

Old Merchant's House

Museum Newsletter

Spring/Summer 1994

Assessing the Museum's Collection

This winter, we began an important and fascinating project at the Old Merchant's House Museum—the evaluation and appraisal of the contents of the house, including furniture, silver, glass and porcelain. For this, we are thankful to Michael Connors, who is the principal of Michael Connors, Inc., the firm doing the pro-bono appraisal. Mr. Connors is a senior member of the American Society of Appraisers and has chaired such New York University Conferences as "Authenticity in American Antique Furniture," held in June 1993. He has been working with American furniture for more than 25 years as a teacher, dealer and appraiser. When we spoke to Mr. Connors about the current project, he said his decision to take on this task gratis stemmed from his great interest in the 19th century and the unusual opportunity of examining objects in a collection that is original to its site.

Since so many items in the museum's collection of decorative arts are of fine quality and worthy of extensive examination, Mr. Connors says the appraisal is expected to take a year to complete. When its work is finished, the firm will present a report about 200 pages long documenting each item in the collection. The appraisal will serve as a curatorial tool: Every item will be photographed, measured, described; its maker, date of manufacture, history of ownership (provenance) will be given, together with a statement of its specific condition, i.e. whether it has suffered any damage or undergone any restoration through the years. Of course, a statement of each object's retail replacement value will be included, the value provided on insurance schedules. Aside from the need to protect the museum in case of damage or loss to the collection, it is important for the staff to know each item's worth in order to

decide how to display it. For example, one would not place an important and valuable table where it could conceivably be damaged if a less valuable one would work in the same place.

Mr. Connors is being assisted by his associates Eric Walstedt, who specializes in research and documentation, and Nancy McKinven, who is concentrating on silver, glass and porcelain. In addition, students in advanced decorative-arts programs at various institutions are researching individual pieces under Mr. Connors's direction.

The research begins with a physical examination of each item to determine style, age, material (e.g., type of wood or porcelain) and method of construction. Then a correlation analysis is made to

compare the piece with similar ones whose construction and authorship have been documented. When enough information and evidence are in hand, the piece can be attributed. At times, experts in a particular area will be consulted when a piece seems to be especially important.

This is the process being used on furniture Mr. Connors believes may be attributable to Duncan Phyfe, for example. During much of the first half of the 19th century, Phyfe had the largest and most important workshop in New York, and his name has long been a synonym for superior quality and craftsmanship in that period. However, he was widely copied and did not sign his work, and the glue on his original labels usually dried out so that the labels have fallen off by now. So today it is



Michael Connors examines the carved mahogany hairy-footed paw which forms the leg of an early 19th century sofa in the museum's collection. Mimi Sherman, curator, and some of Mr. Connors's assistants look on.

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 through Thursdays, 1 to 4 p.m. Group tours by appointment.
Admission: Free for members, \$3 for the public.*

hard to determine with absolute certainty whether a piece came from his workshop or not. Since authentic Duncan Phyfe pieces are much more valuable than copies, much rides on an accurate appraisal.

Mr. Connors won't say now, but he intimates there might be some nice surprises among the Old Merchant's House collection.

Stay tuned.



Education Front

As a museum, our mission focuses on education. This is true not only in our schools program, which continues to be a winner in the elementary division, but increasingly on the university level as well. One major reflection of this is the intern program in which the Old Merchant's House participates with the Fashion Institute of Technology and City University of New York. At present, two students in the graduate program at F.I.T., one in the undergraduate program, and one CUNY undergraduate are working in the museum once a week under curator Mimi Sherman's tutelage.

Dr. Yvette Jayson Sencer, dean of Graduate Studies at F.I.T., said that internship is required for the Master's degree so that students can "encounter the realities of the professional world." Students work with a mentor at the host institution, keep a journal of their experience and write a term paper telling what they did and what they learned.

At the Old Merchant's House, students are up to their elbows in whatever needs to be done. Graduate students Michelle Smith and Sun-Ah Kim have been working primarily on textile storage and have taken part in discovering how furnishing textiles and garments were put together and used, and how they came to be in the condition they are in now. Nichole Wheeler, an undergraduate in objects restoration at F.I.T., is with us because she wants to learn something about textiles conservation as well.

