



## Country house oddities

# Lord Bath, rhino horns and erotica

Jeremy Musson has a private view of the eighth Marquess's Kama Sutra bedroom at Longleat House in Wiltshire and his collection of erotic icons. Photographs by Les Wilson

WHEN YOU approach the great Elizabethan palace of Longleat from the Warminster side, there comes a moment when you pass through trees and see an incredible view over the house and park – it is known locally as Heaven's Gate. In the great house below, built by Sir John Thynne in the 1570s, is a room devoted to another level of spiritual awareness, the Kama Sutra bedroom, named after the chapters in that ancient Sanskrit text which deal with love-making. In that room Lord Bath keeps a small but much-prized collection of erotic figurines and, strangely, a set of rhino horns.

Unusually, the horns are not the leftovers of some big-game hunting forebear, although there are some prehistoric giant fallow deer antlers in the Great Hall from the family's Irish estates and a huge painting called *The Lion Hunt* after Rubens hangs over the great Wyattville-designed staircase hall.

"There were some shocked faces when we said we had to cut them off, but it had to be done, as the white rhino males in the park had simply become too aggressive towards the females, causing some really serious wounds; we were advised that their horns had to come off," says Lord Bath, "but I like to think there were some pretty grateful female rhinos after that, not getting butted in the ribs by their menfolk."

The rhino horns, each about a foot-and-a-half long, joined the other erotic icons in the Kama Sutra bedroom in Lord Bath's private apartments in the late Sixties. "I had just finished painting the murals in this bedroom, inspired by the Kama Sutra. I had never read it but I knew about it by reputation and was just completing it in '69, rather appropriately."

Lord Bath, the eighth Marquess since the death of his father in 1992, had been an art student in Paris before and after he went up to Oxford in the Fifties and "was very much

on my own and it gave me the chance to re-examine my identity, as I realised that the values I had grown up with were very out of date, that we were living in the past. I just decided that my parents' values were not mine. This meant re-examining my political, religious and sexual identity."

The murals in his own rooms at Longleat he painted mostly in the Sixties when he was in his thirties, although he is still adding



Lord Bath's bedroom murals, finished "in '69, rather appropriately," he says

elements to different rooms, especially the dining-room, devoted to the history of Wessex (he once stood for Parliament on the platform of regional devolution for Wessex).

These pictures have been a continuation of explorations of subjects such as *The Ages of Man* and *Paranoia*, as have been volumes of his memoir, *From Strictly Private to Public Exposure*, begun in 1954, "written weekly in the manner of a letter to a friend".

The Kama Sutra bedroom is painted with panels depicting various sexual positions involving two or three figures: "I used my imagination rather than refer to any book but my imagination did begin to run out at about 30," says Lord Bath. The room's mirrored

and mosaic ceiling was made by his nephew Alexander, who has made ceilings for all the rooms muralled by Lord Bath. "The murals are painted on board and can be removed one day; in this room there is hand-painted Chinese wallpaper behind them."

The rhino horns were mounted on wooden shields made by the estate carpenters and hung on the handsome four-poster bed which stands in the middle of the room:

"I had it specially made up from pieces of a bed which George III stayed in when he visited Longleat," Lord Bath informs me. The bed also has an immensely long narwhal tusk fastened to one end. The narwhal is a whale but such tusks were often found in collections of curiosities in the 17th century described as unicorn horns.

Opposite the narwhal tusk is a series of small erotic figurines from around the world, including a sile-na-gig from Ireland and several copies of Iron Age fertility figures from Mesopotamia. "I don't think I have ever seen any other

such collections in a country house in England," observes Lord Bath.

The rhinos at Longleat today are younger than those that lost their horns and are certainly more peaceful. "They seem to get along very well," say Lord Bath, who takes tremendous pride in the animals of the Longleat Safari Park, introduced by his father, Henry, the seventh Marquess and the first owner of a great stately to open to the public in 1949. "There was one ancestor, the second Viscount, I think, who kept a menagerie here, so there were probably a few toothless lions wandering around here in the early 18th century." But then every generation in a great house does its own thing, and every generation leaves its own mark. ■

*Next month: Earl of Carnarvon's mummies. Jeremy Musson is a historian of the English country house, writer and broadcaster.*