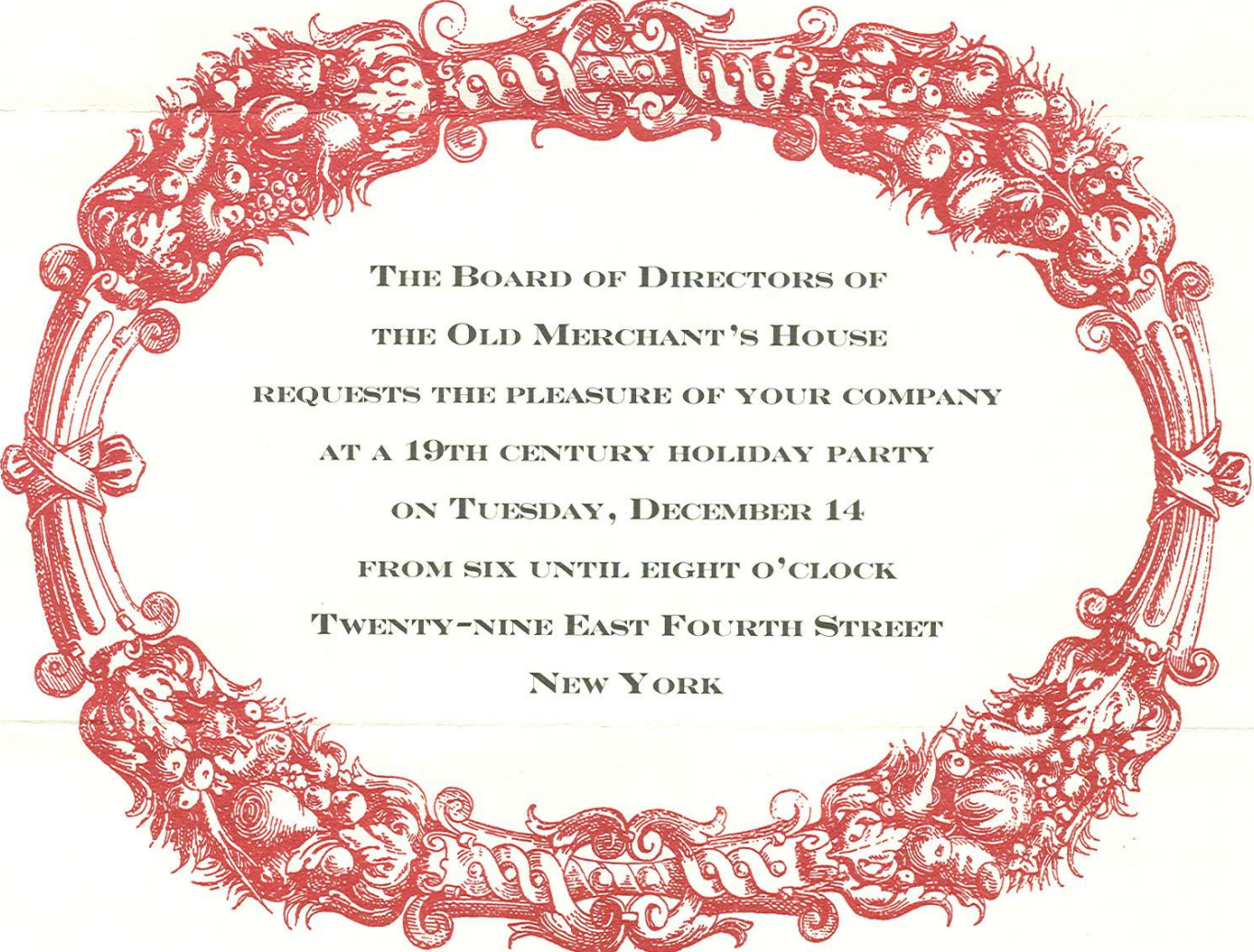


no. 9

Old Merchant's House

Newsletter

Fall/Winter 1993



**THE BOARD OF DIRECTORS OF
THE OLD MERCHANT'S HOUSE
REQUESTS THE PLEASURE OF YOUR COMPANY
AT A 19TH CENTURY HOLIDAY PARTY
ON TUESDAY, DECEMBER 14
FROM SIX UNTIL EIGHT O'CLOCK
TWENTY-NINE EAST FOURTH STREET
NEW YORK**