Lilly Leill, an undergraduate intern from CUNY, is interested in the idea of a museum shop, and is creating a proposal on how and what to merchandise.

Students from other universities, too, have been using the museum as a resource. For example, one class at the New York School of Interior Design used plans and

elevations of the museum in a design project exploring an addition to house administrative and curatorial services. In addition, from Berkeley College in New Jersey, an architectural history and drafting class has been using blueprints of the Old Merchant's House to study how its architecture relates to that of more modern buildings. And students from Parsons School of Design and other schools have used various rooms as locations for sketching and rendering assignments.



Gala Benefit

in June.

Invitation

Will Come

Soon.

Mimi Sherman, M.A. on Call

Curator Mimi Sherman has been piling up credentials as a scholar. She recently was awarded her Master of Arts degree in Museum Studies by the Fashion Institute of Technology in New York. Her thesis, entitled "Portraits in Boston 1640-1690," analyzes the costumes worn by people in the portraits in a search for information about the sitters' lives and times.

Mimi has also been hitting the lecture circuit. She spoke to members of the Raynham Hall Museum in Oyster Bay, NY, in October on 19th century fashion, calling her speech "Dolly Madison to the Gibson Girl." In addition, that month she talked to a class of graduate students in Museum Studies at F.I.T. about the hands-on nitty-gritty of her work, "Some Considerations When Keeping House in a 19th Century House Museum." In January she was a panelist discussing how to deal with "20th Century Dirt in a 19th Century House Museum" at a meeting of curators,

directors and educators of the Historic House Trust of New York.

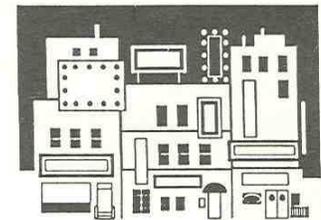
For some time, Mimi has been a regular contributor to the Museum of American Folk Art's publication, *Quilt Connection*. In February she spoke to members of the museum's Folk Art Institute on the subject of her Master's thesis, and in March she served as a member of the review panel judging papers submitted for the Susan B. Ernst American Textile Award, sponsored by that museum. This is the second time she has served on that panel.

These activities—particularly the Master's degree—serve to establish the Old Merchant's House as a museum where highly qualified, professional curatorial services are performed. We knew that all along; now the world does.

Congratulations, Mimi!

Thanks!

Our thanks to Manhattan Borough President Ruth Messinger's office for funding our information card, the snappy 3½" by 9½" handout with the drawing of the house on the front, which made its appearance not too long ago. It was part of the borough president's neighborhood tourism program, whose logo appears below.



*A neighborhood tourism initiative of the
Office of Manhattan Borough President
Ruth W. Messinger*

Thanks also to Richard and Constance Tredwell of Essex, Connecticut, who have generously underwritten the cost of purchasing our museum banner. Our designer and staff are currently working with the Landmarks Preservation Commission to work out details of its installation.

Two newsletters ago we mentioned that we had a wish list and that a banner was on it. We are so encouraged by the Tredwells' response that we are ready to admit we would still love to have a laser printer, a telephone answering machine (ours is practically prehistoric), a 35 mm. SLR camera, platters for passing hors d'oeuvres at parties, and white tablecloths so we can stop using paper ones. Thanks again.

Museum News

Wharton Run Extended

In response to demand stimulated by a sweep of reviews in January, the New York Art Theater Institute extended its run of "False Dawn," a dramatization based on a novella by Edith Wharton.

Originally scheduled to run through December, then January, the presentation ultimately ran through the end of March.

