

Those American Things

MARSHALL B. DAVIDSON

SINCE THE FORMAL opening of the Metropolitan Museum's American Wing in 1924 (Figure 1), its displays, grown larger and more varied over the years, have represented an unquestionable standard and have exerted a widening influence in many directions. Indeed, the Wing has served its essential purposes so long and so well that the concepts upon which it was founded are taken quite for granted. Actually, these concepts were an outgrowth of varied interests and attitudes that were developing and working, sometimes at cross-purposes, over a half century or more preceding the opening. A review of that interplay brings to mind various aspects of this country's social and cultural development during those years that should be more closely related than they generally are in the separate studies of American art and history.

That period—extending, very roughly, from the prelude to the Civil War through the immediate aftermath of World War I—was a time of rapid and very often violent changes in American life. It was during those years that America felt the full, unsettling impact of the Industrial Revolution; that the modern city evolved in all its growing complexity and diversity and with all its grave and nettlesome human problems; and that the nation absorbed some twenty-five million immigrants, many of them from distant places whose very names strained the imagination of “native” Americans—that is, of the people who had come here earlier, largely from the British Isles and the western perimeter of northern Europe.

Among other changes, in the mid years of the last century the self-employed craftsman was rapidly disappearing from the American scene, to be replaced by

manufacturing companies that relied increasingly upon skilled mechanics and power-driven aids to production. As early as 1848, for example, the Cincinnati Chamber of Commerce boasted that “every description of furniture, almost from the common bedstead to the most costly articles,” was made in the numerous steam-powered factories of that city.¹ To lend prestige to their mechanically contrived products, many early manufacturers went to great pains and expense to make them recall in design and ornament traditional handmade articles. And to further that end, they appropriated the styles of the more or less distant past and of different lands, interpreting them without restraint and often without discrimination. The relative ease and speed with which the new machinery could perform certain operations invited excessive elaboration. “We are no longer contented with the plainness that was once satisfactory,” observed Benjamin Silliman, the distinguished Yale professor, in 1854. “A demand for decoration has arisen in every branch of manufactures; and although ornament has been used to excess, and inappropriately, it is still a movement in the right direction.”² Here Silliman spoke not as an eminent scientist, which he was, but as a man of typical Victorian tastes.

In any event, the riot of historical revivals that raged through the third quarter of the last century resulted in a bewildering mixture of forms and motifs. The la-

1. Celia Jackson Otto, *American Furniture of the Nineteenth Century* (New York, 1965) p. 122.

2. Benjamin Silliman, Jr., and Charles R. Goodrich, *The World of Science, Art, and Industry* (New York, 1854) p. 12.



T. M. CLELAND

THE METROPOLITAN MUSEUM OF ART
American Wing

FIGURE 1

A poster commissioned by H. W. Kent and designed by Thomas Cleland to celebrate the opening of the American Wing in 1924. The façade of the United States Assay Office, shown in the background, was built on Wall Street in 1823. When that building was demolished, it was salvaged and given to the Museum by Mr. and Mrs. Robert W. de Forest to serve as the courtyard facing of the Wing

bels by which the passing styles were known—Gothic, renaissance, Louis XVI, modern, among numerous others—were at best only loosely defined; they were often more or less interchangeable, depending upon personal preference for one or another of the evocative terms. “It would be extremely difficult, and in some cases impossible,” reported a contemporary periodical, “to give a name to the principles and precedents of art recognized by most of the American manufacturers.”³ In all this colorful *mélange*, however, there was no recall of the styles that had prevailed in colonial America. But that was shortly to come.

Americans were slow to realize the interest and importance of their colonial heritage. For several generations following the conclusion of the Revolutionary War they were preoccupied with the growing pains of their new nationhood, the implications of a booming democratic spirit, and the advancing conflict of interests and feelings that led to the Civil War. The lure of the West and the promise of a rapidly expanding economy also led them to look more intently to the present and the future than to the past. During those years, to be sure, numerous nostalgic gestures were made to colonial achievements. In the early days of the nation’s independence John Trumbull glorified the heroes of the Revolution in a series of epic paintings. Parson Weems mythicized George Washington in his famous biography of the Father of His Country. In the *Tales of a Wayside Inn*, Longfellow paid homage to the exploits of Paul Revere, indirectly calling fresh attention to examples of his silverwork. And there were a number of early efforts at historical preservation, notably those of the ladies who eventually succeeded in restoring Mount Vernon as a national shrine. But those and similar endeavors were more or less isolated acts of venera-

tion and did not represent a popular revival, and they had little to do with the arts of the country’s past.

