

Old Merchant's House

Newsletter

Spring/Summer 1993

Dressing Fancy

According to legend, the Greek gods disguised themselves as humans, wore mortals' clothes and traveled the earth partaking of its pleasures and vices.

With such divine examples to follow, then, is it any wonder that dressing up has had such appeal over time? More remarkable, perhaps, is the fact that today we do it so little — one more indication, perhaps, that this is a godless age.

In bygone days, however, dressing up took many expressions. One could interpret the deity in halo and flowing robes. On a more practical footing, one could hunt bear in a bearskin. Sometimes dressing up was just to "have a ball" — a fancy dress ball, for instance. ["Fancy" plays a nice dual role in the terminology here. "Fancy" is ribbons and flounces. "Fancy" is also "Fancy that you're Marie Antoinette."] During the 15th century in Europe, fancy dress parties were a favorite form of entertainment. For a long time only the upper classes indulged.

And indulge they did. So much so that by the 18th century, elaborate masks and highly structured garments ensured near-perfect anonymity, which in turn encouraged licentiousness. If the disguises were good enough, they were all that stood between the citizen and a ruined reputation.

A switch came during the 19th century, when the ideals of romance and purity attached themselves to "dressing up." We may have Queen Victoria to thank for this. Parties once again became respectable and, for the first time, enjoyed by a broader social spectrum. Indeed, some of the most respectable magazines and books of conduct of the time offered exacting instructions for fancy dress costumes and even advised readers how to choose among various available identities so they could get the costume ball rolling.

A Liberty of London flyer, for example, suggested that "in selecting fancy costume it

is desirable to study one's personal characteristics, particularly as [they might] suggest resemblance to some real or imaginary personage whose dignity, beauty, expression, form or pose has become conventional and typically distinctive."

Imagine, then, the personality which selected what has come to be known at the Old Merchant's House as the Elf Dress. It was a Tredwell, surely, for the dress was



The Old Merchant's House

is pleased to announce

that the museum is now

open to the public

Sunday through Thursday

1 to 4 p.m.

found in a drawer in the house. We can only conjecture about the personality by looking at the dress. Made of a simple material — cotton sateen — it is printed with the images of plump, tiny, rosy-cheeked female creatures wearing tutus and posing amid butterflies, dragonflies and other romantic winged insects almost the same size as themselves.

The dress was clearly worn — that much is evident from the dust and dirt on the underside of the train. Judging partially by

the relatively pristine condition of the bodice lining, it is also likely that the Elf Dress was worn only once. As a rule, dresses like that were taken completely apart after the party, especially if they were the elaborate silk and jewel-encrusted outfits of the very wealthy, but even if they were more modest costumes — after all, one couldn't go as the same character to more than one fancy dress ball; that would be unimaginative at best, polemical at worst.

Why, then, does this lovely garment survive intact? How did it manage to escape the ripping scissors? We have to rely on guesswork once again. For one thing, it would hardly seem worth taking apart a dress of such humble material, a lowly cotton typical of some lining fabrics of the early 1890's.

For another thing, to a late-20th century eye at least, it would seem a dreadful shame to take this dress apart because it is so beautifully made. The design and construction are complicated and carefully thought out; the pieces have been cut and sewn with skill. The bodice is lightly boned and all edges are hand finished; the skirt is gathered at the waist in beautiful, tiny cartridge pleats. Only the long, straight seams were done by machine, and the hand-made buttonholes serve a row of large, round, faux pearl buttons marching smartly down the center front of the bodice.

