

THE MADNESS OF KING KENNETH

THORNGROVE MANOR: FIVE-STAR FOLLY OR
MONUMENTAL ART? PROBABLY BOTH, SAYS
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PHOTOGRAPHY BRETT HARTWIG & SUPPLIED

Thorngrove Manor is one of South Australia's most seasoned luxury retreats, hosting well-heeled guests for more than 26 years. But don't expect to find a published travel story relating to the \$760-a-night Stirling property, at least not a recent one. "You're the first non-paying journalist we've allowed inside for 10 years," says Kenneth Lehmann. I can't tell if the tall, slightly professorial host is relaying this news with any sort of humour. He only just remembers to impart a grin.

We're in a sophisticated, vaulted entranceway befitting a medieval church. Lehmann is almost reluctant to take me over the threshold, but once we cross it's like following the White Rabbit as he disappears into the curious and curiouser spaces of his Wonderland. As he walks, he talks, his thoughts and ideas eddying in his wake.

So, what criticisms have ungracious travel hacks visited upon Thorngrove, a member of the prestigious international group, Small Luxury Hotels?

"They just don't get it," says Lehmann. "They don't get it!" He fizzes with objections – at the shallowness of the travel industry's remit, at observers that go around measuring and inspecting instead of engaging and absorbing, and (perhaps the last straw) how one writer repeatedly called it 'mock-Tudor'.

Of course, Thorngrove has been called many things. Driving past the hedges and griffon-topped gates along Old Mount Barker Road, past the burlesque of towers, shingles and arches, it's hard not to label the place. 'Solid as a castle'. 'Batty as a chateau'. 'A dress circle curio in the Adelaide Hills'.

But for Lehmann – owner, builder, architect and host – Thorngrove Manor is purely a form of self-expression. "I've built houses all over Australia," he says, "and principally they're all a process of price, framework, time limit and construction. But this building – it's art. As an artist I'm the one who's putting boundaries in place. I've got the canvas, I've got control."

Kenneth Lehmann could come across as having his head up his arts. But he's no indulgent aesthete, nor (as he points out)

does he have much money, using the income from his hotel to continue with his extravagant project.

He began building Thorngrove at the age of 35, constructed on a block bought from the Penfold winemaking family next door. At the age of 60 he's still building, and today it's hard to know where to start. Literally – there's no front or back to the place, only aspects, a carousel of ideas to stir the imagination and intrigue the eye.

The integrity of the structure, however, is plain to see. Its great walls are made of Angaston rock marble, they're water-resistant and bestow a monastic quiet to the inner chambers. Floors and roofs are coated with slate, the turrets shingled as delicately as scales shingle a fish. All the materials seem very at home in the rich green of the (surprisingly) formal gardens.

It owes most to the Victorian revival of the gothic which was a backlash to the industrial age, a counter-movement to the faceless, featureless housing provided for the masses. Likewise, Lehmann's hotel deliberately thumbs its nose

to what he sees as the 'deliberate generic corporatisation, commodification and stark industrial minimalism of modern hotel design'. There's also some homage to the original grand mansions of the Hills whose builders ascribed to the notion 'nothing succeeds like excess'.

But if you're expecting to play the period game, you're on a hiding to nowhere. Differing design and architectural influences are apparent on every inch of the property, and anyway, the builder resists looking through the architect's prism, preferring to talk of inspiration: "An artist makes his interpretation of the work of all other artists beforehand to create something unique," he says. "This structure is dateless. It's timeless."

No wonder 'mock-Tudor' spelt death to all travel writers ever after...

But a lot of Lehmann's ideas were drawn from Europe, most conspicuously England and France. He and wife Nydia did a grand tour of antique stores, reclamation yards and



Eclectic treasures come together at Thorngrove Manor to create unusual and artistic spaces.

markets, bringing home eclectic treasures including glazed Royal Doulton chimney pots, French tapestries, leadlights (the stunning 1860s panels are from a church in Selkirk), light fittings and furniture.

