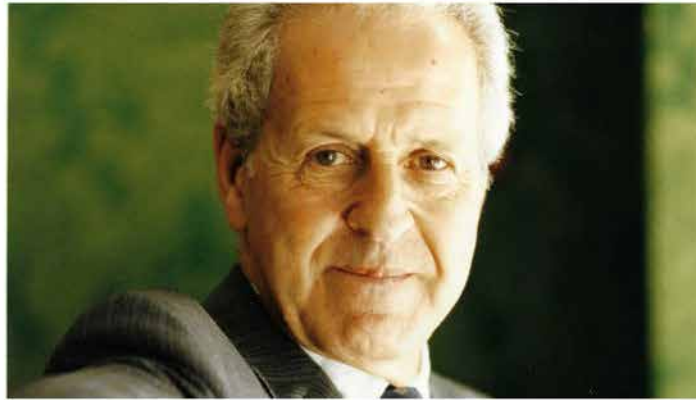


# Ronald Phillips obituary: eccentric antiques dealer trusted by royalty

Leading antique furniture vendor with a Mayfair showroom favoured by royalty, international museums and private collectors, dies aged 97



Phillips's handmade Jermyn Street suits belied an eccentric personality

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Ronald Phillips never planned on dying, claiming he would live for ever. Even an Evening Standard cartoonist's illustration of Ron (his preferred name) fishing an antique out of a swimming pool read "Ronald Phillips 5th February 1929 ad infinitum." Now, if you walk down Mayfair's Bruton Street, a photograph of Phillips — a man who used regularly to greet his own reflection in the mirror with, "By Jove, you're good-looking" — sits in the window of his eponymous gallery.

The business he founded 74 years ago, Ronald Phillips Ltd, is one of the last remaining dealers in exceptional English furniture of the 18th and early 19th centuries. As "brown goods" fell out of fashion, "the firm" (as Phillips, with regal undertones, liked to call it) survived due to its focus on quality and provenance: traditions that his son, Simon, understood and enhanced.

There, one might now find a George III console table that once belonged to John Paul Getty, the Forde Abbey chair or Harewood House mirrors; items often created by the 18th-century cabinet-makers Thomas Chippendale, William Ince and John Mayhew, and with prices that sometimes run to more than a million pounds.

Whenever a client liked something, Phillips would reply: "I can't live on admiration alone." He loved Clementine Churchill dropping by, was glad that "Rob" Maxwell never returned and, years later, was pleased to be out the day the

... which he retained until, years later, was proved to be not the way the singer Michael Jackson paid a visit.



Phillips with Princess Marina, the Duchess of Kent, one of several royals known to shop with him

An Old Harrovian, Phillips did National Service and then, opting not to follow his father to Cambridge, saw a market for selling cut-price watches and silverware to American GIs. With impeccable timing, he began his antiques career just as the trade was reviving after the austerity of the Second World War. By the time he opened Ronald Phillips Ltd in Old Brompton Road, South Kensington, in 1952, British society was embracing consumerism once more and the antiques business was reborn. By the 1960s antiques, once the gentry's preserve, were attracting a new-money clientele — although, initially, Phillips's clients were locals, mainly trade, and country-house owners.

His early trading was with a partner called Billy Rixon (a man with a van) and they flogged unexceptional "brown" furniture while "Parlett", the furniture restorer, beavered away in the basement. Phillips had his sights on more distinguished furniture, however, and he soon started exhibiting at fairs, such as the nascent Chelsea Antiques Fair and Grosvenor House Art and Antiques Fair. Once, on being asked to host a senior British royal on his stand at the latter, he replied: "As long as I don't have to speak to the old battle-axe." The royals who frequented that particular event included Princess Anne, Princess Alexandra and the Queen Mother.

He moved to Bruton Street in 1976. Three years later, he asked Simon, aged 18: "Why've you put on a suit?" "Because I'm coming to work with you," came the reply.



Phillips with his son Simon, who now runs the business, at their Bruton Street showroom

Phillips loved a bargain. He bought a tea-caddy for a fiver and sold it for a few hundred pounds and was jubilant about buying a sideboard from the furniture dealer Mallett at Bourdon House and immediately selling it for a handsome profit — to Mallett in Bond Street. That was as nothing compared to his glee on a sweltering day at purchasing 15 pairs of discounted yellow cashmere socks in Burlington Arcade.

He was renowned for his taste and fine eye. Equally importantly, in a trade often characterised by roguish "Lovejoy" tactics, Phillips built his reputation on trust and integrity. He would always buy back anything he had sold, knowing it to be good quality and authentic; he allowed clients, including new ones, to take items home "on appro" (on approval and unpaid); and was adamantly against "the Ring" (an insider network of dealers fixing prices).



With Billy Rixon at an antiques fair

He was also appreciated for his informal mentoring and was baffled when recipients were grateful, perhaps hinting at an inner diffidence beneath his bluff exterior. When, in the late 1980s, a publisher approached Phillips to contribute a chapter to the *Sotheby's Concise Encyclopedia of Furniture*, he boomed, "Don't be ridiculous. I don't know anything."

