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Obituaries

Christopher Gibbs

Bohemian socialite and dandy credited with introducing fashionable members of the Swinging Sixties to fine antiques, flares and drugs

One night in the summer of 1968 Christopher Gibbs was partying hard with Mick Jagger and Keith Richards at a South Kensington nightclub. At about 2am Gibbs suggested that they adjourn to Stonehenge to watch the sun rise.

Piling into Richards's chauffeur-driven Bentley with the two Stones, Marianne Faithfull and the American singer Gram Parsons, the party arrived just in time to watch the sun come up over the prehistoric monument, "all gibbering with acid", as Gibbs put it. Still high on LSD, they went to a pub in Salisbury and breakfasted on kippers.

It was a typical day in the life of the extraordinary antiques dealer and socialite, whose appetite for drugs earned the admiration of Richards, who conceded that even he could not keep up. "He was crazy," Richards recalled in his memoir *Life*. "He's the only guy I know who would wake up and break an amyl nitrate popper under his nose... He was an adventurous lad. He was ready to jump into the unknown."

Richards particularly enjoyed staying at Gibbs's apartment at Cheyne Walk on the Embankment, not only because of the endless supply of illicit substances, but also because he could indulge in the remarkable library. "I could just sit around, look at beautiful first editions and great illustrations and paintings and stuff that I hadn't had time to get into," Richards recalled.

Gibbs was equally prominent in the bohemian expat scene in Morocco. Brian Jones and Anita Pallenberg (obituary, June 14, 2017) stayed there in 1966 and, after swapping one Rolling Stone for another, Pallenberg spent Christmas 1967 there with Richards and Gibbs. Almost inevitably, Gibbs was present at Richards's home at West Wittering, West Sussex, in 1967 during the drug raid that led to Jagger and Richards receiving jail sentences.

Yet Gibbs was more than a mere drug buddy to the Stones. He helped Jagger to secure the high-society introductions that he craved; showed him around the "palaces and estates" of rural England when he was looking to buy a place; and introduced him to Prince Rupert Loewenstein (obituary, May 22, 2014), who became the group's financial manager.

Beyond the Stones and their associates Gibbs had a far wider circle, acting as style guru and playmate to many who occupied fashionable society in the 1960s, whether or not they could remember being there. His antiques shop off Sloane Avenue in Chelsea furnished with great treasures the mansions of a generation that also included John Paul Getty Jr and Lord Rothschild.

He was once described as "part Montesquieu, part Beau Brummell and part Baudelaire", while the writer James Delingpole noted that "with his silvery hair, well-cut but rumpled suit, and diffident, vaguely ecclesiastical air, he more closely resembles an Anglican dean than an acid-tripping ex-roué once known as the king of Chelsea".

In short, Gibbs was a purveyor of exceptional and intriguing pieces who believed that taste itself was not something that could be learnt. "It's something you catch," he said, "like measles or religion." His position as a style guru was assured when he became an editor



Gibbs in 2006. Right, with Mick Jagger and Marianne Faithfull in Dublin, 1967

of *Men in Vogue*, which was published between 1965 and 1970, coinciding with the "peacock revolution" in English men's fashion. Being a dandy is what he excelled at. "You had to be monumentally narcissistic and have time on your hands, and just about enough money to do it," he declared.

Christopher Henry Gibbs was born in 1938; he had a twin sister and four older brothers. The family had made its fortune in the guano industry (or, as the rhyme put it: "Mr Gibbs/ Made his dibs/

Taste cannot be learnt. It 'is something you catch, like measles or religion'

Selling the turds/ Off foreign birds"). His father was Sir Geoffrey Cokayne Gibbs, a senior civil servant during the war who in peacetime became chairman of Antony Gibbs & Sons, the family's merchant bank; his uncle, Sir Humphrey Gibbs, was governor of Rhodesia during the Unilateral Declaration of Independence.

In 1947 Sir Geoffrey inherited the rambling Manor House and estate at Clifton Hampden, Oxfordshire, which had been in the family since the 1840s. Young Christopher recalled a childhood spent boating on the Thames, swimming and shooting, while also describing the thrill of pressing his young face up against antique-shop windows. He visited Christie's auctions when still in grey flannel slippers; by 14 he was sporting velvet slippers and a monocle on a blue ribbon.

At 15 he was expelled from Eton for "various offences... illicit drinking, panty raids of other boys' rooms — that sort of thing". His crimes included organising a group of boys to pilfer books from Ma Brown's antiquarian bookshop and sell them back to her.

