



Newsletter

MERCHANT'S HOUSE MUSEUM

Fall 2008

“Old French” Furniture for the Mid-19th Century Parlor: Très Chic

As reported in the Spring Newsletter, our Historic Furnishings Report is nearing completion and we have already begun to implement its recommendations. With the help of Curator Sandy Huber of the Historic House Trust, which was instrumental in helping fund the report, our front parlor now reflects an even more historically accurate portrayal of the taste of a wealthy merchant family of the mid-19th century.

Gone but not forgotten

By the 1840s, everybody who was anybody in New York was furnishing their parlors with fancy furniture in the rococo, or “Old French,” style, which had been all the rage during the reigns of Louis XIV and XV. The Tredwells were no exception. The bad, sad news is that the French furniture they purchased was sold in the 1930s by the founder of the Museum. The good news is that we have photographs of the sold furniture so we know exactly what it looked like. And the best news is that a strikingly similar suite recently became available to us from the Museum of the City of New York.

An impeccable provenance

The suite was donated to the museum in 1961 by Susan Dwight Bliss, granddaughter of Amos Trowbridge Dwight, a cotton merchant. As described in their records: “One (1) set of rosewood furniture from the

parlors of the donor’s grandfather’s house at 37 West 25th Street, about 1850.” The three sofas, two armchairs, and six side chairs had been labeled for deaccessioning from the museum’s collection. Thus, in yet another alignment of the planets, we were able to acquire it permanently.

History up close and personal

And the story gets even better. As the Tredwells upgraded their décor in the 1850s, they did not get rid of their old furniture. The two sofas in the front parlor have been moved to other rooms, just as the Tredwells would have done: the most out-of-date to the basement family room; the most recently outmoded to the rear dining parlor. As a result, visitors have a



unique opportunity to see up close and personal how furniture styles changed over the decades preceding the Civil War. But don’t believe us, come see for yourself.

Support for the Museum’s Historic Furnishings Report has been generously provided by: NYSCA, National Trust for Historic Preservation/ Cynthia Woods Mitchell Fund for Historic Interiors, Historic House Trust of New York City, and individual donors.



MERCHANT'S HOUSE MUSEUM

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And Many Volunteers & Interns

The Merchant's House Museum is New York City's only family home preserved intact — inside and out — from the 19th century. A National Historic and New York City Landmark, the House was built in 1832 and was home to a prosperous merchant family for 100 years.

The Merchant's House Museum is owned by the City of New York, operated by Old Merchants House of New York, Inc., and is a member of the Historic House Trust.

Dehumidification: A Dry Topic

Maintaining a proper environment for the care of collections in a historic house is tricky business. To prevent deterioration, objects require a relatively constant level of temperature and humidity — and creating this kind of stable environment in historic buildings is challenging, at best. Installing a full-blown heating and cooling system is too invasive for a small house such as ours, but regular household dehumidifiers and air conditioners are not powerful enough to do the job. Many a frustrated curator turns to the rudimentary use of fans and open windows as a method of environmental control; however, this allows dirt, bugs, and pollutants to enter the building and contaminate the delicate surfaces of collection items.

Working in collaboration with the Historic House Trust and an outside environmental consultant, this summer we set out to find a solution. High humidity usually presents the biggest threat of deterioration to objects, so reducing the humidity levels in the house would go a long way toward

their preservation. In late July — during peak humidity conditions — we temporarily installed two cutting-edge dehumidifiers on the ground floor to see if they could remove enough moisture from the air to bring environmental readings throughout the house to levels acceptable to museum standards. The state-of-the-art units are of a reasonable size and far more powerful than typical household dehumidifiers.

After several days, we measured the amount of water that was removed from the air and found that (hurrah!) the units did improve the humidity readings. Indeed, the test run shows that this type of dehumidifier could well assist in keeping humidity throughout the house at a lower and more constant level than before. What's next? We very much look forward to continuing to work with the Trust to investigate how we can purchase these units — all it takes is money — and can cleverly disguise their operation within our historic setting.

Life in the Past Lane: The New Fall Season

"Every year on the fifteenth of October Fifth Avenue opened its shutters, unrolled its carpets and hung up its triple layer of window-curtains.

"By the first of November this household ritual was over, and society had begun to look about and take stock of itself. By the fifteenth the season was in full blast, Opera and theaters were putting forth their new attractions, dinner-engagements were accumulating, and dates for dances being fixed."

Edith Wharton, *The Age of Innocence*

DCA Grant Will Fund Museum's Public Programs

We are delighted to announce that the Merchant's House has received a Cultural Development Fund grant from the New York City Department of Cultural Affairs. The three-year grant will help fund our public education programs, including lectures, talks, themed tours, workshops, and



performances. We extend our thanks to everyone involved in the DCA program for this most encouraging support.

