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Old Merchant's House

Newsletter Fall/Winter 1989

Chairman's Letter

Dear Friends,

As Chairman of the Old Merchant's House, I am pleased to announce publication of our first-ever newsletter for members. To start, I thought you would be interested in learning about some of the tremendous positive changes that have taken place within the organization during this past critical year of stabilization and restructuring.

A year ago, the House was in deep crisis. The death of our long-time friend Joseph Roberto had deprived us of a staunch champion and dedicated Director. The demolition of adjacent buildings had caused severe structural damage. And our financial resources were in no way adequate to meet our needs. The time had come for immediate action.

We began by forming a special advisory Planning Committee, comprised of OMH Board members and experts in the preservation community. Next, funded by grants from the J.M. Kaplan Fund and the New York Landmarks Conservancy, we hired an interim director, Janine Veto, a fund-raising and arts management consultant—to work with us to secure the physical structure of the House; to stabilize its financial position and administration; and to begin to develop a comprehensive plan to ensure its future.

Here are some highlights of the remarkable progress we have made to date and our plans—and challenges—for the coming year.

Minskoff Settlement

In October, the OMH and the Minskoff Organization agreed upon a monetary settlement for the extensive damages to the House as a result of demolition of the adjacent buildings to the east a year ago. Emergency repairs will be made immediately, before the onset of winter, and full restoration work will commence in the spring.

A Restructured Board

We have reorganized our Board into a smaller core group that includes both long-standing as well as new members. Five Board committees have been established, each devoted to a specific aspect of the House and chaired by a member of the Board. The new committees are: Architectural and Restoration; Curatorial; Programming; Finance; and Membership and Publicity. Board development will continue to be a high priority in the coming year.

Not just antiques...the personal family treasures make OMH special.

An Infusion of Funds

Fortunately, we have been able to attract new funds from a broad base of supporters. For restoration and repairs of the House, we were awarded a spectacular $173,000 matching grant from the New York State Department of Parks, Recreation and Historic Preservation. We have also received needed funds from the Vincent Astor Foundation, the J.M. Kaplan Fund, the Joyce Mertz-Gilmore Fund and the Greenwall Foundation. The New York Times Company Foundation, Chase Manhattan Bank, and the Andy Warhol Foundation for the Visual Arts have become donors for the first time. Other grants are pending and we are encouraged about our prospects for the coming year.

However, as vital as such grants are to the future of the Old Merchant's House, our true base of support rests in the dedicated commitment and interest of our members. We must continue to look to you to meet our day-to-day financial needs—they are substantial! Please don't forget to send your end-of-year gift!

New Program Planning

Activities at the House are growing dramatically. Last spring, the Junior League of the City of New York made a three-year commitment to helping us create and publicize an interpretive museum program for the House. Work has begun on writing an interpretation manual, on training new museum interpreters, and on marketing. With the League's help, we are looking forward to reaching new and varied audiences and to expanding the hours we are open to the public.

We have also been working on creating educational programs for school children. A pilot program emphasizing the importance of historic preservation will be offered for grades two through six beginning in January.

Looking Ahead

We hope you were able to join us at our annual Holiday Festivities for members. If we didn't see you there, please bring your friends to our Open House on New Year's Day, a traditional day for social calling during the 19th Century.

In February, we will launch a big membership drive, which will reflect some necessary restructuring of dues and benefits. Look for your membership renewal then. Perhaps you have a friend who would like to become a member and enjoy the pleasures of our unique House. In the spring, in addition to our annual Garden Party in May, we are planning a special event and a series of lectures. We will also be publishing a spring newsletter.

Of significance, we have initiated a search for a full-time executive director to carry on the superb work Janine Veto has done in helping us build for the future. While a lot of hard work still lies ahead, we are encouraged by the great strides we have made in revitalizing this important New York cultural institution. We hope you are, too.

Sincerely,

Merrikay Hall
Chairman

Gertrude's gowns

History rustles in the folds of a gown, peeps from a petite tapestry shoe and lies wrapped in layers of white muslin . . . the costume collection at OMH brings things alive for many visitors providing a very personal link to Gertrude and the Tredwell family. Of all the House's possessions, these are also the most fragile link to the past. Although Gertrude stored everything in huge trunks, they gathered the dust of a century. And despite their current sanctuary in boxes lined with acid-free paper, the fabric is naturally prone to decay. In 1981, some of the clothes were professionally restored. Silk and wool dresses were placed under netting and vacuumed, while cottons and muslins were hand laundered using approved methods of preservation. But each item cost around $3,000 to be professionally restored and the best restoration efforts can only slow the process.

