The Royal Oak Foundation Looks to Stowe's 1730s Temple of Modern Virtue as its Latest Beneficiary

The William Kent structure will benefit from the proceeds of the organization's annual Timeless Design Dinner

By Mitchell Owens

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Stowe, the English country estate that shares its land with an elite boarding school, is a name that galvanizes attention in the architecture world. The sprawling Buckinghamshire destination, administered by the National Trust, astounds with the richness and variety of a property that was augmented, enriched, and, indeed, reshaped by an all-star 18th-century cast hired by the aristocratic Temple family: Charles Bridgeman, Sir John Vanbrugh, James Gibbs, William Kent, John Michael Rysbrack, and Lancelot “Capability” Brown, who was then just starting out on a career that would result in England’s transformation from stiff formal gardens to rolling landscapes that look utterly natural—but actually aren’t.

“There’s so much going on at Stowe,” says David Nathans, the president of the Royal Oak Foundation, the energetic American fundraising arm of the National Trust. By that he means not only plants, trees, lakes, and the earthly like but scores of monuments, follies, temples, bridges, and other architectural delights that the public can see 365 days a year. Among them is what’s left of the 1730s Temple of Modern Virtue, a William Kent limestone frivolity that was built as a fool-the-eye ruin—it was intended as sarcastic commentary on Sir Robert Walpole, the avaricious British prime minister, who is depicted as a headless torso—but which has become, literally, tumble-down. "It’s a ruin by its very nature, but now it’s a ruin in ruins," Nathan explains. "Even to get it back to its original ruined construct is going to take time, money, and effort.”

Thus, Thursday night’s 18th annual Timeless Design Dinner, a resplendent Royal Oak gala that will be held at the Metropolitan Club—a Manhattan architectural masterpiece by McKim, Mead & White—and its Follies after-party, which features an invitation by the hip young British artist and designer Luke Edward Hall. (Visit the Royal Oak website for tickets.) The foundation hopes to raise $200,000 that evening, with some of the lucre earmarked for the Temple of Modern Virtue’s eventual rescue. Every dollar that is raised Thursday evening will be matched by an anonymous donor as well as the National Trust.
And the dollars are well worth it: Highlights of the evening will include an appearance by Sir David Cannadine and Jeremy Musson, author of the new Rizzoli book *The Country House: Past, Present, Future*; the publishing house is sponsoring the event. Another treat will be special guest Robert Sackville-West, 7th Baron Sackville, author and chatelain of Knole, another great English country house, in conversation with BBC World News America anchor and correspondent Laura Trevelyan.

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As for the gala’s visuals, two design talents, Sarah Magness and Lady Henrietta Spencer-Churchill, are lending their aesthetic visions.
Spencer-Churchill will spruce up the Metropolitan Club’s lobby with a special installation, while Magness’s brief is the dinner itself, which is held in the West Lounge. Her goal for that palatial ballroom-like space is simple: “I want to really wow the Royal Oak’s benefactors.” She and Hyde Park Mouldings have created 14-inch-tall plaster centerpieces in the shape of the Royal Oak Foundation’s iconic leaf logo. The round tables will be skirted to the floor with Prince of Wales check fabric by Holland & Sherry (the heir apparent to the British throne succeeded Queen Elizabeth, the Queen Mother, his late grandmother, as president of the National Trust), and hand-tied bouquets will grace each place setting—the flowers the very same perennials that are blooming right now at Stowe.

Tickets available now at royal-oak.org

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