As the nation paused to observe the centennial of its independence, however, there emerged a new and poignant longing to restore a clearer and more intimate image of the colonial past that had been generally neglected for so long. “As the one hundredth anniversary of our national independence draws near,” reported *Harper’s New Monthly Magazine* in 1874, “the thoughts of our people are eagerly turned . . . to a more familiar observation of the men and women who were actors in that great event . . . to take note of their appearance, manners, and customs; to cross their thresholds and see . . . what entered into their domestic appointments and belongings.”⁴ To illustrate the point, that article reproduced a variety of colonial furniture and other “domestic appointments.” At the Philadelphia Centennial Exhibition two years later a “New England Kitchen of 1776” was exhibited, complete with beamed ceiling, leaded casement windows, and early furnishings to match, including “a few wrinkled pictures and relics.” Lady attendants were garbed in colonial costumes. A trilingual sign, posted over the entrance, identified the building housing the exhibit as “Ye Olden Time; Die Alten Zeiten; Les Vieux Temps; Welcome to All.” It seemed very quaint and picturesque; the crowds that visited the fair were enchanted; and a quest for early American antiques acquired a momentum that grew steadily over the decades to come.

Many of the contemporary periodicals took note of the phenomenon. “As our readers know,” wrote the prominent art critic and journalist Clarence Chatham Cook in *Scribner’s Monthly* shortly after the centennial celebrations were concluded, “old furniture is ‘the fashion’ in some parts of our country. In Boston a polite internecine warfare has for some time raged between rival searchers after ‘old pieces,’ and the back country is scoured by young couples in chaises on the trail of old sideboards and brass andirons.”⁵ This newborn enthusiasm held an important promise for the future American Wing.

3. *The American Architect and Building News*, December 23, 1876, p. 412.

4. Charles D. Deshler, “A Glimpse of ‘Seventy-Six,’” *Harper’s New Monthly Magazine* 49 (1874) p. 230.

5. Clarence Cook, *The House Beautiful* (New York, 1881) p. 161. This book was a reprinting of articles that had earlier appeared in *Scribner’s Monthly*. Incidentally, Cook was the critic who made

One young matron who at that time took to a hired buggy in search of such “loot,” as she called it in a memoir,⁶ was Mrs. Robert W. de Forest, née Emily Johnston, daughter of the first president of the Metropolitan Museum, John Taylor Johnston, and wife of the third, who with her husband was to provide the funds with which the American Wing was built and installed almost fifty years later. It was a period of financial depression and Mrs. de Forest’s resources were then relatively limited, but she persisted. In time she graduated from a hired horse and buggy to her own automobile, and her chauffeur, Barbier, “caught the fever” and served as an ally in her search through the attics and barns, and in the shops that were springing up about the countryside. In later years she was occasionally accompanied by members of the Museum staff, and some of the findings from these excursions made their way into the American Wing, notably a fine collection of Pennsylvania German furnishings, which was acquired with the needs of the American Wing specifically in mind. This material came to the Museum as a gift in 1933, adding a new dimension to its holdings.

There were others, starting in the late 1870s, who took to the byways in horse and carriage with the same inquiring and acquisitive spirit that charged Mrs. de Forest, and whose findings in time contributed substantially to the development of the American Wing. Notable among those pioneers were Irving Whitall Lyon, a Hartford doctor, Walter Hosmer, a cabinetmaker in the same city, H. Eugene Bolles, a Boston lawyer, and George Shepard Palmer, a manufacturer of Norwich and New London. With a number of other early and earnest enthusiasts, they were associated by their common interests in a very loose fraternity out of whose shared experiences and searching inquiries emerged the first solid literature on the subject of the American decorative arts. Dr. Lyon initiated this program with his *Colonial Furniture in New England*, which was published in 1891 and which, because of its empirical approach to the subject, after almost eighty years, still remains a book of helpful reference.