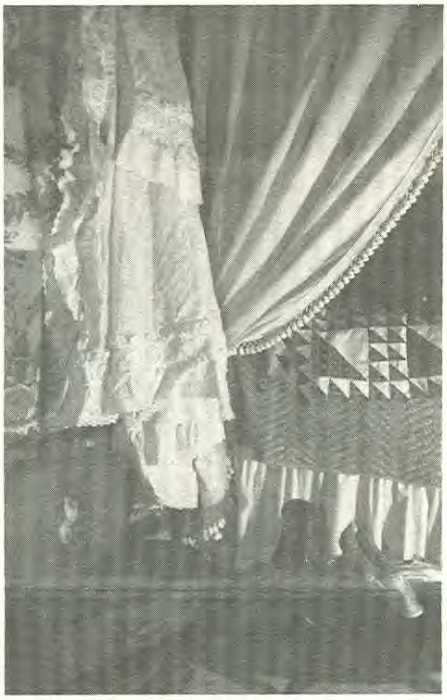
The collection numbers some twenty-five to thirty items, dating from 1815 to 1915. Items on display are rotated twice a year and now is the time to visit OMH as a new display has just been installed.

Romantic restraint

We are particularly fortunate to have on display a green silk dress from our collection. Not only is it in astonishingly healthy condition, but it is a truly excellent example of the distinctively elegant style of dress worn from 1840 to 1850.

By 1840, the Romantic view of women was in full flourish with all its attending restraints. Women were to be ladylike—the embodiment of elaborate perfection. The silhouette of their dresses became elongated with skirts that reached the floor in a dome shape. Bodices became tighter and sleeves narrower. Everything about the garment was dignified, refined—and restrictive.

The most characteristic feature of both day and evening dresses from 1840 to 1850 was the domed skirt seen on our model. At this time, the waist was the focus of fashion. The wider the skirt, the smaller the waist appeared. It was the era of the 18-inch waist (although no museum's costume collection can find one at anything less than 20 inches.) Skirts gained their fullness through a pleating technique called gauging, introduced in 1840. This meant the fabric, usually four or five yards, was gathered in large, even pleats with extra fullness from hip to hip around the back. The skirt was pushed out further by layers of petticoats, the number of which increased as the decade progressed. These were made of crinoline, horsehair or a stiffened cotton. Sometimes a small, bolster-shaped bustle was also worn under the skirt. It was only with the introduction of the hoop in 1850 that women were finally relieved of the weight of those innumerable yards of fabric in their skirts and petticoats.



Hand stitching and yards of eyelet lace give distinction to this beautiful peignoir.

The bodice of our dress illustrates many of the details typical of the decade. It has the distinctively low, pointed waist. The sleeves are set into the bodice making it tight across the back. Their gentle flair is markedly different from the huge puffs of the 1820's. The lace in this Pompadour-style sleeve adds a romantic touch. The dress illustrates the decade's eschewing of excessive ornamentation. There are no frills, gathers or appliques to decorate it as there would have been earlier—and would be later.

The dress is made of a fabric that became famous in the 1840's. It was called "changeable", glacé or shot silk. The art of fabric dying reached a high level in this decade—even today, in samples like our own dress, the colors are almost as clear and bright as when they were new. The dyes used were still vegetable dyes (aniline dyes appeared in 1860). Happily, the renewed popularity of silk in the 1840's saved the American silk industry from the total bankruptcy it was facing after twenty years of overwhelming popularity of muslin and cotton.

