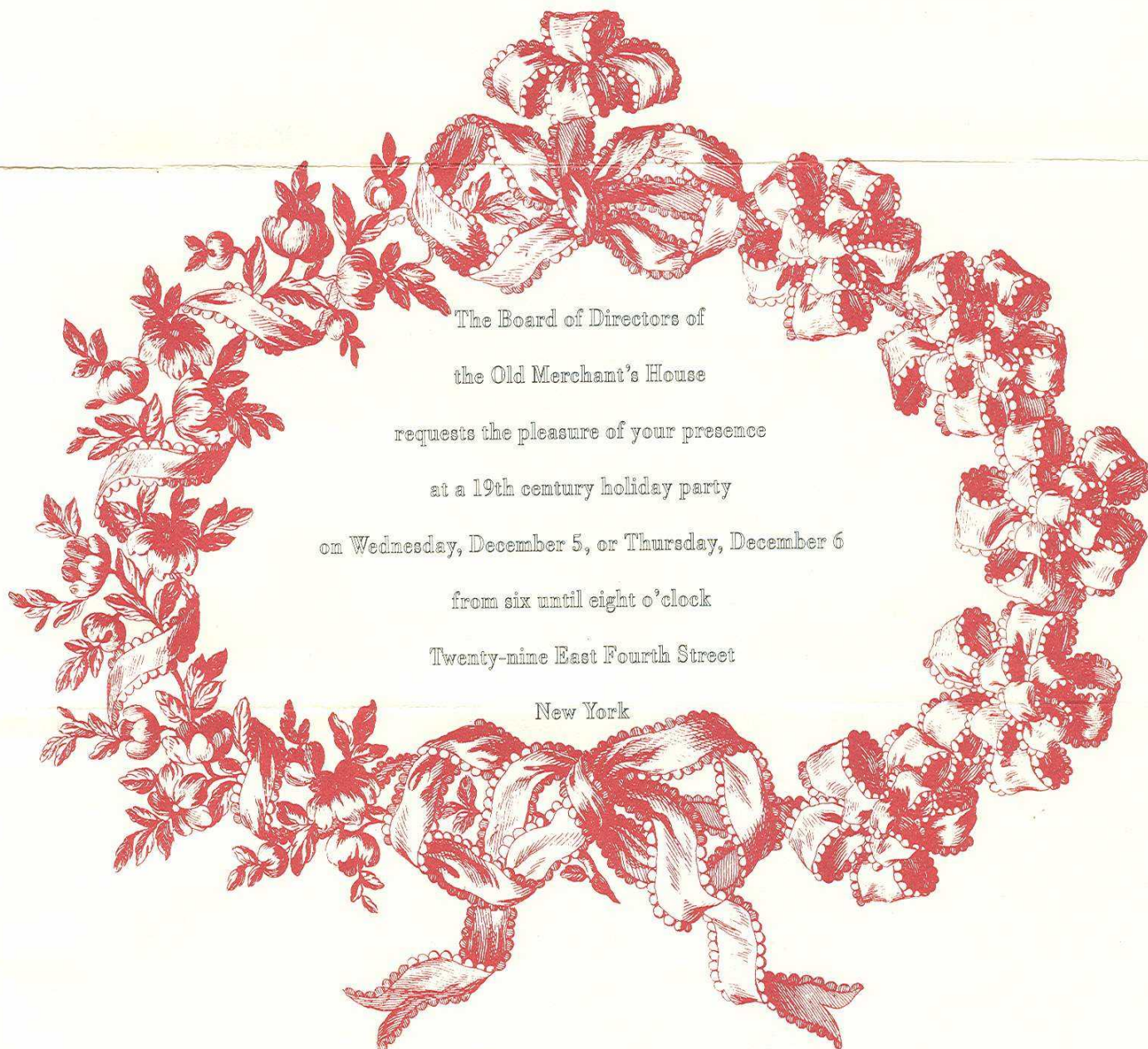


no. 3

Old Merchant's House

Newsletter

Fall/Winter 1990



The Board of Directors of
the Old Merchant's House
requests the pleasure of your presence
at a 19th century holiday party
on Wednesday, December 5, or Thursday, December 6
from six until eight o'clock
Twenty-nine East Fourth Street
New York

R.S.V.P.