These men and women were obviously amateurs in

the true sense of the word, exploring areas that were considered too obscure and humble for professional students of art and history. (Even today the opportunities for academic training in such matters is extremely limited.) However, while they diligently worked at their avocations, architects were pursuing related studies on a professional level. It was in 1877 that Charles Follen McKim, William Rutherford Mead, and Stanford White took what Mead later called their “celebrated” trip through New England to make sketches and measured drawings of important surviving colonial houses for future reference in their architectural practice. For their purpose they visited Marblehead, Salem, Newburyport, and Portsmouth, towns that *Harper’s New Monthly Magazine* had several years before noted for their interesting architectural relics of the colonial period. In the years following the Civil War, such old and relatively unspoiled seaside communities, along with Newport, Bar Harbor, and others, had become increasingly popular as summer resorts, providing at once a welcome retreat from the hurly-burly of growing cities and a picturesque reminder of the almost forgotten charm of colonial architecture and its natural setting. In such places as Nantucket, even before the excitement stirred by the centennial, one could attend auctions that “furnished recreation . . . to summer visitors,” who could there purchase “curious old furniture, old china, old table gear. . . .”⁷ One of the first scholarly monographs concerning colonial architecture, *Early Rhode Island Houses*, was published in 1895 by Norman Morrison Isham (with Albert F. Brown), whose expert advice was later very helpful in the installations of the American Wing. McKim, Mead, and White had been offered the commission to construct the Wing itself but declined, and Grosvenor Atterbury accepted the assignment.

While these interested, earnest, and for the most part wealthy men and women were pursuing their individual ends and forming collections that would provide staple items for the displays of the Metropolitan and other museums in years to come, the revived interest in colonial furniture and furnishings was spreading outward toward a larger public. “All this resuscitation

the most vindictive attacks on General Luigi Palma di Cesnola, the Metropolitan Museum’s first director, over the authenticity of his collection of Cypriot antiquities, which he had sold to the Museum.

6. A copy of Mrs. de Forest’s memoir is in the Museum’s archives.

7. Charles Nordhoff, “Cape Cod, Nantucket, and the Vineyard,” *Harper’s New Monthly Magazine* 51 (1875) p. 65.

of 'old furniture' and revival of old simplicity," wrote Clarence Cook, ". . . is in reality much more sensible than it seems to be to those who look upon it as only another phase of the 'centennial' mania. It is a fashion that has been . . . working its way down from a circle of rich, cultivated people, to a wider circle of people who are educated, who have natural good taste, but who have not so much money as they could wish."⁸ That the wealthy should set standards and serve as guardians of taste was neither a novel nor a passing point of view. Some years later, in *The Decoration of Houses*, Edith Wharton and Ogden Codman, Jr., reminded their readers that "when the rich man demands good architecture his neighbors will get it too. . . . Once the right precedent is established, it costs less to follow than oppose it." A few years later, however, in a series of articles, the magazine *The House Beautiful* complained that the wealthy were betraying their trust. Citing an example of one home that was filled with costly European furnishings, the magazine termed it "a monument to ugliness and the poor taste of the rich."

On the other hand, it seemed increasingly apparent that in matters of taste our colonial forefathers could not err. For all its sparseness and formality, reported the *American Architect and Building News*, colonial architecture was, "on the whole, decidedly superior in style and good breeding, if we may say so, to most that has followed it." And, in much the same vein, Cook wrote that "the furniture of the Revolutionary period is evidently the outcome of a refined and cultured time. . . . There was a 'style' in those days." An association of those merits with the Founding Fathers added a patriotic note to aesthetic appreciation.

The growing regard for American antiques, both as relics and as models for emulation, had a number of other, different aspects. Antiquarianism pure and simple obviously played a basic role in this revival of interest, as did the irrepressible and instinctive urge of the collector. Aside from that and the association of antiques with "good breeding," after the passage of several generations the colonial period was sufficiently distant to excite the same romantic sensibilities that had found expression earlier in the revival of alien and more remote styles—"the French and German miracles of ugliness," as Cook described them, "that have been our only wear of late years."

These were years of reform in the arts as well—years when such zealous advocates as John Ruskin and William Morris in England were attempting to curb and rectify the vulgarities and thoughtless exuberance of mechanical production that had accompanied the spread of the Industrial Revolution. Both these men considered the advancing technology a dehumanizing agent and recommended a return to handicraft traditions. There were others, just as earnest, who believed the machine could and should be tamed to serve human ends in a decent and acceptable fashion. In either case, they stressed the need for returning to first principles in matters of design and construction. Looking back through the mists of history, Ruskin, Morris, and their followers on both sides of the Atlantic thought they discerned those principles in products of medieval craftsmanship. Such work, they believed, reflected the freedom and inspiration of the individual artisan, in a time before the workman had become an impersonal thrall of the machine.