R. S. V. P. (212) 777-1089

MUSIC AND REFRESHMENTS

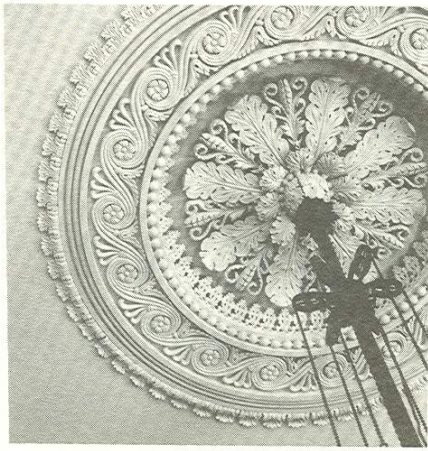
MEMBERS FREE

OLD MERCHANT'S HOUSE

NON-MEMBERS \$20.00

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. Located just steps from Washington Square, it was built in 1832 as a row house and was home to a prosperous merchant, Seabury Tredwell, and his family for nearly 100 years. Today, the house stands alone, a unique survivor of Old New York. Its rich, late-Federal exterior recalls the beauty and order of entire city blocks. Its unaltered Greek Revival interior, complete with original furniture, clothing, and family memorabilia, offers an intimate glimpse of upper-middle-class life in 19th century New York. The Old Merchant's House is a designated National Historic and New York City Landmark and has been open to the public as a museum since 1936.

Hours: Sunday through Thursday, 1 to 4 p.m. Admission \$3.00. Group tours by appointment.



Old Merchant's House Ceiling Medallions: Unquestionably the Finest

by David Flaharty

The Old Merchant's House, built in 1832, has been described as "transitional" to the extent that its unrestrained federal woodwork coexists handsomely with its robust Greek Revival plaster ornamentation. Indeed, the matching ceiling medallions in the double parlors are unquestionably the finest designs to survive into the late-20th century and are superior to any composed during the American classical revival.

Builder-architects of typical lower Manhattan row houses generally specified flat plaster ceiling fields as three-coat work against sawn wooden lath and, with the client's approval, bought enrichments from the corner plaster shop often following period stylebooks such as Minard Lafever's *The Beauties of Modern Architecture* of 1835.

The Old Merchant's House medallions, however, appear with recessed alternating acanthus foliate center clusters. To achieve this dramatic result, framing and lathing of the central ceiling joists was necessarily more elaborate than simply running joists level from party wall to party wall into masonry pockets.

With the flat plastering complete, the artisans turned plain-run, reeded surround mouldings on the ceilings by troweling a mixture of gypsum and lime ahead of revolving sheet metal template blade sections nailed to stocks and slippers. Off-site cast plaster enrichments, such as the illustrated center cluster, guilloche/rosette and surround acanthus foliage, were then set within and around the runs using plaster as an adhesive.

Like all early houses in New York City, the Old Merchant's House has been subjected to masonry settling, nearby blasting, water intrusion and heavy vehicular traffic -- all factors which cause plaster ceilings to fail, particularly on center with oversized

ornamentation. But the unusually substantial framing allowed these medallions to withstand gravity regardless of the increased weight.

Students of Greek Revival plaster medallions who could see the plaster models in the author's personal study collection or the restored medallions on-site, would understand why it is appropriate to say that the medallion form has never been designed and executed more brilliantly than in the double parlors of the Old Merchant's House. Peering through windows of Greenwich Village townhouses, one observes centerpieces composed with varying degrees of success. But at the Old Merchant's House, there can be no question that this unidentified craftsman was the reigning genius of American classical revival plasterwork.



David Flaharty has 25 years experience as an ornamental plasterer and is also a sculptor and educator. He was chief restorer of the plasterwork at the Old Merchant's House during the 1970s. Mr. Flaharty will be a guest lecturer at the museum in the spring of 1994. This article and two photographs are reprinted with the author's permission.

