

LIFESTYLE

artisan in residence

On the Wilton House estate in Wiltshire, sculptor STEPHEN PETTIFER has revived the use of an eighteenth-century innovation in his studio and transformed a neglected house for his own use

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A detail of a sculpture
of Neptune and Triton

There is something very calming about being in Stephen Pettifer's black corrugated iron studio, situated in the grounds of Wilton House near Salisbury. In today's digital world, to watch him and the remarkably skilled team around him sculpt the figure of a reclining dog, or carve a crest, intertwined serpents or vast figures of Neptune, using some of the same techniques as those used centuries ago, is awe-inspiring and wonderfully reassuring.

Studying furniture design at Parnham College under John Makepeace was Stephen's initial ambition, but fortunately for many of Britain's stately homes, he chose instead to study at City & Guilds of London Art School. After graduating, he worked for sculptors such as Anish Kapoor, many National Trust houses and palaces, Westminster Abbey and the Museum of London and, over the years, his love of sculpture increased.

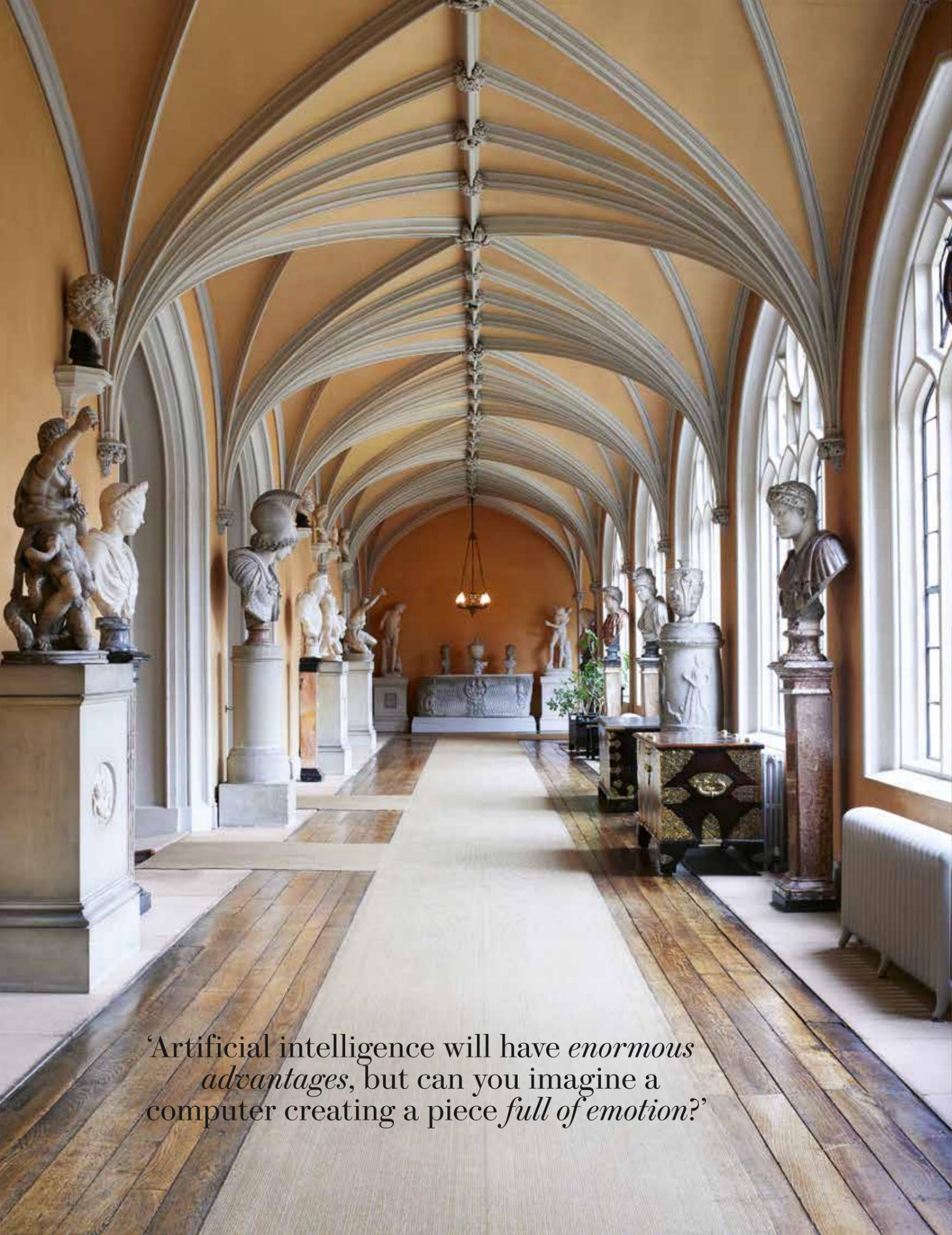
He became fascinated by Coade stone, a material developed over 200 years ago by Eleanor Coade as a closely guarded secret, which had gone out of fashion. Coade is not strictly stone but a unique terracotta, containing clay, grog and silicates. More durable than stone – and therefore able to withstand pollution and weathering – the material lends itself to close and finely detailed work. Coade stone became so popular with architects such as John Soane, Robert Adam, John Nash and James Wyatt that it has been credited as being a major influence on the architecture of the day.