To such true believers design was a moral act. It involved not so much the matter of style as the application of sound principles to manufacture, whether an object was made by hand or by machine. The voices of those reformers were heard and heeded in this country. In the spirit of their preachments one American author wrote that the revival of medieval principles in furniture making must be regarded as the most significant incident in the history of that craft; "not," he added, "because the principles are mediaeval, but because they are principles."⁹ In 1877 another writer advised his compatriots, in selecting furniture, to consider more than just comfort, taste, and cost; they must consider "certain higher duties," first of all "the principles of truth of construction." In the eyes of such critics it was another of the merits of early American furniture that its sound, honest, and skilled craftsmanship represented those principles—principles that, with all its speed, power, and repetitive clichés, the machine had betrayed.

There were some enthusiasts who attempted to emulate those principles in the work of their own hands. In the last decades of the nineteenth century, following English precedents, dozens of organizations devoted

8. Cook, *House Beautiful*, pp. 187 ff.

9. *The American Architect and Building News*, May 26, 1877, p. 164.

Furniture of our Forefathers.

The most complete line of thoroughly correct

Colonial Reproductions

AS EXEMPLIFIED IN

CHAIRS

IS MADE BY THE

Barnard & Simonds Company

ROCHESTER, N. Y.

Shown during January and July at GRAND RAPIDS,
5th Floor, Furniture Exhibition Bldg.

200 Patterns of Dining Chairs in Oak and Mahogany.
150 Pieces for the Parlor, Library and Hall.

FIGURE 2

An advertisement for colonial revival furniture, from the *Grand Rapids Furniture Record*, 1902

to the revival of the spirit of the earlier arts and crafts were turning out pottery, furniture, silverware, and other artifacts in communities scattered over the entire country. Their members, reported one journal in 1894 with moral fervor, were “toiling in the noblest cause that ever inspired human endeavor—the triumph of Love over selfish Greed.”¹⁰ Compared to factory work their output was very small, but by challenging popular values and shoddy performances of the day those arts and crafts groups helped prepare the ground for more realistic advances.

Late in the century, the visiting French poet, novelist, and critic, Charles Joseph Paul Bourget, spoke of the almost pathetic eagerness of Americans to surround themselves with objects that conveyed an idea of time and stability. “In this country, where everything is of yesterday,” he wrote, “they hunger and thirst for the

long ago. . . .”¹¹ He referred particularly to the homes of the very wealthy of that day (the kind of home deplored by *The House Beautiful*), which bulged with costly plunder gathered from art and antique markets throughout the Western world. But his observation had a broader application. Some years earlier, in 1878, *Godey’s Lady’s Book* had pointed out that one curious feature of the “latest mania among fashionable people” for collecting old furniture was the aid it afforded them to lay claim to a respectable ancestry. And for those whose budget was limited and whose discernment was less refined, factory-made reproductions “in the colonial style” served much the same purpose (Figure 2).

The fact that before the end of the century a substan-

10. *The Decorator and Furnisher* 23 (1894) p. 204.

11. Paul C. J. Bourget, *Outre-Mer: Impressions of America* (New York, 1895) p. 53.

tial part of the population had come to America in cramped steamers, centuries after the *Mayflower*, and owned ancestors who probably had never heard of Bunker's Hill or Saratoga, was not very important in all this—although it disturbed some of older American stock. During the 1880s alone, one observer noted with a sense of shock, America had “suffered a peaceful invasion by an army four times as vast as the estimated numbers of Goths and Vandals that swept over Europe and overwhelmed Rome.”¹² Henry James, himself an expatriate revisiting Boston, referred to such newcomers as “gross little foreigners.” However, as Margaret Mead has remarked, in this land there was an odd blending of the future and the past in which another man's great-grandfather became the symbol of one's grandson's future. And immigrants from the most outlandish places, with a touching desire to identify with American traditions, soon learned to venerate the deeds of adopted ancestors, to sing of this “land where my fathers died, land of the pilgrims' pride.”