Old Merchant's House

777-1089

Music and Refreshments

19th Century

Holiday Shop

Admission:

Members Free

Guests \$15.00



The Magic of Nutcrackers

By Scott Marshall

During December and January, the Old Merchant's House will display a colorful collection of over 35 nutcrackers to celebrate the holiday season and to remember Christmases past. The nutcrackers that will be on display all reflect a time when craftsmen took pride in creating objects that were elaborately ornamental, yet were also functional. "It was a Victorian tradition to serve fruits and nuts in their shells towards the end of a meal and predictably these gadget conscious people had to have the proper tools for the job". This was why, according to the *Lyle Price Guide to Collectibles and Memorabilia*, compiled by Anthony Curtis (Putnam, 1988), many 19th century families at dessert time would bring out a nutcracker to "complement the tableware and reflect the status of the household".

In today's world of architecture and the decorative arts, objects are often streamlined. Indeed one may purchase a characterless nutcracker of two metal prongs in any convenience store. But where are the romance, the mystery, and all of the wonderful associations that cling to the little wooden figures of yesteryear?

Nutcrackers as we know them today evolved during the 15th and 16th centuries in the area of Nuremberg, Germany, a mountainous region where wood was plentiful, winters were long, and the local "cottagers and farming population were forced to look for supplementary ways of earning a living...[such as] the casual making of all kinds of domestic utensils and toys" (*An Illustrated History of Toys*, by Karl Ewald Fritzach and Manfred Bachmann, Abbey Library, 1965). A simple wooden instrument that moved with the pull of a lever, the nutcracker was a hybrid of both practical device and toy—albeit originally more of a toy to amuse adults than to occupy children.

Although sometimes circulated along medieval trade routes from the deep Thuringian forests, nutcrackers did not reach a large audience until the German tale "The Nutcracker and the Mouse King", by Ernst Theodor Amadeus Hoffmann,

appeared. Written in 1816 (only 16 years before the Old Merchant's House came into being) and set in Nuremberg, the Hoffman story is dark and full of forboding; in its complexity of two interlocking tales it also differs significantly from the well-known version of today.

The popularity of "The Nutcracker and the Mouse King" led to its being subsequently retold in French by the celebrated novelist and dramatist Alexandre Dumas (Père) as "Casse Noisette"—literally "The Cracker of Hazelnuts". Filtered through a 19th century sensibility that emphasized the virtues of home and childhood, the story became sweeter, lighter and happier—more suitable to be a child's fairy tale. Not long after, Peter Ilyich Tchaikovsky settled on "Casse Noisette" as the subject for his new ballet—and the rest is history, as they say.

Interestingly, the Tchaikovsky ballet was not a success when it premiered in December 1892 in St. Petersburg, Russia. It was not performed in the West until 1934 when the Sadler's Wells Company (now the Royal Ballet) opened in London. New York did not see it until 1940 when an abbreviated version by the Ballet Russe de Monte Carlo came to town. That same year the music achieved new and unprecedented popularity when Leopold Stokowski conducted "The Nutcracker Suite" as part of the revolutionary Walt Disney color cartoon movie "Fantasia".

However, it was not until 1944 that the full-length score was performed in the United States by the San Francisco Ballet; ten years later the complete version finally premiered in

New York. After more than half-a-century, "The Nutcracker" was finally appreciated as a work of genius and on its way to becoming a popular Christmas-time classic.

In recent years more and more nutcrackers have become available for purchase as holiday gifts, though many carry hefty price tags. As the nutcracker in the original Hoffmann story had a military character, it seems appropriate that the majority of

nutcrackers that one sees today are soldiers. It has now become fashionable to create nutcrackers representing almost every possible trade: bakers, cooks, hunters, chimney sweeps, clowns, doctors, kings, beer drinkers, monks, Santas, mushroom pickers—the list is inventive and endless. Most are



Berkshires Week/Clemens Kältscher

men; female nutcrackers are a rarity.

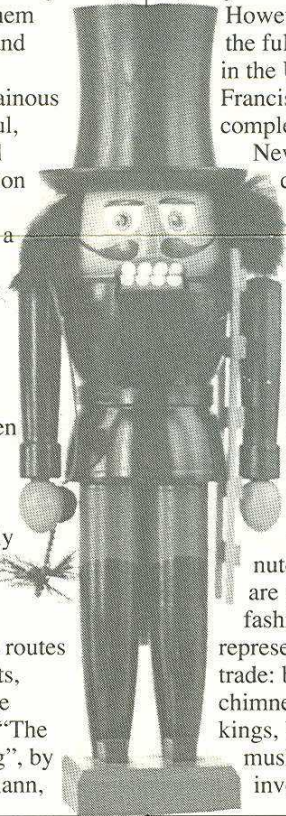
Most of the nutcrackers available for purchase today are made in either West or East Germany, befitting the country where Hoffmann's tale originated. Occasionally one finds nutcrackers made in Switzerland or elsewhere. Contrary to popular belief, most nutcrackers crack nuts under the wooden levers in the back, not in their mouths (although some can do both).

