects. "But he wasn't ever going to ruin its character."

The team's plan was to restore Easton Neston's operating systems, as well as its 18th-century mien, within reason. "I don't really want a chair I can't sit on," Max observes. "All the tables should be old, and all the chairs should be new if one can help it." Since Lord Hesketh's sale had emptied the house, Max was forced

**Above:** Architect Ptolemy Dean restored the vaulted basement to its late-17th-century glory and made it the primary kitchen.

**Opposite:** The Yellow Dining Room's ornate stuccowork dates from the 1730s; the marble mantel is by William Kent, and the chandeliers, mahogany table, and curtain fabric were custom made. The portrait of the first Duchess of Grafton and her son is by Sir Godfrey Kneller, and the hunting scene is attributed to Paul de Vos.







**From top:** The vista from a second-floor window takes in an ornamental pool ringed by clipped hedges and, in the distance, an 800-yard-long canal. Reportedly designed in the late 17th century by Sir Christopher Wren, the redbrick wing houses Max's design studio. Topiary lends sculptural presence to the grounds. **Opposite:** Stone columns crowned with 19th-century statues flank a gravel walk in the gardens.



to furnish it from scratch. Working from California with a computer-generated model of the interiors as a cheat sheet and masses of auction catalogues, he began accumulating furnishings and art—the bigger the better. “Rooms as large as those at Easton Neston swallow up furniture,” Spencer-Churchill explains. “There aren’t a lot of houses where you know tapestries are going to work.” Billboard-size paintings turned out to be perfect, too, including the romantic set of antique riverscapes now lining the ground-floor garden hall. Says Max, “It’s a great luxury to buy very big canvases, because nobody has space for them anymore.”

Still, missteps were made. “Leon, have you actually seen it?” was a frequent Spencer-Churchill response upon receiving an e-mail about some intended acquisition. “A few things he bought sight unseen, because the prices were good,” she says. “But then he would admit, ‘Oops, I made a mistake on that,’ and sell them. He’s got a good eye for scale, though, and has ended up with an eclectic mix of styles. I don’t mind that. That’s how a house like this would have evolved.” Several treasures lost through the auction were reproduced by Spencer-Churchill, most spectacularly a 19th-century rock-crystal chandelier. The designer was startled to learn, however, that Max was going to have most of the velvets and damasks required for the curtains and walls woven by the same Chinese mills that produce the fabrics for his clothing lines. But when the huge bolts finally arrived, Spencer-Churchill found herself pleasantly surprised by their quality and impressed that Max had one pattern copied from an 18th-century document.

In addition to a rejuvenated decor, Easton Neston gained what it had needed for years—bedrooms with en suite sitting rooms and baths. The refurbished servants’ dining hall has become a cheerful spot for casual





**Clockwise from top:** A 17th-century Gobelins scene from the life of King Solomon is displayed in the sitting room of the master suite. The Tapestry Bedroom features a George III mahogany bed with a custom-printed linen canopy; the carpet is a 19th-century Sultanabad. The bath of the Empress Suite—named in honor of Empress Elisabeth of Austria, who rented Easton Neston in 1876—is anchored by a marble tub with Lefroy Brooks fittings.



The German Bedroom, named for the origin of its furnishings, includes an 18th-century marquetry bed, a gilt-wood mirror, and a circa-1800 cylinder desk. The bed hangings, in a Marvic print, are lined with a Brunswick & Fils check.



meals and is much used by Max Studio employees, who work out of a wing attributed to Sir Christopher Wren, Hawksmoor's mentor; the bright-white space is now outfitted with goth furniture by one of Max's friends, fashion designer Rick Owens.

Curiously, the area Max seems most pleased with—and whose restoration was heralded when the Georgian Group gave Dean a preservation award last year for his Easton Neston efforts—is the basement. Once a labyrinth of exposed wiring and waterlogged limestone, the subterranean chamber has been returned to its Hawksmoor glory, the superb vaulted ceiling now sheltering the main kitchen. Renovating the basement took a full year and more money than Max expected, but he insists it was worth the trouble. “The criterion was to make everything look like it's always been here,” says the fashion designer, proudly embracing the house motto—“Now and Always.” □



**Above:** An 18th-century grisaille painting hangs in the master bath; the tub fittings are by Lefroy Brooks.  
**Right:** The master bedroom is dominated by a majestic 17th-century Brussels tapestry by Geraert van der Strecken; a late-19th-century Chinese embroidered-silk coverlet dresses the gilt-wood bed. The parcel-gilt armchairs are by *ébéniste* Jean-Baptiste-Claude Séné, and the table and side chairs are 18th-century Italian; the carpet is a Louis XVI Aubusson.