With such various thoughts in mind, around the turn of the century the editors of *The House Beautiful* thought it advisable to warn its large audience against carrying an enthusiasm for colonial styles to excess. “Let it be admitted at the outset,” the magazine stated,

that the furniture of our forefathers has certain undeniable qualities. . . . Those of us whose Connemara grandfathers kept the pig in the parlor, or whose German parents reached these shores in an emigrant-ship thirty years ago, set an even higher value on everything that speaks of deep-rooted Americanism. And this is most praiseworthy.

But, the article continued, the fashion was becoming so common it was getting monotonous.¹³

It seems clear enough that such remarks referred to factory-made reproductions “in the colonial style.” As early as 1884 it was reported that to satisfy the growing interest in such things the manufacture of “antiques” had become a thriving modern industry. Actually, beyond a limited circle of connoisseurs and some other serious students (including an expanding group of dealers), there were few who had any clear understanding of the progression of early American

styles or the refinements of form and detail by which they could be identified. In an effort to clarify the matter somewhat for its readers, *The Decorator and Furnisher* for March 1894, for instance, explained that “the Colonial is a distinctive style, that stands midway between the Empire on the one hand and the Chippendale on the other. . . .” The magazine also reported a statement that gave credit for the design of the Windsor chair to “one Windsor in Philadelphia in the seventeenth century.” Before there was an available body of reliable, illustrated literature on the subject, such confusion was pardonable. In the meantime, what was made in the name of “early American” apparently varied widely, from facsimiles well enough conceived and constructed to fool the unwary collector of today (Figure 3) to highly whimsical productions that bore only a tenuous resemblance to any early forms.

FIGURE 3
A colonial revival armchair in the Chippendale style. The Newark Museum



12. These remarks, made by Josiah Strong, a prominent clergyman, are quoted in Arthur M. Schlesinger, *Paths to the Present* (New York, 1949) p. 64.

13. *The House Beautiful*, March 1902, p. 230.



FIGURE 4
Henry Watson Kent

There was no museum in the land to which the public or the manufacturer could turn for guidance in such matters. For more than a generation after its founding in 1870 the Metropolitan was itself completely lacking in concern for the early American crafts. The first two directors of the Museum, General Luigi Palma di Cesnola and Sir Caspar Purdon Clarke, were foreigners who may well have considered American artifacts as provincial derivatives of the high styles of England and the Continent. However, in 1905, with the appointment of Henry Watson Kent (Figure 4) to the staff as secretary to Robert W. de Forest, then secretary of the Museum, a seed was sown that within less than a score of years came to full bloom in the creation of the American Wing. As a young man of Yankee stock, Kent had spent twelve years in the old colonial town of Norwich, Connecticut, serving both as curator of the Slater Memorial Museum and librarian of the Peck Library. (Subsequently, for five years, he was assistant librarian and librarian of the Grolier Club in New York.) He had a consuming interest in the history of that area of old

New England and a rich appreciation of its surviving relics and traditions. A number of those early collectors who have already been mentioned, and others, sought his advice and direction. Thus, he brought to his new post a background of understanding and of friendships that would richly benefit the Museum in certain directions of its future growth.¹⁴

From the beginning Kent enjoyed a very sympathetic and helpful relationship with de Forest. They lived catty-corner from one another on Washington Square—Kent at the Benedick, New York's first bachelor's apartment house, designed by McKim, Mead, and White and otherwise celebrated as the setting for the opening scene of Edith Wharton's *House of Mirth*; de Forest at number 7, one of the Greek revival town houses on the north side of the square. Mrs. de Forest had been born in this house, and her father deeded it to her as a Christmas present in 1879 when he inherited it from his mother. Much of the original furnishings, including "pillows, blankets and counterpanes," according to Mrs. de Forest, and "a semi-circular STAIRCASE, with a handrail, all built of beautiful mahogany" for the library, had apparently been supplied for it by the celebrated New York cabinetmaker Duncan Phyfe during her grandfather's lifetime. The staircase, on rollers, was later given to the New York Public Library "as a kind of relic."¹⁵ On his way to work Kent would frequently stop in while de Forest was breakfasting to discuss Museum problems (and no doubt to admire the antiques that the de Forests had collected over the years). It may have been on such an occasion, when the Museum was planning its part of the Hudson-Fulton Celebration of 1909, that Kent recommended a display of American decorative arts of Fulton's period to complement an exhibition of Dutch paintings of Hudson's time. The Hudson-Fulton Celebration was a city-wide affair, plans for which had been started in 1905. Naval vessels from eight nations attended and, illuminated at night, extended up the Hudson River in a long armada from Forty-second Street to Spuyten

14. In his autobiography, entitled *What I Am Pleased to Call My Education* (New York, 1949), Kent referred to these and other aspects of his career that are mentioned later. I had numerous conversations with Kent about these matters.