Stephen started to research the forgotten process >



THIS PAGE CLOCKWISE FROM ABOVE Coade stone urns in the process of being restored. Sculptor Hannah Hartwell working on a whippet commission. Stephen and his Hungarian vizsla, Bean, with a lion sculpture for Fidelity International in Frankfurt. OPPOSITE Stephen and Alasdair Rennie moving a sculpture of Neptune and Triton





‘Artificial intelligence will have *enormous advantages*, but can you imagine a computer creating a piece *full of emotion*?’

of sculpting in Coade, reinventing and refining the preparation of clays. By trial and error, he set about perfecting the techniques. Today his restoration work can be seen in many of Britain’s stately homes, palaces and public monuments, as well as in newly commissioned pieces for his private clients.

He founded his firm Coade in 2000, working from a studio in Kensal Rise, but in 2005 he was offered a studio on the Wilton estate. He decided to move out of London, along with gifted sculptor Alasdair Rennie, and set up shop in a larger and more accessible building. The team later expanded to include Hannah Hartwell and Richard Ball. Working on bronze, lead or terracotta pieces, as well as Coade stone, Stephen brings in other sculptors and specialists as the case demands. ‘We can occasionally have six or seven people working here at one time, so space is essential.’

Space is also essential to allow pieces such as a huge sculpture of Neptune and Triton to be accommodated. This piece was commissioned to stand in a grotto in a Hampshire garden designed by Mat Reese. Based on an eighteenth-century marble in the Louvre by Lambert-Sigisbert Adam, Stephen has made it his own. The model for Neptune was a personal trainer, who stood stock still in the middle of the studio every day for weeks wearing only a mankini.

‘It was wonderful working from life,’ says Stephen. ‘I did an original model about one fifth of the eventual size, which, in this instance, was scanned three-dimensionally by computer.’ A robot then carved a rough figure out of foam, from which a mould was made. Finally, the clay figure that emerged from this was resculpted and finessed. ‘Normally we would scale up using a mathematical system that goes back to the Romans, though this is time-consuming,’ says Stephen. ‘Using a computer to work on a model that has taken four months to design for me takes away the creative process. Scaling up mathematically allows you to make changes along the way, >



OPPOSITE Stephen has restored many pieces in the sculpture gallery at Wilton House. THIS PAGE FROM TOP At Messums Wiltshire with Johnny Messum. With friend and local ceramicist John Julian at his workshop on the Wilton estate. Delivering lioness sculptures to St Giles House, Wimborne St Giles. A horse’s head sculpture being delivered at Messums Wiltshire



which to my mind is essential – after all the client is commissioning a piece from the artist’s hand. Artificial intelligence is going to have enormous advantages, but can you imagine a computer creating a piece full of inaccuracies and emotion? I can’t.’

Finished pieces straight out of the kiln are always too white and so a translucent patina is applied. This is fairly superficial and will eventually wear off, to be replaced by the natural ageing of time. Restoration of a piece takes time and demands immense care. Recently, six heavily ornate Coade stone urns, which originally stood along a balustrade at Buckingham Palace, were discovered. Each urn had to have its paint chemically removed, then the piece was deconstructed and restored. Stephen estimates the process will take a year to complete. Over the 12 years since he has been on the Wilton estate, he has restored most of the pieces standing in the sculpture gallery of the house. This includes a Roman sarcophagus, which was found in a river on the estate. More modern pieces commissioned include life-size models of each of the Wilton children, which stand in a central hall of the house.

Stephen now lives, along with his Hungarian vizsla, Bean, in a seventeenth-century house in the middle of the estate. He inherited the dog, then called Sabina, from a friend’s parents who had found her too much to handle, so Stephen took her on and shortened her name. The two are now inseparable, making a stylish duo whether walking through woods on the Wilton estate or along the streets of Kensington. She is obedient to his every command.

Stephen’s house was in a parlous state when he took it on, having previously been lived in by a keeper who had inhabited only two rooms. Over the years he has restored it, doing much of the work himself, so now there is a kitchen, cloakroom, dining room and sitting room on the ground floor, plus a small annexe, which he has turned into a chic bar. Upstairs are two large bedrooms and a bathroom. The house is surrounded by an acre of lawn (presided over by a robot mower) and has a view of magnificent trees planted several hundred years ago.

The chimneypieces are from Jamb, which stocks several of Stephen’s pieces in its London showroom. The serpent mirrors above them are made by him, as are the various pieces of sculpture that prop open doors or lie quietly beneath tables and beside chairs. He has furnished the house from local auction houses and sales in the cattle market in Salisbury. ‘If you are patient, you can pick up wonderful stuff,’ he explains. Many of the paintings on the walls once belonged to Stephen’s uncle, the respected broadcaster and journalist Julian Pettifer. It is a house that exactly exemplifies Stephen’s style of craftsmanship and artistry. ‘If I had all the money in the world, I would just be a sculptor,’ he explains. It is fortunate for us that life has not been quite so generous. Thanks to him, much of our architectural heritage will be preserved and pieces of beauty will be added for the generations of the future □

Coade: coade.co.uk



ANTICLOCKWISE FROM LEFT
At the Beckford Arms pub with
owner Charlie Luxton. Stephen's
house. He uses a shepherd's
hut as an extra bedroom



It is a house that exactly
exemplifies Stephen's
style of *craftsmanship
and artistry*



CLOCKWISE FROM
LEFT Stephen has
restored much of his
seventeenth-century
house, including the
dining room, with a
chimneypiece from
Jamb and sculptures
by Stephen. In the
main bedroom, there
is a Coade stone
plaque. Stephen
bought furniture for
the sitting room at
local auctions, and
some of the paintings
belonged to his
uncle, Julian Pettifer