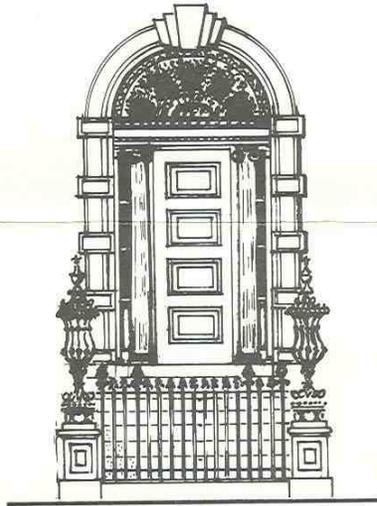
Wharton (1862-1937), novelist and short story writer, was a friend and protege of Henry James and wrote principally about the lives, tragedies, manners and morals of the upper classes in New York during the 19th and early 20th centuries. Her work is currently enjoying a revival, probably the splashiest example of which is the recently released film, "Age of Innocence," based on her novel of that name.

"False Dawn" is the title of a minor novella published in a collection called *Old New York* and tells the story of the scion of a wealthy New York family sent to Europe in the 1840's to bring home works of art to enhance the family's prestige. He buys an extraordinary collection of early Italian masters, but it is so far ahead of its time the father feels exploited and humiliated, and he disinherits the son. The young man eventually dies in poverty and the work is inherited by distant relatives, who sell it and launch themselves into the gilded age of the 1900's on the proceeds.

The New York Art Institute Theater was founded by a husband and wife team, Donald Sanders and Vanessa James, to offer theatrical presentations in museums and historical houses or sites, and it has

been doing so since 1978.

Clive Barnes of the New York Post said, in his review: "It's almost an unmatchable match—Edith Wharton's New York and the Tredwell's 1832 Old Merchant's House...Not to be missed."



Culinary Historians Are Cooking

Speculating that the Old Merchant's House would be an ideal venue for a lecture on hearth cooking, the Culinary Historians of New York scheduled their February meeting at the museum. Apparently a lot of other people thought so

too, because the event was so heavily booked the speaker had to give her lecture to a second group later in the evening.

Pat Guthman gave her slide presentation to about 80 people that night in two different sittings. A teacher and historian of hearth cooking, Ms. Guthman is also a collector and dealer in 18th and early 19th century hearth cooking equipment. Her lecture dealt with cooking techniques at an open hearth and featured slides of various devices, most of them made of forged iron, used to contain food and control heat.

The presentation was made in the front parlor, but guests were invited downstairs to the kitchen to view the hearth and built-in beehive oven, which were the means of cooking when the house was built in 1832. They could also see the cast iron, coal-fired stove which now sits in the hearth area.

Guests were treated to a selection of 18th century desserts baked for the reception by Helen Brody, a member of the organization and author of the book, *Cooking with Fire*. Copies of her book were available for sale at the lecture, and 40 percent of the proceeds went to the Old Merchant's House Museum.

Hearts A-Flutter

On the afternoon before Valentine's Day, in the front parlor of the Old Merchant's House, an audience was treated to a serenade by performers Ed Romanoff and Andrea Weber, who accompanied themselves on guitars and read a selection of mostly romantic poetry spiked with barbs from William Shakespeare and irreverent guru Tom Lehrer. Sweet, but not mushy.

STEP INTO THE PAST AND BE A PART OF OUR FUTURE

Become a member and help preserve one of America's finest historic houses and its collections. Membership contributions play a vital role in the life of this remarkable museum.

- GOOD NEIGHBOR Individual--\$35, Family--\$70
Free admission during visiting hours. Invitation to the Holiday Party. Bi-annual newsletter. Calendar of Events.
- PROTECTOR \$125
- CULTURAL HERO \$250
- PRINCELY SUPPORTER \$500
- TRUE FRIEND \$1,000 and above

For those who can consider a leadership contribution of \$1,000 or more, the Old Merchant's House has launched a special FRIENDS program. FRIENDS will be invited throughout the year to receptions and other events for them and their guests only. FRIENDS contributing at the higher levels enjoy additional benefits. For more information, please call Margaret Halsey Gardiner, Executive Director, (212) 777-1089.

I/We would like to join the Old Merchant's House Museum in the category above. Enclosed is a check in the amount of \$_____.

I/We cannot join the Old Merchant's House Museum at this time, but wish to make a tax-deductible gift of \$_____.