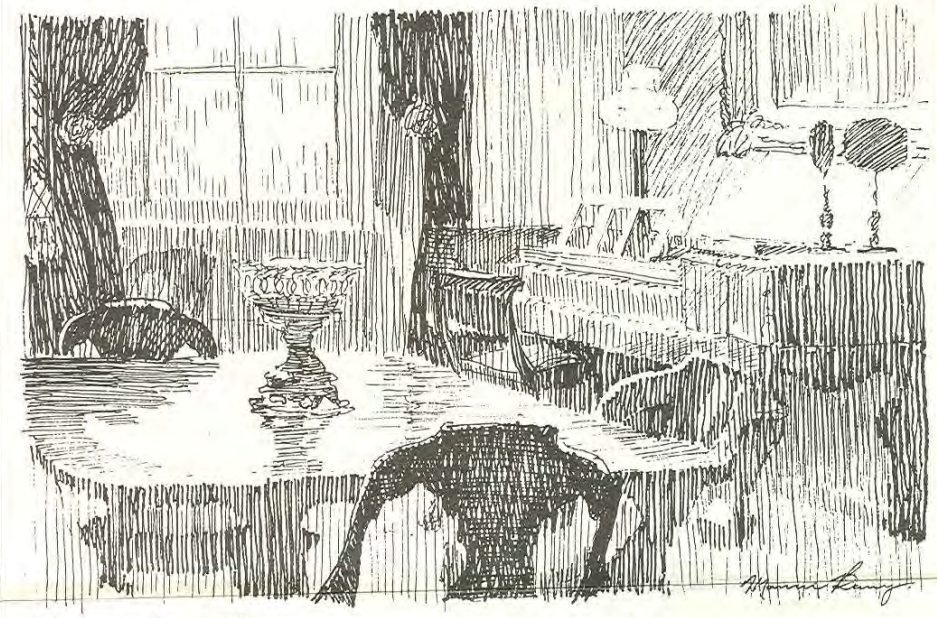
Intriguing intimates

Our second costume installation is of a more intimate nature and features a very beautiful white cotton peignoir or day robe. This garment shows wonderful workmanship in its ruffles and eyelet trim. The skirt has an ingenious arrangement of ribbons and buttons sewn into the side seams, to allow the wearer to gather up the side panels for a romantic 18th century effect. Women throughout the century spent much time in these loose fitting, charming robes, wearing them morning and evening—no doubt putting off the donning of stays for as long as possible.

The drawers in the display are typical of the large, loose style favored for all undergarments during the first half of the 19th century. Many pieces of underwear from that time look as if they were designed for giants. Drawers have a fascinating history. They were reviled almost universally when they were first introduced in the 1800's. Women were not to wear trousers in any form. But progressive writers spoke of them as healthy garments, particularly when made of light wool. Despite the controversy, they gained great popularity with the young, especially among the wealthy. By 1840, they were part of the wardrobe of all respectable ladies.

The two new costume installations are on display now, together with an existing installation of earlier white muslins pictured below.

Photographs by Deborah Jaffe



A Parsons student sketch.

Shooting the House and other Group Tales

Although open to the general public on Sundays only (so far), the House buzzes with activity all week—and all hours. The indefatigable Pat Hildebrand, Program Director, is always on hand to welcome groups of all kinds. Historical associations that have toured OMH include the South Street Seaport Organization, the Smithsonian Associates, the Museum of the City of New York and the Historical Societies of New York, Monmouth County and Pittsburgh. The Victorian Society of Boston came expressly to see this gem of Victorian values and interior design groups from as far afield as Savannah have come to see 19th-century design at its best (the Parsons School of Design students stayed to Sketch last spring and a new class has returned this winter).

The House has also proved a wonderful (and inexpensive) backdrop for magazines and catalogs, from *Colonial Homes* to *Child* magazine. This Fall, *The Bridal Guide* came to shoot Mother of the Bride outfits, *Gourmet* magazine has shot a piece for its December issue and the House has even tempted toiletry and bath products company Caswell Massey to shoot its new catalog here—despite an obvious lack of bathroom settings! What makes the house so wonderful as a location is not just the fabulous furnishings, or the relatively low fees, but also its flexibility.

When *Art & Antiques* wanted an authentic kitchen scene, its staff simply rearranged the pie-safe between the windows, set out the china and pots where needed. The shoot also included a fully set dining table—with candles in the Tredwells' crystal candlesticks and extra props in the parlor. Of course, Pat is always on hand to keep a firm eye on the proceedings.

Groups and shoots of all kinds can be readily accommodated at OMH. It makes a memorable change from the usual venues and you may arrange tours or cocktails at very reasonable rates. Call the office for details.