Frequently, single pieces acted as inspirations for whole rooms, some dazzling in their ambition and execution.

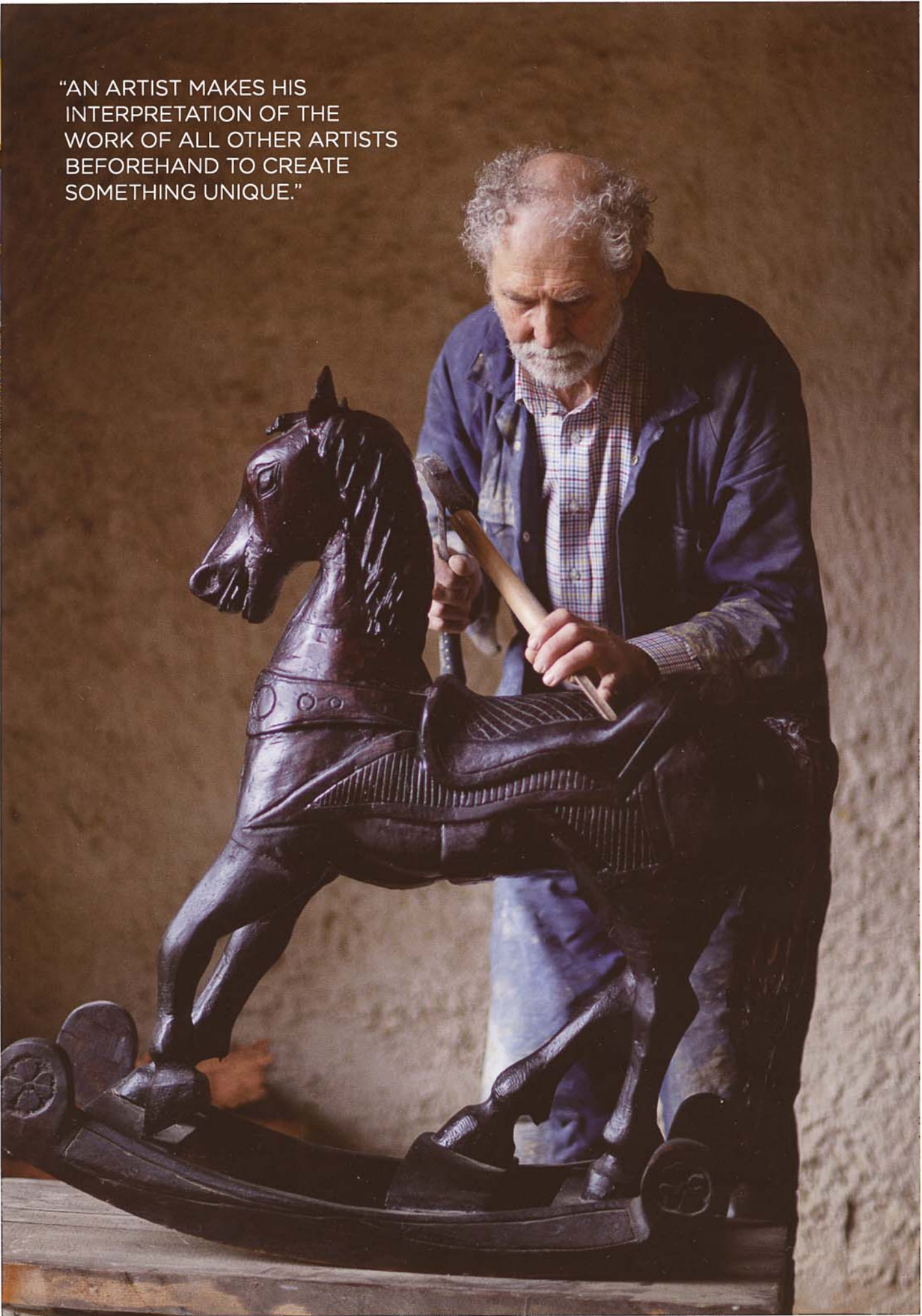
The dining room off the grand Kings Chamber suite is perfectly circular and covered by a cupola-indented ceiling. It has been constructed around – constructed for – an ornate, gold 25-candelabra, a thing that glitters and flickers within the curved space.