Elisabeth Draper: Board Member Emeritus (1900-1993)

Interior designer Elisabeth Draper, Old Merchant's House Board member and friend, died on July 7, 1993. We extend our condolences to members of the Draper family and friends. Mrs. Draper asked that, upon her death, those who wished could make contributions to the Old Merchant's House, and so a fund has been established in her name for the conservation of textiles.

Museum News

Interns Restore Ceramics

F.I.T. student Marylin Mazza restored five serving and display pieces from the museum's ceramics collection this summer, work so dexterous the objects appear to have never been broken. All of her repairs employed state-of-the-art conservation techniques and stable non-toxic, reversible materials. Karen Dersis, also from F.I.T., restored a blue-and-white transferware platter from the collection as a senior project, with mends invisible to the naked eye. The museum's collection of blue-and-white transferware will be on display in the museum beginning in January 1994. The exhibit will look at ceramic as a material and

as decoration. Approximately 15 pieces are part of this collection. These ceramics were popular pieces for collection and use among the upper middle class of the 19th century.

Down Under

Dr. Diana Wall and her students from CCNY Urban Anthropology Department conducted a second season of excavations in the garden at the Old Merchant's House. An interesting assortment of artifacts was found in the center of the garden, reflecting the ground's use in the 17th and 18th centuries when the property was part of a farm, through the Tredwell's occupation in the 19th and early 20th century, and up to the present. Pottery sherds include English Midlands mottled ware (1660-1750), white salt-glaze stone ware, delft ware, cream ware (post 1762), other kinds of white earthen ware, as well as ever-ubiquitous flower pots. The archaeologists found bone from food scraps, metal buttons, coal, and pieces of fabric, bottles, glass, coal, as well as a pig's knuckle. New excavations to supplement existing pollen records, and to delineate the garden's layout in the 19th century, are being planned for later this year. The results of the archaeological excavations of the museum garden will be presented in final form some time next year.

(Too) Close to the Blaze

On Sunday, September 12, the Skidmore House (1840s), just steps to the east of the Old Merchant's House, caught fire; not surprising given years of neglect. The origin of the fire has not yet been determined. The areaway door was burned, along with piles of refuse, but agents for the property tell us the damage was minor. The building is now boarded up and secured. Despite Landmark status, the building has been left vacant and derelict by the owners since 1988. The Old Merchant's House staff has met several times with police officers of the local precinct. Staff members of the office of Councilman Antonio Pagan and the Department of Health are also assisting in our effort to protect the Old Merchant's House.

Help!

In May, the Junior League of the City of New York concluded its three-year volunteer commitment to the Old Merchant's House. We are grateful to League members who participated and want them to know that visitors to the museum greatly admired and appreciated their help. A new yet-to-be-named committee of Leaguers has now been formed to work on various projects. The committee urges anyone who wants to help to join. With expanded museum hours and a full calendar of events, we need volunteers now more than ever.

In Print

The Old Merchant's House is appearing at book stores near you, in two different volumes. British photographer James Merrell has included a number of stunning images of the museum and its collection in the new book, *Victorian Style*, published this year by Mitchell Beazley International, Ltd. In addition, the museum is featured in the National Trust for Historic Preservation's new publication, *Old Greenwich Village: An Architectural Portrait*, out this October. Fame is upon us.



And More.....

With funding from the Vincent Astor Foundation and the New York Economic Development Corporation, another section of the west wall is being repaired, by Aris Restoration, Inc. ... AVIVA Films used the kitchen and rear bedroom for two vignettes in "Hot on the Trail," which will air on the Turner network in December ... A new Old Merchant's House general brochure is in the works, thanks to the J.M. Kaplan Fund and the Open Space Institute... Self-guided tours are drawing an increased public response. Volunteers are translating the written tour into Spanish, French, German, and Japanese for our international visitors ... Nearly half of the textile collection has been catalogued and repacked for storage after the 1991 restoration ... Research and cataloguing of the furniture has begun ... Volunteers Anthony Hadaway and Paul Fisher have been working on the garden. Our goal is to have a lush and groomed space by spring 1994. If you would like to help us winterize, please call ... Curator Mimi Sherman has been collaborating with the National Lighthouse for the Blind to create a tour for the visually impaired. A similar tour for the hearing impaired is being developed.