As Christmas 1990 draws closer, "The Nutcracker" ballet may be found in the repertoire of both major and regional ballet companies across the country and around the world. Additional millions watch the annual telecast on television. And, the hardy little nutcracker itself has become as familiar and easily recognizable a secular holiday symbol as Santas, trees, stockings, wreaths and candy canes.

Scott Marshall fell in love with the story of the nutcracker and the marvelous Tchaikovsky music as a small child by watching an annual television broadcast in the 1950's. His first nutcracker appeared under the family tree on December 25, 1959, along with the story and a recording of "The Nutcracker Suite"; he was then six years old. Each Christmas since then he has received a different nutcracker (sometimes two) from Santa Claus. They now comprise a 30-year collection.

A volunteer tour guide at the Old Merchant's House from 1983-85, Scott is the Executive Director of the Greenwich Village Society for Historic Preservation.

"The Magic of Nutcrackers" exhibition:
December 2 through January 13
Old Merchant's House



Museum Calendar

October 27

New York University conference: "300 Years of American Furniture" Tour, 1:30 to 3:30 p.m., by subscription

October 28

Museum re-opens to the public, Sundays 1 to 4 p.m.

December 2 through January 13

Exhibition: "The Magic of Nutcrackers," open Sundays 1 to 4 p.m.

December 5 and 6

19th century Holiday Party, music and refreshments, 6 to 8 p.m. Admission: members free, guests \$15.00



December 9

"The Magic of Nutcrackers - the Confessions of a Collector". Lecture by architectural historian and collector Scott Marshall, 2 p.m.

December 11, 12, and 13

Holiday Candlelight Tours with refreshments, 5:30 to 7:30 p.m. Admission: \$6.00, members \$3.00

February through October 1991

Exhibition: "Suburb to the Seaport: Greenwich Village 1790-1850," at the South Street Seaport Museum, displaying objects from the Old Merchant's House collection.

Museum News

Professional Museum Staff Selected

After an extensive search, during which twelve highly qualified candidates were interviewed by a committee of the Board of Directors, the Board has appointed Margaret Halsey Gardiner as Executive Director and Elizabeth Churchill Cattán as Associate Director/Curator. The Board determined that they would make the best management team for the Old Merchant's House, providing a needed balance of financial management and administrative abilities with museum curatorial expertise.

Margaret Gardiner, known as Pi, has an impressive financial background, a strong interest in American decorative arts and historic preservation, and extensive knowledge of the needs of the Old Merchant's House, having served as President of the Board, and as Acting Director during the search. Pi holds an MBA in finance from the University of California, Berkeley, and has done in-depth independent study in 18th and 19th century architecture and decorative arts. Until 1989, Pi worked for the Dun & Bradstreet Corporation, in corporate strategic planning.

Elizabeth Cattán is a candidate for a master's degree in art history at Southern Methodist University. Elizabeth was graduated from Tulane University and began her graduate studies at Dartmouth College. While working at the Historic Hermann-Grima House in New Orleans, LA., which was built in 1831, one year earlier than the Old Merchant's House, she authored studies on 19th century social history, architecture, and textiles. At the National Museum of Women in the Arts, in Washington, D.C., Elizabeth served

as Director of Public Relations from 1985 to 1988. She has most recently worked as Fine Arts Specialist at Weschler's, a regional auction house in Washington, D.C.

Volunteer Contributions

Volunteers are the heart of the Old Merchant's House. In recent months, volunteers have accomplished the cataloguing of over 160 textile objects (including fans, shoes, needlework, muffs, hats, and other items of clothing). Each piece has been photographed, wrapped, labeled, and packed. Volunteers are currently weeding the garden, conducting a telethon to remind members to renew their



A Parsons student sketch.

Step into the past and be a part of our future

☐ GOOD NEIGHBOR \$25

Free admission during visiting hours. Invitation to the Victorian Holiday 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 a 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

☐ RESTORATION FUND \$_____

POSTCARDS _____@ \$1.00 each _____10/\$8.50

Mr./Mrs./Ms.