15. Emily J. de Forest, memoir.

Duyvil. De Forest was receptive to Kent's suggestion, and since he was chairman of the art committee for the celebration, such a showing was arranged at the Museum.

As de Forest later observed, that exhibition was planned "to test out the question whether American domestic art was worthy of a place in an art museum." In other words, did such native artifacts more properly represent ethnography or art? English museums had earlier pondered the problem of where to draw the thin line separating those two fields. "Broadly speaking," wrote Lord Balcarres, who was among other things trustee of the National Portrait Gallery and vice-chairman of the National Trust, "objects must be classified according to the quality (apart from their nature) for which they are most remarkable."¹⁶ Thus, an inlaid and highly decorated musket would go into the art section; a common or plain weapon into the ethnographic section. Meanwhile, however, such borderline distinctions seemed not to concern other departments of the Metropolitan. The Egyptian Depart-

ment, for example, apparently felt no compunction in showing chipped flints and similar Paleolithic material along with its sculptures and wall paintings.

De Forest and others thought the Hudson-Fulton demonstration was completely affirmative. "Those American arts," wrote Kent, had been raised "to a position of acknowledged dignity; and it marked the first recognition by the museum of the right of such objects to be included among its collection." However, even some years later, according to Kent, when the American Wing was being planned, the Museum's director, Edward Robinson, a classicist and earlier director of the Museum of Fine Arts in Boston, still felt that "these American things" were not worthy of the institution. (He had consulted friends at the Boston Museum who confirmed his views.)¹⁷

In arranging such an exhibition, the Museum had had virtually nothing of its own to display, and Kent

16. *Encyclopaedia Britannica*, 11th ed., s.v. "Museum of Art."

17. Kent, *My Education*, p. 162.



FIGURE 5
A late xvii century carved oak chest made in the Connecticut Valley, from the Bolles collection. The Metropolitan Museum of Art, gift of Mrs. Russell Sage, 10.125.689



FIGURE 6
Carved bust from the pediment of the so-called Pompadour highboy, made in Philadelphia about 1765, from the Palmer collection. The Metropolitan Museum of Art, Kennedy Fund, 18.110.4

had turned to the private collections of his old friends and acquaintances—including those of Bolles and Palmer. These two men were cousins whose collections complemented one another; Bolles concentrated on material of the earlier colonial period, whereas Palmer confined his acquisitions to examples from the later colonial years. Before the Hudson-Fulton exhibition was held, Bolles had incorporated into his holdings substantial elements from those of Hosmer (sharing some of this with his cousin) and Irving Lyon, thus bringing together well over four hundred items representing the findings of three of the earliest, best informed, and most successful collectors in the country. When, shortly after the exhibition closed, Bolles told Kent of his wish to sell his collection, Kent promptly

reported this to de Forest and then, to dramatize the importance of this opportunity, took the de Forests and Richard Townley Haines Halsey, later to be made a trustee of the Museum, on a brief tour of the Boston area where they met other prominent collectors and visited a number of historic houses, sites, and monuments. They noted with special interest the period rooms that George Francis Dow had installed a few years earlier in the Essex Institute at Salem. This type of installation, in which a sense of historical reality was achieved by showing objects in a contemporary architectural setting, was somewhat revolutionary in this country, although there were a number of acknowledged European precedents. Upon their return from this pilgrimage and with their consequent report, the trustees forthwith accepted the collection as the gift of Mrs. Russell Sage, a public-spirited client of de Forest's who provided the funds for its purchase. The nucleus of the American Wing had been formed (Figure 5).