Museum Calendar

Thursday, October 28, through Sunday, November 14

Old New York: False Dawn

The New York Art Theatre Institute's production of Edith Wharton's novel *Old New York* is a work of modern performance art specially created for the Old Merchant's House. Reservations required. Admission \$24. Thursday through Saturday at 8 p.m., Sunday at 3 p.m.

Tuesday, November 23, 6 p.m.

Chamber Music in 19th Century Splendor

String quartet Halcyon plays selections in the parlors. House opens for viewing at 5:30 p.m. Reservations required. Admission \$10, members \$7.

Tuesday, December 7, and Wednesday, December 8, 6 to 8 p.m.

Candlelight Tours

Tours of the museum resplendent with 19th century holiday decorations. Refreshments. Admission \$6, members \$3.

Sunday, December 12, 1 to 4 p.m.

A Visit from St. Nicholas

Dramatic reading of Clement Clarke Moore's 19th century classic. Tours and refreshments. Admission \$6, members and children \$3.

Tuesday, December 14, 6 to 8 p.m.

19th Century Holiday Party

Music, refreshments, and tours of the museum decorated for the holidays. Members free, non-members \$20.

Sunday, December 19, 7 p.m.

A Christmas Carol

Staged reading of Charles Dickens's classic

Christmas story, performed by Gregory St. John. Reservations required. Admission \$10, members \$7.

Tuesday, December 21, 6 p.m.

Chamber Music in 19th Century Splendor

String quartet Halcyon plays selections in the parlors. House opens for viewing at 5:30 p.m. Reservations required. Admission \$10, members \$7.

Saturday, January 1, 1 to 4 p.m.

19th Century New Year's Day Reception

Celebrate the New Year by "visiting," a tradition in 19th century New York. Tours and refreshments. Admission \$6, members \$3.



*Old Merchant's House
is now available
for private parties,
corporate events,
still photography,
and film shoots.
Call (212) 777-1089.*

STEP INTO THE PAST AND BE A PART OF OUR FUTURE

*GOOD NEIGHBOR \$35

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

*PROTECTOR \$70

As above, for two.

*CULTURAL HERO \$125

*PRINCELY SUPPORTER \$250

*GUARDIAN ANGEL \$500

*TRUE FRIEND \$1,500



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:
Old Merchant's House

and mail with this form to:
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29 East Fourth Street
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Letter from a Third Grader Says it All...

116 W. 11 St
New York, N.Y.
June 16, 1993

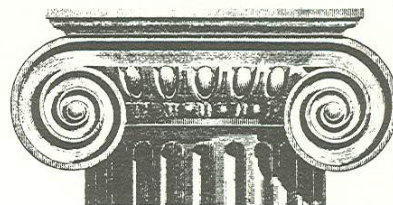
Dear Ms. Churchill,

Thankyou for showing me about
old merchants house.
I loved the liveing room but
I really wanted to sit on the
furniture. Maybe I will get
that kind of furniture. 'Yah when
pigs fly

Sincerely,
James Costa
3-309

This marks our third season offering an education program for elementary school children. The program, a joint effort with the Greenwich Village Society for Historic Preservation, consists of a slide presentation, a walking tour of Greenwich

Village, and a tour of the Old Merchant's House. The program draws comparisons between New York life in the 19th century and today, while introducing students to architecture and historic preservation.



Board of Directors

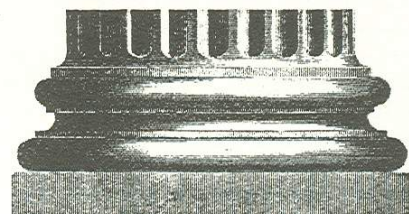
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Old Merchant's House is the bi-annual newsletter of the museum. Inquiries may be sent to the Old Merchant's House, 29 East Fourth Street, New York, NY 10003. Telephone 212-777-1089.

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