

# KINFOLK

A full-page photograph of a man with dark skin and short hair, looking over his shoulder towards the camera. He is wearing a green, ribbed, long-sleeved turtleneck sweater. He is standing in a field of tall, dry grass that is illuminated by warm, golden light, suggesting late afternoon or early morning. The background is a dense field of similar grass.

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# HOME TOUR: Ollivier & Gladys Chenel



A pas de deux  
inside an antiques-filled  
Paris apartment.

WORDS  
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( below )      Olivier and Gladys Chenel, pictured at Galerie Chenel, their antiques gallery on the Right Bank. Ollivier is a third-generation antiques dealer, and the lineage may continue; the couple's teenage son, Theophile, has already started rooting around flea markets.





“ This is a family apartment. It is a miracle that nothing has ever been broken.”

In Ollivier and Gladys Chenel's Paris apartment there is a 17th-century marble console, on which a series of objects have been carefully arranged: a second-century marble head, the fragment of a column from an ancient Roman monument, a ceramic dove by Pablo Picasso and a photograph of the Mediterranean coast taken from inside Adalberto Libera's iconic Villa Malaparte by François Halard. It's a neat cross-section of the eclectic mix of art, objects and antiquities that fill the couple's home in the historic city center.

For Ollivier and Gladys, though, the key to understanding their creative and collaborative approach to collecting is, in fact, a small work by the British artist John Stezaker. It hangs in the entryway and consists of two black-and-white photographs combined to create a single image of a man and a woman. “At first you see this

as a collage of artifacts of the past,” says Gladys. “You then realize that it forms quite a unique and surreal portrait of two people.” In much the same way, their collection has grown to be a kind of double self-portrait, the product of their shared interests and the many years they have been together.

While their apartment might be filled with a wealth of art and objects, the Chenels don't see themselves as collectors. Serious collecting is left to their clients. The couple founded Galerie Chenel in 1999 along with Ollivier's brother, Adrien, specializing in ancient sculpture. “If we really started collecting antiques we would never sell anything, and that wouldn't be good for business,” says Ollivier.

Most of the antiquities in the couple's apartment are on temporary loan from the gallery. But the ephemerality of their collection emphasizes the intimate and tactile relationship the couple has with these objects.

These are not investments that need to be carefully stored and never seen but works of art that are there to be studied and shared before they move on to a new home.

“They are sculptural objects. You want to see them from every side, so you have to touch them,” says Gladys, spinning an Egyptian alabaster vase on the table in front of her. “It's always been important to us that this is a family apartment where people will feel comfortable and our kids can play, rather than a museum. Though it is something of a miracle that nothing has ever been broken.”

The Chenels had been looking for the perfect place for a long time. They were renting typically Parisian, Haussmannian-style apartments but now they were looking to buy and wanted somewhere interesting and unusual to make it worthwhile. After searching for several years, they walked into this apartment inside a 17th-century building. “It had been empty for two years when we first saw it,” Gladys says. “But you could tell it had a soul. As soon as I saw the original parquet floor, I knew we had to find a way to live here.”

Just as in this historic part of Paris, which survived the extensive redevelopment of the city in the mid-19th century, little has changed in the apartment over the centuries. The previous owner had knocked through to the adjacent apartment in the 1970s but the original features—the painted ceilings, the vast marble fireplace, the parquet floor—had otherwise been left untouched.

“We wanted to find somewhere that we could adapt to, rather than adapting the house to fit us,” Ollivier says. Their architectural interventions in the apartment were largely limited to converting the second entryway into a bedroom for their son and remodeling the bathrooms, which Gladys designed. Even the fabric covering the wall in the bedroom was left unchanged, informing the couple's approach to the decoration of the rest of the room.



















( above ) Above the bed, the Chenels have hung a painting by Albert Chubac, a lesser-known Swiss artist who most often worked in pure abstraction.  
 ( left ) The second sitting room at the Chenels' home. Most of the antiquities in the apartment are on temporary loan from their gallery.

This is not to say that the apartment is a Louis XIV-era house museum. The couple may have restored the painted ceilings but the space has also been filled with modern and contemporary artwork and carefully chosen design pieces, such as the Pierre Augustin Rose sofa that curves across the living room and the Mario Bellini-designed Cassina table in the dining room. That it all works together with the ancient objects—which include a Corinthian capital, the top part of a column, upended to serve as a plinth—is a testament to the couple's careful approach. "We will never buy anything just because we've seen it in a catalog and like the look of it," Gladys says. "Behind every piece, there is a story."

The couple gives several examples: The Picasso ceramics are similar to those sold by Ollivier's father, who was also a dealer; the photorealistic drawing by Emmanuel Régent of a temple is from Nice, where the couple met; the antique narwhal tusk is a prized family object because their children used to think it came from a unicorn.

As at the gallery—where they have frequently held exhibitions of contemporary

art, design and photography alongside ancient sculpture—the couple's dynamic approach to antiquities at home is a breath of fresh air, blowing the dust from a specialism that has been seen as traditional and elitist.

"We want to show how you can live with antiquities. They don't only have to be in a museum," Ollivier says. "And it's such a joy to live with them," Gladys continues. "The pieces always look different in the morning light than in the afternoon. I think we would struggle to live without sculptures in our lives now. We will even take a piece or two with us on holiday."

The collecting of antiquities was at its height of popularity in the 19th century, when Greek, Roman and Egyptian artifacts were seen to associate their owner with the elevated ideals of ancient civilizations. Ollivier and Gladys' approach, however, is far more humble, rooted in a sense of wonder and passion for ancient sculpture that inspired them to open their gallery 23 years ago.

"Above all, we love architectural fragments," Ollivier says. "You can imagine the scale and spirit of a colossal building from a much smaller piece."

At Ollivier and Gladys' home, one also gets the sense of the scale of time from these antiquities, of the different owners and homes that they have passed through since they were created. Many have existed for more than 2,000 years and could go on existing for as long yet. "We are only guardians of these sculptures," Ollivier says. "In one or two generations, we'll be gone, though people will be able to find out that these objects once passed through us." "The best moments when we are researching the provenance of an object at the gallery are when we find it in a photograph from an old issue of *Connaissance des Arts* or *AD*," adds Gladys. "It's nice to think that maybe in 50 years, people will be looking through a magazine and see that their piece was once in this house."

(1) Galerie Chenel has sold ancient sculptures to some of the world's most important institutions, including the Metropolitan Museum of Art, the Boston Museum of Fine Arts, the British Museum and the Louvre Museum. The gallery is actually located opposite the Louvre, on Quai Voltaire.



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## MY FAVORITE THING

Words:  
George Upton

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GLADYS CHENEL, interviewed on page 86, on the Egyptian god that oversees her home.

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We came across this sculpture of the Egyptian god Bes at a sale in America about 20 years ago. He's quite unusual. Bes was worshipped as the protector of the household and depictions of him are normally quite small. This one, however, was made by the Romans in the 1st century B.C.E. It's sculpted in nenfro, a kind of lava, which means it's surprisingly light and contrasts with his heavy, cartoonlike expression.

We had acquired the sculpture for our gallery but my husband and I came to fall in love with it. I was secretly quite happy when it

didn't sell. Since then it has become part of the family. It's the piece that we have owned for the longest and the first object we find a home for when we have moved house. At the moment, it's in the dining room but in our last apartment it was in the hall. The children would play around him and we would dress him up when they had parties—we once gave him an eyepatch and tied a scarf around his neck when my son had a pirate-themed birthday.

He's really watched us grow up. It feels like we can talk to him, to tell him our secrets.