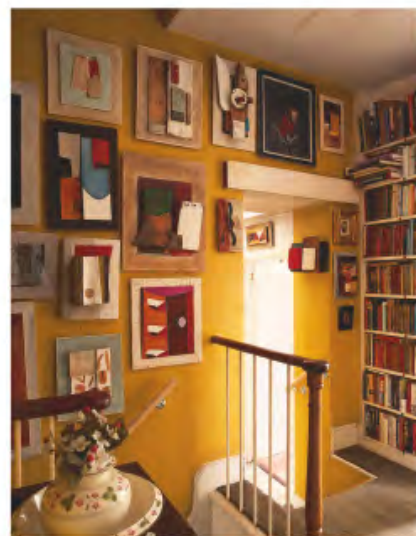


This page, clockwise from top left: the wallcovering in the ground-floor living room, made of slices of cork laid on gold paper, is topped with Hugh's 3D assemblages; on the mantelpiece, behind his painted standing object *Fenge* (1995), is a postcard of Japanese ballet dancer Sano Osata, whom he knew during his teens; Penny's mother, Edith Jenkinson, bought the Buddha in the corner of the living room in China in the 1920s; *Side Street* (1994) and a bowl of Indian rolling pins can be seen on a table in the dining room. Opposite: dozens of brushes line the walls in Hugh's first-floor workshop

BY ACCIDENT AND DESIGN

Whether or not Hugh Lee intended to become an artist, from retirement at 60 until his death aged 93 he created over 600 works. Never selling a single piece, the former civil servant carefully curated an ever-rotating display of his abstract paintings, objets trouvés and rustic assemblages, turning the Richmond home he shared with his wife into a living gallery. Emma J. Page chances upon owls, fossils with faces and scrap-metal figurines. Photography: Robert Sanderson



Top: the dining room features an early trestle table, inherited from Hugh's father. The chairs came from the General Trading Company, at a time when the store sold antiques. Above left: below a trio of assemblages over the doorway, a selection of plain glassware, collected by Hugh, sits on a shelf. Pieces include ale and wine glasses, mugs and jugs. Above right: in the entrance hall, the underside of the staircase is painted in Hugh and Penny's preferred shade of bright yellow. Several of Hugh's standing objects sit on the bookcase, including his *Caliper Owl* (1989)

Top: a treasured side table by British furniture-maker Alan Peters stands to the right in the first-floor sitting room, once a bedroom for two teenage boys. Above left: in the entrance hall and first-floor landing, Hugh's rustic assemblages and abstracts hang densely on the walls. Among them are *Owl Barn* (above the doorway, left) and *Spokeshave* (left of the doorway), which incorporates the tool used for planing the spokes of wheels. Above right: on a decorative chest in the aforementioned sitting room, three standing objects by Hugh accompany a clay pot by ceramicist Paul Philp

THE UNPREPOSSESSING frontage of Hugh and Penny Lee's former Richmond home gives no hint of the treasures it conceals. But the inside tells a different story. On virtually every inch of wall space hangs a carefully curated selection of Hugh's own colourful abstracts, mainly oil on board, interspersed with 3D pieces and rustic assemblages, while sculptures, or standing objects, as Hugh called them, populate nearly every surface.

This collection evolved over time. A lover of art, objets trouvés and ceramics, Hugh gathered pieces all his life, from ironware dishes to pottery by Hans Coper and Lucie Rie, but it wasn't until the end of a 30-year career in HM Treasury that he produced his own work in earnest. From his retirement at 60 until his death aged 93 in 2011, he created 600-plus pieces, mounting his first external show at Richmond's Orleans House Gallery in his 90th year.

But Hugh's art remained inexorably linked with the home he shared for over 40 years with his wife, Penny, a fellow civil servant, and the five children they raised. They moved there in 1969. Originally semi-detached, the late-Victorian, three-storey home had suffered war damage. It was occupied by the son of the first owners, says Penny. 'Nearby bombs had caused plaster collapse on the third floor that had never been repaired.'

A project like this suited the couple. Hugh always had an interest in architecture, once commissioning Eino Goldfinger to build him a home in Hampstead, before financial constraints caused him to reconsider. Hugh and Penny took on renovations piecemeal, as funds allowed. First they filled in the side return with two extra storeys and extended the kitchen, with the help of local architect and friend Charles Rathbone, and later they added a third floor. 'It was a no-nonsense, architecturally plain house and we liked that,' says Penny. 'By extending to the side, we created two more bedrooms and an additional bathroom. The interiors were adorned with simple fittings, and we retained some period elements, contrasting white walls with ones in bright sludgy green or strong yellow.'