Helping around the house

Ten years ago, Xenia Brandt's daughter Anita was a young architecture student involved in the restoration and reopening of a somewhat derelict museum on East Fourth Street. Xenia came to take a look at her daughter's project—and has been here ever since. Every other Sunday, Xenia's cheerful Danish-American accent greets arriving visitors as she collects their small entrance fees and steers them to the visitors' book. Thirty to fifty visitors is a good day at OMH but Xenia enjoys the small crowd—there's more opportunity to meet and talk to people, who come from all over the world.

What binds someone like Xenia to OMH for ten years? "It's the friendship we have here" says Xenia, who delights in playing den mother to the roster of volunteers. She also mentions the value of preserving something important to New York and she likes to think that she is helping keep the house "as well as Joe and Carol did it." (Joe and Carol Roberto were responsible for restoring the house in the 1970's, at the request of the Decorator's Club, after years of structural deterioration.) How long will Xenia continue in her post? She has no plans to quit because, she says, "it's just fun!" Cont...

Please help create a future for this unique landmark

Become a member today or, if you're already a member, sign up a friend.

GOOD NEIGHBOR $25
Free admission during visiting hours. Invitation to the Victorian Holiday Party and Spring Garden Party

PROTECTOR $50
As above for two and family

CULTURAL HERO $100
As above plus invitation to special events

PRINCELY SUPPORTER $250
As above plus gift of new illustrated book on New York

GUARDIAN ANGEL $500
As above plus more

TRUE FRIEND/CORPORATE CHAMPION $1,500
Host a special event at the House

PROUD OWNER $2,000,000
Restricted deed

Membership contributions are tax deductible. Please remember to inquire at your place of business about matching corporate gifts.

Make check payable to:
Old Merchant's House of New York
and mail to:

The Old Merchant's House
29 East Fourth Street
New York, NY 10003

Mr./Mrs./Ms. _____

Address _____

City _____ State _____ Zip _____

This membership application form expires 2/1/90

Cont...

Getting involved

Not all of us have the time and energy to make the kind of dedicated commitment to the house that Xenia has made. But wouldn't you like to get involved just a little—perhaps on a one-time basis? It's a great way to meet other members and a good excuse to spend more time at the house. Here's how you can help in the next few months:

New Year's Day

This annual event seems to grow every year. Monday, January 1, 1990, OMH will hold its traditional Open House from 1:00 to 6:00 p.m. Work off those Christmas calories helping us take care of the 300 plus visitors who are expected to descend upon us. Help out in a two or four hour shift monitoring traffic between floors or serving hot cider and goodies in the Old Kitchen. An exhilarating way to start the New Year!

19th Century Research

If you enjoy history and would like to put some learning to good use, we always need help with research on particular subjects of 19th century life. Perhaps you'd like to investigate old recipes, parlor games, social customs, music of the period? You determine the topic and the amount of time you can spend.

Guided Tours

To learn a lot about the House, you might want to become a Tour Guide. Learn the tour in your own time from our simple study guides and from listening to other volunteers, then join us on one or two Sundays a month to lead tours. You'll find it fascinating as you explore various new aspects of the house.

We make it easy for you to get started on any of the above activities. Just call the office Monday to Thursday, 9:00 a.m. to 5:00 p.m. and tell us your interests. Come on and join the fun.

Illustrations this page are from a theater program in the House's collection.

Old Merchant's House Calendar

Christmas Party 5–7pm
Wednesday, December 6
Thursday, December 7
(Members and guests only)

Candlelight Tours 7–8:30pm
Thursday, December 14

New Years's Day Open House 1–6pm
Monday, January 1, 1990

The Old Merchant's House is a non-profit organization committed to the restoration and preservation of the historic Seabury Tredwell House. Built near Manhattan's Astor Place in 1832, the House was the Tredwell home for one hundred years. It became a museum in 1936.

Old Merchant's House is the bi-annual newsletter for members of the House. Inquiries may be sent to The Old Merchant's House, 29 East Fourth Street, New York, NY 10003.

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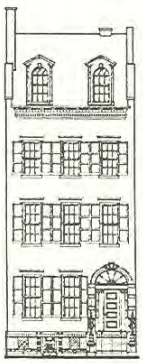

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