In his final years with the business — Phillips retired in the late 1990s — he would sit at the mahogany partners' desk in Bruton Street opposite Simon and file his nails, cut out newspaper coupons for discounted holidays and, in August, phone friends to find out how they would like their grouse cooked for lunch.

Born in London in 1929, Ronald David Phillips grew up among Edwardian furniture (and two grand pianos in the drawing room) in his parents' Belsize Park house in northwest London. He had an elder sister, Ruth. Although his mother, Olga Marcelle (née Somech), once lay protectively on top of him in Regent Street when she heard a wartime doodlebug, they were mostly raised with benign neglect.



Phillips, right, as a child, with his grandparents and sister Ruth

Olga was a writer, musician, historian and friend of the suffragette Sylvia Pankhurst. Their father, Ivor (born Isaac Augustus Phillips), was a barrister and Bayswater Synagogue warden. The nanny, whom Phillips always called his "nurse", figured large in his psyche.

He liked to be a hoot but was also a man of a stoical and private disposition. If being twice evacuated impacted him, or if his story of the prep school master who put him on his knee and force-fed him green vegetables implied something more perverse, Phillips never let on, though he never again ate a leafy green vegetable. He also rejected his parents' observant Judaism with a post-bar mitzvah bacon sandwich. The pupils of Harrow School — his hero was fellow alumnus Winston Churchill — became Phillips's tribe. He was often to be found singing Harrow Songs and trawling its alumni register to contact contemporaries, even if he had never met them.

He enjoyed a lifelong friendship with his cousin John Croft, now 103, a one-time codebreaker at Bletchley Park. But his closest friend over 68 years was Jean King, a former actress with bottle-blond hair who had given birth to her first

child at the same time as Phillips's first wife, Elisabeth, had given birth to hers.

Phillips had met Elisabeth, the illegitimate daughter of Lt Col Darcy Willoughby Osborne, when she visited his South Kensington shop. He said she came in to trick him into marrying her; she claimed she went in for a Pembroke table. They had three children, David, Caroline and Simon, but the couple divorced acrimoniously and never spoke again — though not before Phillips had rapped Elisabeth's lover with an umbrella on crossing paths at Grosvenor House. Phillips's children lived with him after Elisabeth left. He then married Pimphun "Pim" (née Channon), a fine cook and spirited Chinese-Thai woman 22 years his junior. They had a daughter, Dara, but that marriage, too, ended in divorce.



Phillips's second wedding, to Pimphun Channon  
NOT KNOWN, CLEAR WITH PICTURE DESK

His life thereafter involved drinks with his contemporary, Raine, Countess Spencer ("Much too old for me," he would mutter), and wining and dining the broadcaster Angela Rippon, whose photograph he kept beside his bed at his weekend cottage in Wiltshire. In his twilight years, he was besotted with "The Beloved" — a Scandinavian model whom he had met in the park. When seeking gossip, he would always ask, "What news on the Rialto?" And would invariably answer himself with: "The Dutch have invaded Holland and the Swiss navy's in retreat."

Kensington was always his fiefdom, where he lived in a Georgian townhouse for 59 years until he sold it to the actor Eddie Redmayne. Every morning, with the Daily Express held high to read as he walked, he would circumnavigate the Round Pond in Kensington Gardens. In later years, he jettisoned his newspaper to make “park friends”, talking to everyone, from students to the Duke of Gloucester. One day a stranger approached him. “I think I know you. I’m the Finnish ambassador.” “I’m the ambassador of Kensington,” Phillips retorted. He became firm friends with His Excellency Leif Blomqvist.

Phillips’s eccentricities were not obvious in his dapper presentation, which included handmade Jermyn Street suits and, in his thirties, a waistcoat and pocket watch. He swam in his pool with tomato ketchup on his hair, claiming it helped to retain his natural colour; he liked dogs more than people, and often said so; he would greet others with “Vive de Gaulle” (“But he’s dead,” as one bemused stranger replied); and at home, for an alarming joke, he would frequently answer the phone with “*Sieg heil!*”. He enjoyed impersonating Tony Hancock when not doing his Churchill act, reciting aloud some of his famous speeches (on one occasion in a grass skirt).

He was a bon viveur but even as a young man, he would often nod off at dinner before the bill came (and his companions would mischievously creep out, leaving him to pay).

Phillips adored his family: he expressed pride in his firstborn David, an accountant (“Winger Ding Dong” as he termed him), for being “popular”; in his daughter Caroline (“Bella Good Child”), a journalist, for her newspaper articles; in his son Simon (“Fluff Ball”) for his “brilliant” business acumen; and in his daughter Dara (“Pudding”), a chef, “for picking up stray dogs”.

“My children are all popular,” he added, “just like me.”

As for his final words? They were a request for ice cream. Always a man of surprises, he donated his body to medical research in gratitude to the NHS — and because he wanted his manhood to enjoy a posthumous existence. “Happy days and naughty nights,” as he would always say in farewell to friends.

**Ronald Phillips, antiques dealer, was born on February 5, 1929. He died on March 29, 2026, aged 97**