



L. Cornelissen & Son, Bloomsbury

Four of London's Best Independent Art Shops

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There is nothing wrong with a chain art shop if you have a simple transaction in mind. If you need to purchase a few pencils or a palette knife, go for it. If, however, you desire more specialized materials, to encounter special characters, or to avoid an inane plague of adult colouring books, you may have an issue.

My favourite art shop in New York was a place on 4th Avenue called NY Central. I began to buy its wares as a nineteen year-old, particularly its papers, which were uncommonly fine. Upstairs in the paper department, there was a long-haired gentleman who had possibly served his post since 1970. He always wore an exquisite beret, and it was a pleasure to discuss art-making with him. I wondered with whom else he'd made small talk. Artists from Warhol to Cecily Brown had been some of the eminent customers. I felt like I was mingling in their shadows.

In 2016, NY Central bowed to Manhattan's exorbitant rents and shuttered its doors. Shortly afterwards, I moved to London. I've heard that NY Central has re-opened, though under corporate ownership that is probably exploiting its venerable name. I doubt it is the same.

In London, I've tried to find independent establishments that, like NY Central, are serious vendors but also embody something quintessential about the city and its artists. Below are a few of my top picks:

AP Fitzpatrick**142 Cambridge Heath Road, Stepney E1 5QJ**

AP Fitzpatrick is a working painter's paint shop, a short walk along graffitied streets to re-purposed studio buildings and several East End galleries. What makes this outfit particularly appealing is its advocacy of newly-synthesized paints. Lascaux Acrylics, for instance, are more luminous, lighfast, and less plastic than standard acrylics. The same company's Aquacryl paints are a transparent liquid acrylic that can be used as a watercolour but with greater ease on large-scale surfaces. QoR Modern Watercolours use an Aquazol rather than a gum arabic binder, which increases age-resistance. One of its staff members, a young woman in splattered jeans, had obvious first-hand experience of the stock and answered my questions with detailed authority.

Sheperds**30 Gillingham St, Pimlico SW1V 1HU**

Sheperds is a dedicated book-binding shop that sells, among other materials, beautiful papers. Its wide flat-files and dowelled racks of handmade, patterned, marbled, and tissue papers are worth a browse. To graze the sheets with your fingertips is a delicious tactile experience. I stop by Sheperds for rolls of oversized watercolour paper, but I always depart wanting to learn about the craft of hand-sewn books or working with Japanese sumi-e ink.

Russel and Chapple**30-31 Store Street, Bloomsbury WC1E 7QE**

Russel and Chapple began as a merchant of theatrical curtains, supplying the venues of Covent Garden from the later 1700s. Through its knowledge of specialist fabrics, the business extended into artists' materials, and it remains London's great emporium of painting textiles. The shop is lined with giant spools of linen, cotton, and canvas, with textures ranging from something like bed sheets to potato sacks. There are shelves of wooden and aluminium stretcher bars, traditional gessos, modern grounds and primers, various varnishes. The shop can also fabricate panels and supports customized to your needs.

L. Cornelissen & Son**105 Great Russell St, Bloomsbury WC1B 3RY**

L. Cornelissen & Son is an apothecary of colour. Rows of glassware display sumptuous ground pigments: golden ochre, quinacridone magenta, potters pink. The deep drawers of the Victorian cabinetry contain plump tubes of paint and French pastels. There are other curiosities: myrrh resin, gum sandarac, lemon shellac. The shop is a Dickensian portal. Founded in the 1800s by a Belgian lithographer, Walter Sickert was apparently a regular patron, and it would not be surprising to bump into him perusing the mongoose-hair brushes. Cornelissen is a wonderful purveyor of traditional and exotic materials, but I visit for its ghosts. You sense London's past artists in its aisles and hope to internalize some of their vibrations.