Address _____

City _____

State _____

Telephone _____

Zip _____

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
and mail to:

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

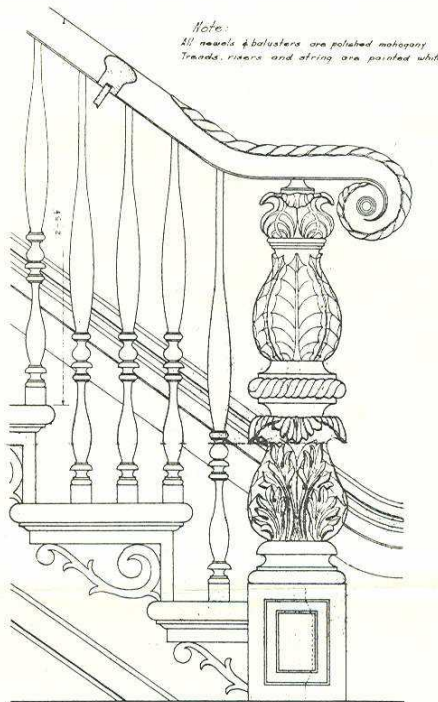
memberships for 1990-1991, and helping with mailings and other office work.

Volunteer Sally Lipsey has been working on computerizing the inventory of the Tredwell family's books. She is inspecting and cataloguing each book, recording a description of its physical appearance as well as content, and looking for revealing inscriptions and insertions. She is also classifying the books according to subject (religion, literature, biography, French language, texts, philosophy, politics, art, and travel) and by signature. Sally writes: "Mrs. Seabury Tredwell received the works of Lord Byron, including *The Suppressed Poems*, published in 1829, 'from her affectionate nephew, Timothy.' This book is in the Tredwell family collection of books, and is one of many from which we hope to gain insight about members of the family, and about life in New York in the 19th century. While Eliza Tredwell's name is also inscribed in *Women of the Bible*, her husband's name appears in biographies of William Harrison and Daniel Webster. The Tredwell daughters, Julia, Phebe, and Gertrude, owned French conversational books, leading to the conjecture that they all studied French and may have traveled abroad."

Please let us know if you would like to participate in volunteer activities.

Historic Structures Report

In September, the Old Merchant's House selected the well-known New York firm Jan Hird Pokorny, Architects & Planners, to research and write an Historic Structures Report. The report, which will take almost a year to complete, will provide comprehensive historical research and architectural documentation on the Old Merchant's House and will be an invaluable tool for long-range restoration



Main Stair Detail

planning and budgeting, as well as for developing museum programs.

Donations to the Library

A library has been started for use by volunteers, staff and researchers on 19th century New York and its architecture, textiles, decorative arts, and lifestyles. Any donations of books on these subjects would be gratefully received. The following titles, in particular, are sought for the library:

1. *Classic New York*, by Ada Louise Huxtable (Anchor Books, 1964).
2. *19th Century Dwelling Houses of Greenwich Village*, Verna Small, editor (Greenwich Village Homeowner's Association, 1964).

3. *New York in the Nineteenth Century*, by John Grafton (Dover Books, 1980).
4. *Old New York in Early Photographs*, by Mary Black (Dover Books, 1973).
5. *Nineteenth Century New York in Rare Photographic Views*, by Frederick S. Lightfoot (Dover Books, 1981).

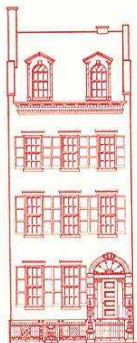
The Old Merchant's House wishes to thank members who have recently donated books to the library: Mr. and Mrs. Joseph Angermeier, Anthony Bellov, Doug Dammerell, Scott Marshall, and Hilda Regier.

Restoration Begun

The critical reconstruction work to stabilize the museum building is under way. The entire restoration is projected to take several years to complete and will be accomplished in phases. The first phase, which began this summer, consists of emergency structural repairs on the exterior of the house. The next phase is scheduled to begin in the spring and will include much-needed interior as well as exterior work. During this second phase, we will have to pack and store the entire museum collection — and the museum will again be closed to the public. We are grateful to the many members and friends who have responded so generously to the museum's call for financial help with donations to the Restoration Fund. Historic restoration is enormously costly and funds are urgently needed. Please help.

Old Merchant's House is the bi-annual newsletter for members 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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29 East Fourth Street
New York, NY 10003