Who created this elegant piece of work is a mystery. Costumers flourished who both rented and made fancy dress ball garments, and some costumes were made by family seamstresses or independent dressmakers as, most likely, the Elf Dress was. As for its style, overall effect mattered and historical accuracy did not, so we have an 18th century silhouette with renaissance embellishments. A square neckline tops a lace-trimmed bodice that ends in a point below the waist, and the sleeves have the picadils, or shoulder puffs, favored in the 16th century. The skirt is open

The Old Merchant's House is New York City's only family home preserved intact from the 19th century and Greenwich Village's only historic house museum. A rowhouse built in 1832, it is among the finest surviving examples of late-Federal and Greek Revival architecture of the period. Home to prosperous merchant Seabury Tredwell and family from 1835 to 1933, the landmark house, which has been a museum open to the public since 1936, reflects in its original textiles, furniture, and decorative arts the lifestyle of a typical New York City upper-middle-class family of the last century.

*Hours: Sundays, 1 to 4 p.m., group tours by appointment.
Admission: Free for members, \$3 for the public.*

a private, non-profit membership organization formed to protect New York State's architectural heritage. It receives public funding from the New York State Council on the Arts and major funding from private foundations. The League promotes public awareness of historic preservation through its resource center, publications, conferences and films, and it provides technical and legal assistance to local groups.

The Founders Reception was held in the evening with hors d'oeuvres and New York State wine. Guests were treated to a colorful address by Brendan Gill, Chairman Emeritus, Preservation League of New York State.

At the beginning of June, the Henry James Society will be Holding its Sesquicentennial Symposium in New York. Specially tailored tours of the Old Merchant's House have been arranged for conference participants who, in the words of symposium co-chair Julie Rivkin, "would really be thrilled to be in such an authentic Jamesian setting."

On Thursday, June 17, the Old Merchant's House will host the opening reception for a New York University conference entitled "Authenticity in American Antique Furniture." It seems fitting that this conference should begin in an environment so complete, whose furnishings are not only authentic but original to the site.

Many distinguished experts will speak at the conference, which is part of NYU's Appraisal Studies Program. They include Morrison H. Heckscher, curator of American Decorative Arts at the Metropolitan Museum of Art; Brock Jobe, a deputy director at Winterthur Museum; Myrna Kaye, author and consulting curator of furniture, Society for the Preservation of New England Antiquities; Leslie Keno, vice-president and director, Sotheby's; Frank Levy of Bernard & S. Dean Levy, Inc.; and Philip Zea, curator of Historic Deerfield.

The director of the conference is Michael Connors, adjunct assistant professor of arts at NYU. Mr. Connors is a senior member of the American Society of Appraisers, a dealer and consultant in American and European furniture, and a Ph.D. candidate in decorative arts at NYU.

The conference will be held June 17-19 at NYU's Washington Square campus.

Volunteers Above and Beyond

Some special volunteers must be praised and thanked for their unflinching service to the Old Merchant's House. Penelope Bateau has given endless hours in varied tasks. She wrote most of this edition of the newsletter, painted some of our iron grillwork and is constructing made-to-measure boxes for individual items in the textile collection. Barbara Mullen has our newly donated computers up and running with software designed to computerize the collection and has already input a good deal of information into them. Raissa Pockros, who is gifted with vast knowledge of office machinery, has our fax machine humming usefully, and she has also pitched in on less glamorous jobs, helping to vacuum and then move the trunks now on display on the ground floor all the way from the attic. Jerry Johnson moves cheerfully from one maintenance job to another, and things that work follow in his wake. John Abb has constructed a device to suspend the halogen light discreetly over the front door. The lamp is on a timer and

illuminates the front door at night, which helps protect the house as it draws attention to the facade. Members of the Junior League and other volunteer docents, both new and old friends of the Old Merchant's House, continue to give generously of their time. The grateful appreciation of the staff and board is extended to all.

Equipment Bonanza

Through the good offices of our treasurer, Karen Treadwell, the Old Merchant's House has come into possession of a Xerox copier, an overhead projector, some desks, cabinetry and chairs, and a couple of marble table tops. These articles have so improved the efficiency and appearance of our office space that we are feeling rather puffed up about it all and wish Karen to know how grateful we are to her for delivering us from shabbiness.

