

COLLECTING PATTERNS

Take a modern American artist and a 19th-century British collector and what do you get? A fascinating new show at Salisbury & South Wiltshire Museum, says HANNAH GUINNESS

An absorbing new exhibition at Salisbury & South Wiltshire Museum examines how artist Sue Johnson has been inspired by the 19th-century collector General Pitt Rivers.

There were plenty of Victorians who were zealous accumulators of objects so why, I wondered, was Sue so moved by this one? Interestingly, it turns out that Pitt Rivers is regarded as a founding father of modern archaeology. This, Sue explains, was down to his innovative techniques: "General Pitt Rivers was highly methodical and rigorously scientific in the sense that he believed that everyday objects should be carefully collected and studied – not just valuable, rare or exotic pieces."

Pitt Rivers: Collecting Patterns is made up of three bodies of work that were all inspired by Pitt Rivers pieces. The first two, *The Curious Nature of Objects* and *The Nature of Curious Objects* are based on an illustrated nine-volume manuscript inventory, held at Cambridge University Library, of Pitt Rivers' 'second collection' – objects that are now mostly lost or cannot be viewed in person. Sue came across the inventory while exploring the collections at the Pitt Rivers Museum in Oxford, and used the illustrations of items in these records and similar objects in the museum to create her works.

Making connections

She especially noticed how often "functional objects took on the shape of a plant or animal", and her delicate watercolour still lifes blur the lines between inanimate objects and organic entities. "In *Birds Without Feathers*, an



Photograph © Malcolm Osman, Pitt Rivers Museum, University of Oxford

out-of-context floating branch, designed to mimic a 17th- or 18th-century natural history illustration, now shows Pitt Rivers' 'second collection' items that have been created in the shape of birds. These 'birds' perch on branches, flightless as human-made objects. Yet birds and objects in collections are migratory – birds fly, and in their own 'lives' objects are collected, transported and installed in new (museum) locations.

"Throughout, it was my aim to shed new light on the collecting practices of General Pitt Rivers, sometimes by juxtaposing objects that were quite different in almost

every way yet shared a single common characteristic, or alternately by creating an image that illuminated a type of object that could be found often within the collection, such as weapons, tools and ceremonial objects. In all of my work, it was important to imagine the objects as active, animated, with the possibility for having a life of their own."

Objects for contemplation

The third group of work, entitled *Armchair Archaeology: A Pitt Rivers Wallpaper Collection*, is based on Salisbury Museum's Wessex Collection of objects collected by Pitt Rivers during his archaeological work in the local area. When first visiting the museum Sue was struck by a photograph of a pool table in the General's home, on which were arranged artefacts from his excavations.

"In the same way that objects were laid out on the pool table for contemplation in a domestic space, I have designed wallpaper that depicts objects for contemplation.

Decoding the images on vessels of antiquity, or puzzling over the use of particularly curious objects, takes time and patience.

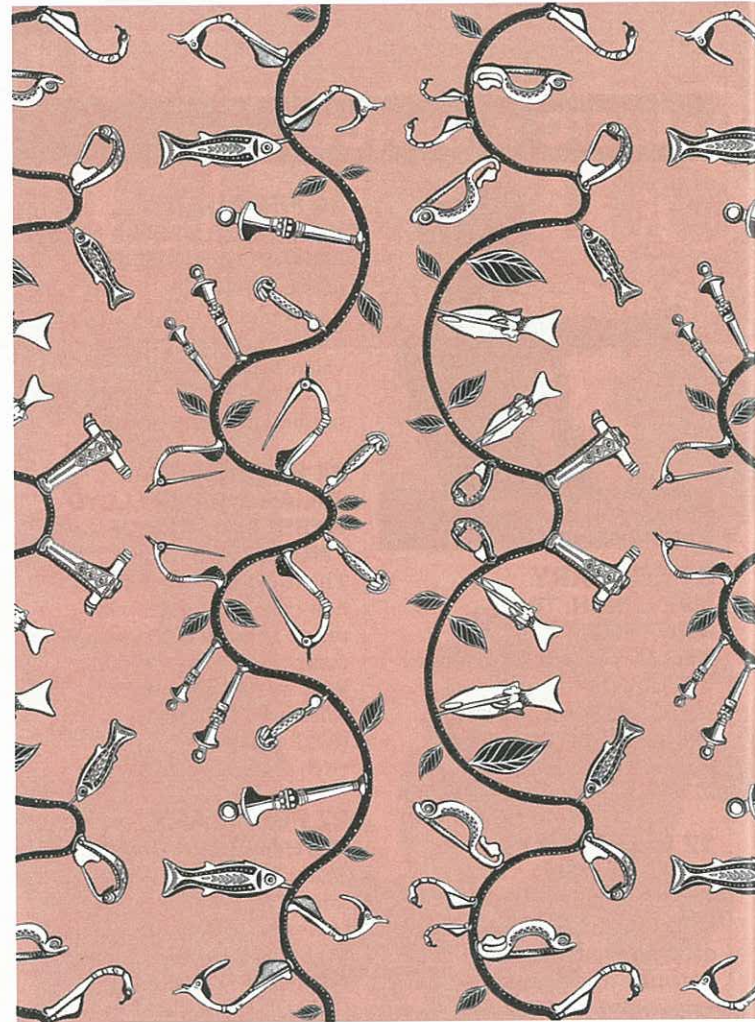
Rather than wallpaper being purely decorative, this new wallpaper carries a didactic purpose, creating a specifically contemplative mood for a room, such as a library or study. Said another way – the objects become part of a subliminal visual experience, ever-present in the room."

As far as creative pairings go it's an unusual one: a 21st-century American artist and a 19th-century Victorian collector, but as this new exhibition goes to show, the results could not have been more fruitful. **SL**

Pitt Rivers: Collecting Patterns
1 February – 10 May at Salisbury & South Wiltshire Museum
Tel: 01722 332151;
salisburymuseum.org.uk



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Clockwise from top left: In *Birds Without Feathers* Sue blurs the line between organic entity and inanimate object; Sue uses Pitt Rivers' objects in her wallpaper designs; Goldfishing Bowl; Paddling Bush – plant or decorative object?; the ambiguous forms of Sue's work