

Throw away the pile of magazines and rip down the posters. Cloakrooms deserve more attention, writes **Sonia Purnell**

CLOAK AND SWAGGER OPERATION

What does your loo say about you? The answer is: more than you think.

Interior designers called in to dress up houses find that more of a client's personality is poured into the cloakroom than any other part of a home. Frequently they serve as a shrine to the owner. If the host really wants his or her guests to notice an award, prize or achievement, the sitting room mantelpiece is nowhere near as effective as the cloakroom wall.

"I have noticed that the downstairs loos of unmarried people in their mid-thirties become hard-core ego walls," reports Antonia Stewart, an interior designer based in west London. "What starts off with a couple of photos of the 1st XI in red and white rugby shirts turns into a gigantic display of the owner of the house Lycra-clad running in the Marathon de Sable, or sailing the Atlantic single-handed. Boys are definitely worse than girls on this."

While this might equate to a male peacock spreading its tail, Stewart finds it less alarming than cloakrooms piled high with smutty joke books or old caricatures of shooting and fishing. "I don't mind them in my parents' friends' houses, but I would



Old vs new: traditional with coats and clutter, above; and a bright and airy design from Antonia Stewart, below

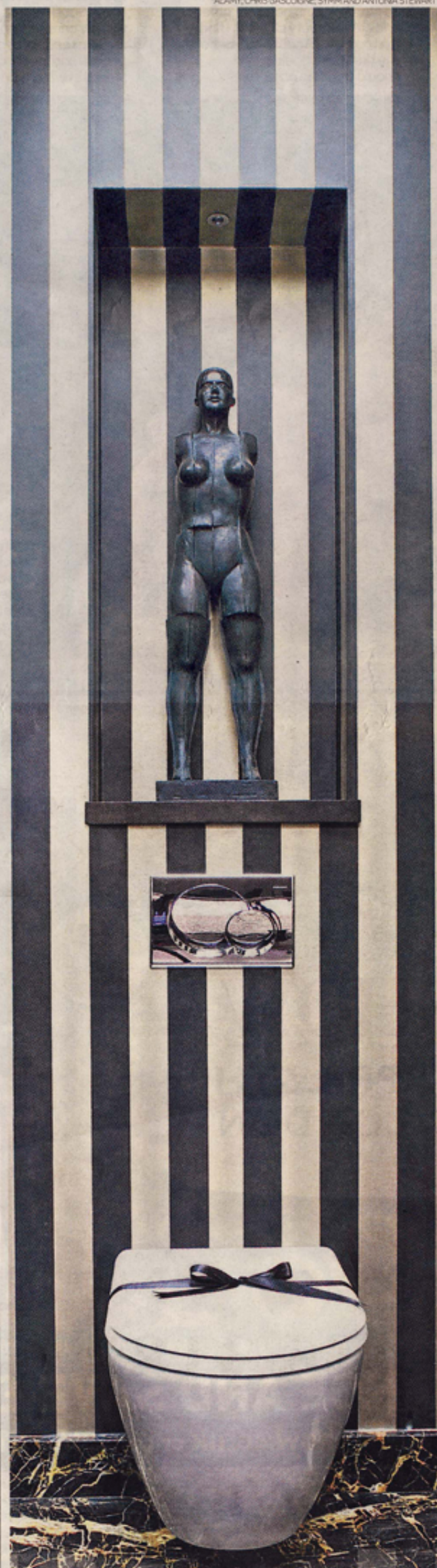
never put them in a client's or friend's house."

Clients with serious money have an image they want to project. A young banker in one of the smartest streets in Notting Hill, for instance, is clearly trying to rebut any suggestions that his occupation makes him a fly-by-night opportunist. His cloakroom is all steel and stone, presumably denoting solidity and permanence, with just a single, tasteful candlestick perhaps to represent his softer side.

Meanwhile, another interior designer, Katrina Phillips, was commissioned to make a "happy" cloakroom by another banker and his social anthropologist wife, whose harrowing work involves helping disadvantaged children. "She wanted the cloakroom to feel sparkly and uplifting after a hard day. So I've put in a chainmail rather than a crystal chandelier, and installed a horsehair blind with a sparkling metallic thread woven through it. The wallpaper, from Brian Yates, is also metallic so that ultimately rather than showy, the room feels very healing, glowing and calm."

Not qualities you associate with the average banker, but a sense of healing is a common theme in more successful cloakrooms. Good soap, soft

ALAMY, CHRIS GASCOIGNE, SYMM AND ANTONIA STEWART



Making a statement: a striped cloakroom at a penthouse in Eaton Place designed by Finchatton; and a striking stone hand basin by Symm and Anton, below

towels, artwork and even carefully chosen books always go down well – and suggest thoughtfulness and perhaps a welcome hint that we might just be a little cultured ourselves.

And who would have thought your lavatory paper could speak volumes about you? It's not just Simon Cowell's black loo roll at £10 a roll that is a no-no. "Always have a basket full of loo rolls," Phillips advises. "Just one roll does not look generous and could even make you look rather mean."

The cloakroom is also the place for rebelling against the rest of the house – a thoroughly masculine chamber of wood and sombre colours, in a household



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dominated by women and pastels. In my male-dominated home strewn with footballs, toy guns and dirty socks, I have managed to get away with a thoroughly girly cloakroom coated in silver-leaf with mini-chandelier and Seventies disco ball plus mirrored make-up box and a shelf of perfumes. So what if my guests suspect me of an undignified yearning for a more glamorous youth; it makes me smile every time I go in there.

We just have the one cloakroom – the size of a cupboard under the stairs in a London terrace house. But for true cloakroom power, the trend now in more spacious homes is to install two – one off the kitchen and the other accessible from the hall. The kitchen one is about family – cosy, colourful and with snaps of the children. While the other is the sophisticated one with stone and metallics and the place you direct anyone you wish to impress. Here, small will not do. "Push the ceiling height as far as you can, use floating vanity units to create an impression of spaciousness and install polished nickel taps, which look very smart," advises Saskia Blyth, design director of the upmarket developers Finchatton.

So if you can't afford one of their properties, you can at least emulate a banker-bonus cloakroom.