As our operation improves and we take on more ambitious projects for the museum, however, we are naggingly aware of some glitches in the system. The most obvious of these is an ancient computer printer that



Urban Archaeology is under way in the garden, resuming a study begun two years ago to determine more about day to day life in 19th century New York.

STEP INTO THE PAST AND BE A PART OF OUR FUTURE

*GOOD NEIGHBOR \$25

Free admission for one during visiting hours. Invitation to 19th century Holiday Party and other special events. Bi-annual newsletter.

*PROTECTOR \$50

As above, for two.

*CULTURAL HERO \$100

*PRINCELY SUPPORTER \$250

*GUARDIAN ANGEL \$500

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* NOTECARDS _____ @8 / \$10.00

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*RESTORATION FUND \$ _____



Membership contributions are tax deductible. If you are eligible for a matching gift program, please take advantage of it to increase your gift. Gifts of securities are welcome. Please ask your broker or banker to call the museum office (777-1089).

Make checks payable to:
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chews paper and shrieks when it consents to work at all. It is a challenge to the sweetness of our collective disposition to get a press release out on time. So now, with this windfall of fine equipment from Karen Treadwell invigorating us, we are emboldened to admit that we have a wish list.

A laser printer is at the top of it.

A banner would be nice, one visible from the boundary avenues of 4th Street. It would hang outside the museum and beckon visitors.

And oh, yes—buckets of money. Thanks.

Museum Calendar

Sunday, April 25, 1 to 4 p.m.

Once in a Lifetime Exhibition Opening

Articles purchased for use once in a lifetime—wedding dresses, fancy dress ball clothes, trunks for the Grand Tour—form the basis of this exhibition from the collection. Curator Mimi Sherman will give gallery talks throughout the day. Exhibit open through the summer. Free for members, \$3 for the public.

Thursday, April 29, 6 p.m.

Chamber Music in 19th Century Splendor

String quartet Halcyon plays selections in the parlor. House opens for viewing at 5:30 p.m. Call for reservations. \$7 for members, \$10 for the public.

Saturday, May 1, Noon to 4 p.m.

Archaeology at the Old Merchant's House

The garden will be open for tours of this urban excavation. Diana Wall, Associate Professor of Anthropology, City College of New York, will give tours every hour on the hour. \$5 for members, \$7 for the public.



Tuesday, May 11, 6:30 to 8:30 p.m.

Spring Benefit

Cocktail reception at the FORBES Magazine Galleries. By invitation.

Tuesday, June 22, 6 p.m.

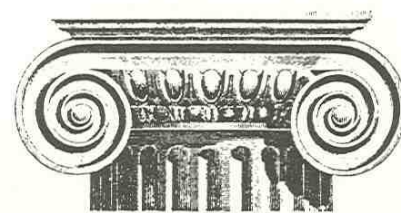
Midsummer's Night Frolic

Selections from Shakespeare's "A Midsummer Night's Dream," presented by the puckish Mort Kroos and his Poetic License Players. Call for reservations. \$7 for members, \$10 for the public.

Wednesdays, June and July, Midday

Noontime Tours and Lunch in New York's 19th Century Secret Garden

The garden is open for lunch (bring your own) from noon until 2 p.m., weather permitting. Thematic tours begin at 1 p.m. Free for members, \$3 for the public.



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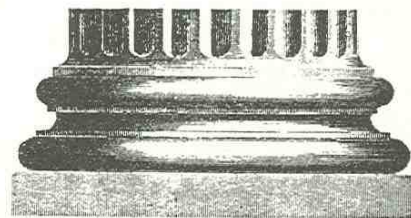
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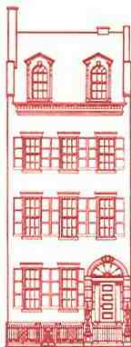
Rebecca Churchill

Education Coordinator



Old Merchant's House is the bi-annual newsletter of the museum. Inquiries may be sent to the Old Merchant's House, 29 East Fourth Street, New York, NY 10003. Telephone 212-777-1089.

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