A word must here be said about Halsey, much better and fondly known as "R. T." to almost all his large circle of friends and associates, for he was to be the principal guiding spirit in the formation of the American Wing. He had been a member of the Board of Governors of the New York Stock Exchange since 1899, but his avocational interest in early American art and history was deep and demanding. He had started writing on such subjects the year of his election to the Board of Governors and continued to do so for the next thirty-odd years. In 1906 he wrote an authoritative introduction to the catalogue of a pioneering exhibition of early American silver held at the Museum of Fine Arts in Boston. He had also contributed from his own collection to the Hudson-Fulton exhibition and participated in the preparations for it. In passing, it is worth noting that he had been an intercollegiate tennis champion at Princeton in the 1880s, and at the time of his tragic death in 1942—he was struck and killed by an automobile—he was the last surviving member of the generation of players that had introduced that "elegant and pleasant" pastime into the United States.¹⁸

18. The 7th ed. (1942) of *A Handbook of the American Wing*, by R. T. H. Halsey and Charles O. Cornelius, contains an appreciation of Halsey by William T. Ivins, Jr. Also, I was privileged to know and work with Halsey and had many conversations with him.



FIGURE 7

Mahogany secretary, made in Philadelphia about 1760–1775, from the Palmer collection. The Metropolitan Museum of Art, Kennedy Fund, 18.110.1

Kent took the occasion of closing the deal with Bolles in Boston, over a bottle of champagne, to propose the organization of a small society of prominent collectors, to be called the Walpole Society, who would meet on occasion to enjoy discussing their common interests and to learn from one another. The formation of this group had some important consequences, not least the fact that the collections of its members consistently found their way into public institutions. Palmer was one of the founders of the society, and his remarkable eighteenth-century furniture came to the Metropolitan by purchase in 1918. As earlier indicated, it was a perfect complement to the Bolles collection. If sold at public auction today, either the celebrated Pompadour highboy or the Cadwallader table—just two of the forty-odd pieces that were thus acquired—would no doubt command a sum considerably larger than that paid by the Museum for the entire collection. Palmer was an utterly indefatigable collector, and armed with very substantial resources, he usually acquired what he went after. He followed the Pompadour pair (highboy and associated lowboy) through three successive owners before finally adding it to his other treasures. On one occasion, when he went to St. Louis to see the highboy, he admired the central finial (Figure 6) so much that the elderly lady who then owned the piece took the carved bust off the pediment and tried to insist that Palmer take and keep it—which he scrupulously refused to do. Another outstanding case piece, a magnificent secretary (Figure 7), had been offered by a dealer named William Meggat of Wethersfield, Connecticut, for seventy-five dollars before Palmer purchased it for an undisclosed price, and then paid six hundred dollars to have one “Patrick Stevens of Robbins” restore it.¹⁹

19. This information was included in a letter written in 1934 by Henry Wood Erving, another notable early collector, and printed in the *Walpole Society Notebook* of that year on the occasion of Palmer's death. Erving further noted that when he first saw the highboy, the carved finial was not in place. In the same publication



FIGURE 8

A miscellany of contemporary clippings reporting the opening of the American Wing

Patrick Stevens was a highly respected craftsman who later was employed at the studio of Louis Comfort Tiffany. Robbins Brothers, later Robbins and Winship, had been in business in Hartford since the early nineteenth century, and the brothers had known craftsmen who had worked in the eighteenth century. At one time the firm had a partner who was “a true son of the Revolution.” One early collector remarked that to do business with such men “was like shaking hands with a man who had met Washington.”

Aside from Meggat, among the early antiques dealers were the Prior brothers of Cromwell, one or the other of whom apparently made some creditable “an-

Kent observed that some of the most important of Palmer’s pieces “came from the homesteads of the Huntington, Carpenter and Beckers families [of Norwich], famous people in colonial days.” Copies of the society’s publications are not easily available in public repositories. I am indebted to Walter Muir Whitehill for these references from a volume in the Library of the Boston Athenaeum.

20. This information was published in the issue of the *Walpole Society Notebook* last cited and in the one issued a year later on the occasion of the society’s twenty-fifth anniversary meeting. With characteristic thoughtfulness Kent presented me with a copy of the latter issue in 1941.

tiques,” although he remained the while a highly successful provider of excellent and genuine antique furniture for the early collecting fraternity. Another source of supply for this group was the upstairs “rookery” of the dealers Sam Winick and Morris Schwartz in Hartford.²⁰

In 1913 de Forest became president and Kent, secretary of the Metropolitan Museum. The next year Halsey became almost simultaneously a member of the Walpole Society and a trustee of the Museum, where he was immediately appointed chairman of the Committee on American Decorative Art. When, in 1922, the de Forests announced their gift of an American Wing to the Museum, Halsey for all practical purposes assumed the functions of a curator, and the following year he sold his seat in the stock exchange in order to devote more time to those functions. It is doubtful that the Museum has ever had a more active and dedicated trustee. Over the years following his election to the Board of Trustees, with the help of younger staff members, he led a tireless search throughout the Atlantic seaboard states for the best and most representative architectural interiors that could be

found for ultimate installation in the Museum, as well as for furnishings that would be most widely representative of early American achievement. This persistent effort to acquire the finest examples from all sections of the colonial and early republican area occasionally aroused the ire of local preservation groups, especially in New England, who felt that such material should at all costs remain where it was. But in the end the Museum's accomplishment was applauded by even the most rabid among the opposition.