The Observatory perched atop a circular tower began with a single pattern from a piece of antique wooden furniture.



Lehmann says he simply 'liked it' – then took a cast of the pattern (a crown, an arch, a fleur de lys) and reproduced it a dozen times, affixing it into the plaster of the room. The tower roof is an inverted bell, a structure of great complexity and real beauty, one which has him enthusing about the challenges faced in the creating, processing and engineering of the feature.

His craft and patience is behind most of what you see. His plaster castings of period architectural motifs are everywhere, including rope dado rails, Tudor roses and the Thorngrove coat of arms. There's also a litany of wooden installations, including banister posts, four-poster beds, rocking horses and finials, adorned with hounds, griffons, lions and royal heads – again, all hand-carved by Lehmann.



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Kenneth Lehmann at work.



If the effect pleases the eye, it's the labour – the zeal – that boggles the mind.

The Queens Chamber is his favourite room. It has a false ceiling that has been made and fitted with 3,600 individually cast pieces of plaster. He knows they're individually cast because he individually cast them and he individually stuck them into place. One might think the favouritism is some homage to his father, a ceiling craftsman and builder from whom he learned many of his skills, but it's not so.

"It's the shadows," he says, turning a light on and off. "Shadows are an important thing in a property, you can't leave the shadows out." As the light changes, the ceiling shifts its form. "Look at that! This sort of thing is lost in modern buildings which are engineered to be minimalist."

Only one designer is mentioned on my tour of the property, and unsurprisingly, it's Gaudi, the Spaniard who broke all the rules (not to mention deadlines) in the construction of his organic forms, including the *Sagrada Familia* cathedral in Barcelona.

Lehmann gets excited by the asymmetrical aspects of his building, an aesthetic most strikingly on display up among the turrets and gables where one can see *mélanges* of curved, straight and organic form. He believes Australian windows typically look out on geometrical regularity, betraying our relatively short European history. "But in England you look through a window and see asymmetry formed by age, history and story. It's the individuality of buildings."

I enquire if there is function beneath the extravagant form, dedicated as it is to servicing the needs of paying guests.

"It has tremendous function as a hotel! There are seven staircases in Throngrove so each room has its own entrance and staircase. Guests might not want to be with other people

and at Throngrove they can be totally isolated." He adds that while one room is occupied, guests are oblivious to another being serviced; the building also has huge voids and shafts throughout so structural maintenance can be carried out.

But again, he's at pains to relay this is not a hotel, it simply operates as a hotel. "We're transforming the bed-for-a-night experience into an emotional connection – an experience in a living artwork."

Which beggars the thorny question about Throngrove – is the living artwork a work of art?

Well, it depends who you ask. Guests on the Small Luxury Hotels website speak of being taken into fantasies of historic grandeur and fairytale. "The property has long captivated my imagination," writes Bryony on the website, "not only for its aesthetic architectural beauty and high standards, but for the rich heritage, culture and artistry which envelopes it... I felt queen for a night!"

If you ask me (dare I confess, a travel writer by profession) I'd say it's like nothing I've seen before, a place born of incredible dedication and an almost inhuman work ethic. It also has a cheerful madness, in fact the madness of the artist, which is comforting in a time of conformity, gloss and spin.

Final words are best left to Henry Wadsworth Longfellow, whom Lehmann quotes in his submission for an Advantage SA Award (Arts Section):

*Ah to build, to build! That is the noblest of all the arts. Painting and sculpture are but images, are merely shadows cast by outward things on stone or canvas, having in themselves no separate existence. Architecture, existing in itself, and not in seeming a something it is not, surpasses them as substance shadow. **

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