He was obliged to finish his schooling at Stanbridge Earls in Hampshire, which he described as "a school for sensitive, difficult boys". It was followed by his first job, as an estate agent for Knight Frank & Rutley. This was interrupted by National Service with the army, but he lasted only three months before being "booted out" as medically unfit (as a child he had polio).

There were brief studies at the Sorbonne in Paris, while back in London he lived opposite St Paul's Cathedral, engaging in a dubious flirtation with the property business. At 20, and with £10,000 from his mother, he set up as an antiques dealer, returning from buying trips to Morocco with "rugs, lamps, djellabas, wall hangings and the name of the best hash dealer in Tangier". His first shop, opened in 1958, was a small place in Camden Passage, a narrow, flagstoned alley in Islington. By 1962 he had moved to larger premises in Elystan Street, Chelsea, where his stock was distinguished by an eclectic richness. By now the charming and sociable Gibbs was at the heart of the fashionable Chelsea set. He was, by one estimation, "the most avant-garde dresser this country has ever had", favouring a flared trouser as early as 1961 and with a wardrobe that mixed clothes brought back from north Africa with the colourful reinvention of tradi-



tional British tailoring found at places such as Blades in Dover Street.

His flat in Cheyne Walk hosted many of the gatherings of that well-heeled bohemia, as well as providing the set for a marijuana-smoking party scene in Michelangelo Antonioni's film *Blow-Up* (1966). Through shared acquaintances and Mrs Beaton's Tent in Frith Street, a common Soho haunt, his circle came to include the Stones, whom he described as "merry company, funny, irreverent and open-minded".

He acted as a travel guide around Britain and Ireland for Jagger, who in turn taught him to drive and asked him to be godfather to one of his children. Gibbs took the singer and Marianne Faithfull to stay with Desmond and Mariga Guinness at Leixlip Castle in Co Kildare and in 1968 it was Gibbs who was responsible for naming one of the era's classic albums: the Rolling Stones's *Beggars Banquet*.

That same year he acted as designer on Nic Roeg's notorious film *Performance*, creating decadent sets for the rooms of the fading rock-star Turner,

played by Jagger with Pallenberg in attendance. "There was so much hashish being smoked and so much acid being dropped it's hard to remember the decade, let alone the film," Gibbs remarked. His romantic associations included a brief involvement with Rudolf Nureyev, whom he described as "quite vigorous and stagy".

In 1971 Gibbs moved to 118 New Bond Street, where he remained for almost 20 years, before moving to Vigo Street and then, in 1998, to Dove Walk, Pimlico. In all these buildings Gibbs displayed the wonderful objects, often with extraordinary price tags, found in the upper reaches of the London antiques trade. The Englishness of the stock was enriched by different traditions and important objects, often bearing an impressive provenance, and mixed with items chosen because they were beautiful, rare or curious.

He relished the histories of Britain's landed families, his intuitive eye for objects of interest supported by a deep knowledge of sales and catalogues that allowed him to make discoveries hidden to others. The architectural historian John Harris once suggested that were Gibbs to find himself on a desert island, the book he would most like to have accompany him would be his uncle's annotated copy of the *Complete Peerage*. "I like things with a past — and people, too," Gibbs said.

His homes also revealed his gift for decoration: his houses in Morocco; his apartments in Cheyne Walk and Albany; his country house, Davington Priory, and, after 1980, the family's Manor House, which, despite being the youngest son, he inherited because none of his siblings wished to move back.

His style proved widely influential, especially in America, and affected the appearance of the glossy interior-design magazines, such as *World of Interiors*, launched in the 1980s. His knowledge and judgment were highly prized and he was a trustee of the charitable trust established by his friend John Paul Getty Jr, served on the arts panel of the National Trust, and advised the Victoria & Albert Museum on the refurbishment of its British galleries.

In 2000, after the death of his 90-year-old housekeeper, Gibbs decided that he no longer needed the rambling spaces of the Manor House. Among the objects in a two-day sale held in a vast tent on the lawn were a Victorian stuffed two-headed lamb. Before leaving for good he erected on a plinth a worn-out pinnacle from the chapel at Eton College, which he had acquired through "one of the beaks". The Latin inscription explained that both he and the pinnacle had been expelled.

His final destination was Tangier, where he established an elegant home and garden on one of the mountain slopes overlooking the Strait of Gibraltar. One visitor described him there as "wearing wonderful kaftans", adding: "And he looked like Moses walking in the olive garden — very peaceful." There were, however, some things that he missed about England, he said, adding: "I get homesick for snowdrops."

Christopher Gibbs, antiques dealer, was born on July 29, 1938. He died on July 29, 2018, aged 80