The house benefited from the couple's love of art. Penny had works by Alfred Wallis and Ben and Winifred Nicholson, friends of her mother, Edith Jenkinson, who trained at Byam Shaw School of Art, and shared a studio with Ben in the 1920s. Hugh's collection included pieces by Anthony Fry and Julian Trevelyan.

Long days at the Treasury were punctuated by excursions to auction houses, antique shops and galleries, where Hugh would pick up pieces to bring home on approval. A life-long love of the South Downs also unearthed treasures - driftwood, stones and fossils. Hugh found beauty in objects that others might overlook. 'Rust is very useful,' he declared in 2008, when asked about its recurrent presence in his work. 'It's just a wonderful colour.'

But Hugh never hankered after becoming an artist. His passions were always singular and often visceral. 'Anything he did, he wanted to do as well as he could,' reflects Penny. 'And while he was doing it, there was nothing else in the world. He had successive crazes really. At one point it was genealogy. Or if he was listening to music, he didn't want anything else to distract him. He was a perfectionist, and he had the vulnerabilities that accompany that trait.'

Instead, his own pieces unfolded spontaneously in the late 1970s. Over time, Hugh embraced a host of abstract artists including Georges Braque, Henri Matisse and Kurt Schwitters, each of whom influenced his style. He also felt a kinship with Margaret Mellis's compositions. 'It all started with the making and painting of picture frames, then the transformation of random objects into assemblages,' says his eldest daughter Catherine. 'Much later, that developed into days spent with paintbrush in hand in the garden shed, with increasingly large-scale and elaborate works emerging.'

It was a set of 1920s brushes given to him by his mother-in-law, Edith, when he was 61 that prompted Hugh's first foray. His initial efforts were rudimentary, involving pots of emulsion before he graduated to oils on board. From colourful abstracts to mounted scrap-metal figurines, he produced piece after piece, eventually from a bedroom he turned into a makeshift studio.

'Ideas come to me as rapidly as they have in the past,' Hugh said, reflecting on his work in 2008, 'and as long as they continue, I shall give rein to them.' Everyday items mutated into unique ensembles. An old wooden salad bowl was upended, painted and reimagined in *Buzz/Nut*, a cheeseboard was doctored to form part of an abstract. Humour was essential, fossils acquired faces and owls became a recurring motif.

Though Hugh's art hardly left the house, he enjoyed showing it to family and friends. His daughter Harriet remembers carrying works into the living room for guests to see. 'I'd bring them in and they'd guess their names. But he was sensitive and disliked criticism. He preferred to hang his art at close quarters, where he could assess it. Pictures he'd just finished were hung in a good light, often in the kitchen so he could sit at the end of the table and look at them,' says Penny. 'Then he'd move them when the next came along, which meant rehanging several at once to create the right composition.'

Revisions were common, during work or years later, when he might turn a piece upside down, modify it or split it in two. Gradually, the house became a living gallery space and Hugh's art entered into a symbiotic relationship with the setting. He would never sell a single piece, sometimes citing questionable durability by way of excuse. In truth the art had become an integral part of his home and his life. 'I think it's just because I am... unduly possessive about them,' he said in 2008, 'they are my children, if you like.'

Despite a couple of shows, including one at the Pasmore Gallery at Harrow School where he had been a pupil, Hugh struggled to see himself as an artist. 'Though he took part in local open-house exhibitions and had postcards of his work,' says Harriet, 'he couldn't understand why someone might want to display it as it wasn't for sale. He didn't consider himself an artist as he wasn't trained.'

These portraits of the house taken for posterity before it was sold in 2012 reveal the intimate and deeply personal setting. 'My favourite aspect of his art is the way the pieces worked in tight groups, creating something greater than the sum of their parts,' reflects Hugh's son Will. It's a sentiment echoed by Harriet, who believes the family home itself was in fact his greatest artwork. For details, visit hughlee.co.uk. Penny Lee's new house will be open during the Dulwich Festival, 8-17 May. For details, visit openhouseart.co.uk



Opposite: in Hugh and Penny's bedroom a Chinese lady, made of clay, sits atop a blue-and-white painted chest of drawers found at Antiquated, a decorative-antique dealer's in Petworth. Above it hangs a made-by-figure- and landscape-painter Anthony Fry. The chairs were bought at an auction in Gloucestershire. This page: the second-floor bathroom, painted in contrasting brown and red was primarily used by the children. Examples from Hugh's vast body of work have found their way into this space too, via a series of playful assemblages and bright abstracts