CALENDAR OF EVENTS

Unless otherwise noted, reservations and prepayment are required. Call 212-777-1089 or email nyc1832@merchantshouse.org.

'Spirited' Fall Events

Wednesday, October 1, 6:30 p.m.

Lecture: Investigating the Merchant's House

The Historic Paranormal Research Group will discuss some of the convincing evidence they have collected confirming the Museum's reputation as "Manhattan's most haunted house."

\$20, \$15 Members.

Thursday, October 2, through Monday, November 10, Noon to 5 p.m.

Exhibition: A Mid-19th Century House in Mourning

Poignant scenes of death and grief, including a wake in the parlor, will be recreated as the Museum explores mid-19th century mourning customs. *Included with Museum Admission.*

October 24, 25, 29, 30, Tours begin every 30 minutes from 6 to 10 p.m.

Ghost Tours of "Manhattan's Most Haunted House"

Listen to eerie stories collected over the years and learn the startling results of recent paranormal investigations, all by flickering candlelight. \$25, \$13 Members. *Call early - tours sell out!*

Friday, October 31, 7 & 9 p.m.

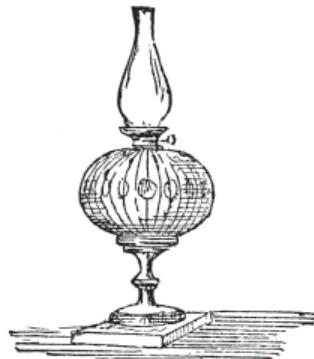
Spine Tingling & True: Merchant's House Ghost Stories

Official Museum ghost-storyteller Anthony Bellov will recount highlights from his recent compilation of strange and supernatural occurrences reported over the years at the Merchant's House Museum. \$20, \$10 Members.

Sunday, November 2, 3 to 5 p.m.

Mid-19th Century Funeral Recreation & Cemetery Tour

Join us as we recreate the 1865 funeral of Seabury Tredwell in the Merchant's House Museum's double parlors, then follow the casket to New York City Marble Cemetery where Mr. Tredwell was temporarily interred. 19th-century mourning dress encouraged. (Black armbands will be provided.) \$15, \$5 Members.



Illuminating History

Presented in partnership with NYC's General Society of Mechanics & Tradesmen

Tuesday, October 14, 6:30 p.m.

Lecture: New York and the 19th-Century Gas Lighting Revolution

Historic lighting expert Vincent Plescia will discuss the founding of New York City's gas companies as well as the incredible technology and beautiful design of 19th-century domestic gas fixtures. \$15, \$5 Students. Hosted by the General Society at 20 West 44th Street. Call 212-840-1840 for information and reservations.

Thursday, November 6, 6:30 p.m.

Lecture: Lighting the Merchant's House

Historic lighting expert Vincent Plescia will give an overview of the wide array of 19th-century lighting technologies and designs represented in the Museum's collection. He'll also discuss details of a recently completed project to conserve and restore the matching gaseliers in the Museum's double parlors, thought to be among the country's oldest *in situ* domestic gas fixtures. \$15, \$5 Students & Members.

I (We) would like to help preserve the Merchant's House Museum (Donations are tax-deductible)

Good Neighbor \$60

Family/Household \$80

Protector \$125

Cultural Hero \$250

Princely Supporter \$500

Leading Light \$1,000

Paragon of Virtue \$2,500

Senior/Student \$30

Please make checks payable to the Merchant's House Museum and mail with this form to 29 East Fourth Street, New York, NY 10003-7003, or charge your contribution to: American Express Visa Master Card

Card No. _____ Exp. _____ Signature _____

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Address _____ City/State/Zip _____

Telephone _____ Email (please!) _____

It's a Brave New World.



Gertrude Tredwell (1840-1933) lives — online!

Look for her on **Facebook** (search Gertrude Tredwell),
MySpace (myspace.com/GertrudeTredwell), and
Twitter (twitter.com/GittieTredwell).

MERCHANT'S HOUSE MUSEUM

29 East Fourth Street
New York, NY 10003

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HOURS

Thursday through Monday,
12 to 5 p.m., self-guided tours
(Closed Tuesday, Wednesday)

ADMISSION

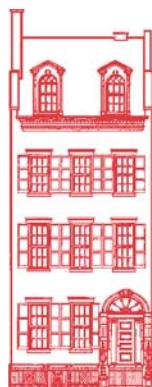
Members Free
Adults \$8, Students & Seniors \$5

GROUP TOURS

Guided tours are offered seven
days a week by appointment.

www.merchantshouse.org

Non-Profit
U.S. Postage Paid
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Merchant's House Museum
29 East Fourth Street
New York, NY 10003