Name(s) Acknowledgement listings will appear as written above.*

Address _____

City _____ State _____ Zip code _____

Telephone: Day _____ Evening _____

Please make your check payable to the Old Merchant's House Museum and send it with this form to the Old Merchant's House Museum, 29 East Fourth Street, New York NY 10003. Contributions are deductible to the extent provided by law. For further information, call Margaret Halsey Gardiner, Executive Director, at (212) 777-1089.

* If you prefer not to be listed, please check here.

Museum Calendar

Saturday, April 30, 1 to 3:30 p.m.
Walking Tour, Gramercy Park Historic District

Richard McDermott, editor, *The New York Chronicle*, will dispense tales of the history, people and architecture of the area. Meet at Calvary Church, 21st and Park Avenue South, rain or shine. \$12, \$10 for members.

Saturday, May 7, 10 a.m. to 4 p.m.
Appraisal Day with Harold Jaffe, member, American Society of Appraisers

By popular demand, Mr. Jaffe returns and offers appraisals of decorative arts objects: \$5 each, three for \$12. Small pieces are preferable; no jewelry. As part of the day's event, Mr. Jaffe will discuss individual pieces and the appraisal process, inviting audience participation. \$2, \$1 for students.

Tuesday, May 10, 8 p.m.

Elizabethan Court Music

Countertenor Jeffrey Dooley with Musick's Monument, Consort of Viols, will present a program of songs and private devotional works in the museum's double parlors. Viol players Virginia Kaycoff, Jane Furth, Edward Truettner and Douglas Vogt; works by Byrd, Parsons and others. \$10, \$7 for members.

Thursday, May 12, 6:30 p.m.

Edith Wharton and the Sense of Place: New York, Newport, Lenox and Paris

Cultural historian David Garrard Lowe tells the story of the great novelist's life, focusing on the struggle of an upper class woman to achieve independence in the late 19th century. Mr. Lowe's most recent book is *Stanford White's New York*. \$15, \$12 for members.

Friday, May 20, 7 p.m.

19th Century Popular Songs

Balladeer and performer Linda Russell will present a musical portrait of popular culture in the 1800's by means of song, hammer dulcimers, penny whistles, limberjacks. \$10, \$7 for members.

Saturday, May 21, 9 a.m. to 4 p.m.
In the Time of Louis Comfort Tiffany

Harold Jaffe, president of the Louis Comfort Tiffany Society, will host a day devoted to Tiffany and his rivals. 9 a.m.—Breakfast and Tiffany, a light collation at the Old Merchant's House Museum. 10 to 11:30—lecture and documentary video on Tiffany and his contemporaries. Following a lunch break, the group reconvenes at 1:30 at the museum for a tour of a Tiffany collection. Reservations required, (212) 777-1089. \$30, \$25 for members.

Wednesday, June 8, 8 p.m.

Nicholas Nickleby

Gregory St. John performs a staged reading of the Charles Dickens novel, abridged and adapted by Dickens for public presentation. Reservations required. \$10, \$7 for members.

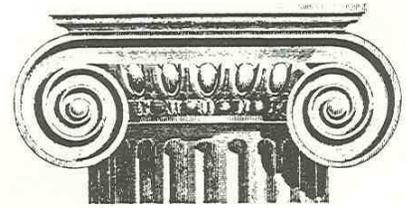
Wednesdays, June and July, Midday
Noontime Tours and Lunch in New York's 19th Century Secret Garden

The garden is open for lunch (bring your own) from noon until 4 p.m., weather permitting. Thematic tours begin at 1 p.m. \$3, free for members.

Throughout June

From the Museum's Collection

Exhibition of 19th century ceramics: Imari-style English china and blue and white transferware; 19th century lighting devices; day dresses from the 1860s.



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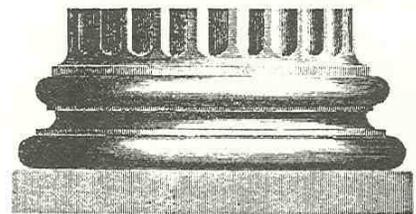
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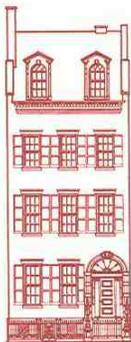
Rebecca Churchill

Programs Administrator



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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