The actual opening of the Wing in the autumn of 1924 was the realization of a dream that had grown both more vivid and more plausible since the Hudson-Fulton exhibition and the acquisition of the Bolles collection fifteen years before. For those who had persevered over that period it gave cause for self-congratulation, for it was immediately apparent that this new departure of the Museum was a remarkable popular success. As we have often been reminded since, this was the first time a museum had given place to a systematic display of the American domestic arts. A major art museum had given those "things" its benediction, put them prominently under the same roof with treasures from ancient Egypt, Greece, and Rome, and with works of art from other cultures of the East and West. Why, reported one newspaper with pleased astonishment and in bold headlines, "AMERICAN ART REALLY EXISTS," which, as the subhead added, refuted those critics who complained that this nation had no culture comparable to those of Old World countries (Figure 8). "It is not merely an exhibition of art," wrote Lewis Mumford in *The New Republic* for December 31, 1924; "it is a pageant of American history. . . . nothing so complete and so tactful has ever been accomplished before by an American museum."

That in view of its sponsors the new exhibition represented something more than the vindication of American art as such was clearly apparent in the addresses given at the opening ceremonies. Most of the sentiments and some of the sentimentality that had earlier characterized the recognition of a neglected past were reviewed for the occasion—the note of patriotism, the appeal of nostalgia, the veneration of the Founding Fathers and earlier generations of colonists for their sterling characters as well as their good taste, the desire to resuscitate the permanent and stable values of their traditions, and the rest. The Museum was sounding a

patriotic note, de Forest remarked from the chair: "We are honoring our fathers and our mothers, our grandfathers and our grandmothers, that their art may live long in the land which the Lord hath given us." In his following remarks Halsey pointed out that

traditions are one of the integral assets of a country. . . . Many of our people are not cognizant of our traditions and the principles for which our fathers struggled and died. The tremendous changes in the character of our nation and the influx of foreign ideas utterly at variance with those held by the men who gave us the Republic threaten, and unless checked may shake, the foundations of our Republic.

(These fears were real at the time. The Sacco-Vanzetti case was then awaiting a decision. The Immigration Act enacted by Congress in 1924 drastically reduced the torrent of immigration and closed a momentous chapter in American history.) The American Wing would provide "a setting for the traditions so dear to us and invaluable in the Americanization of many of our people to whom much of our history has been hidden in a fog of unenlightenment." These period rooms, with their furnishings and with the history that might be associated with them (in some cases by a stretch of the imagination), were "anchorage for our cherished traditions." Atterbury, the architect, observed that nothing would please him more than if a visitor were to run into John Alden kissing Priscilla on the top floor. "If, in passing by some night," he added,

returning, perhaps, at crack of dawn from one of our marble-lined, electrified, steam-heated, "jazz-racked" hotel ballrooms, I chance to see through the windows of the old Gadsby's Tavern room, the flickering light of tallow candles and hear the faint sound of a spinet marking the stately measure of a minuet. . . . I shall know that we have really made a success of the American Wing.

In a final statement, the Honorable Elihu Root, first vice-president of the Museum, pointed out that the de Forests, Halsey, Kent, Atterbury, and the rest who had made the Wing possible "formed an old-fashioned American community, and in their spirit was born again that atmosphere that produced whatever was fine and warming and delightful in old American

life.”²¹ In the evening, following the ceremonies, the trustees of the Museum gave a festive dinner at the University Club. The menu, exquisitely designed by Kent and meticulously printed at the Museum Press under his direction (Figure 9), listed choice and abundant fare, as befitted an important occasion for celebration.²²

Although Lewis Mumford had warm and kind words to say of the Museum’s accomplishment, as already quoted, he also had critical reservations. Mumford was then a young man, still in his twenties, and had just published his *Sticks and Stones*, a study of American

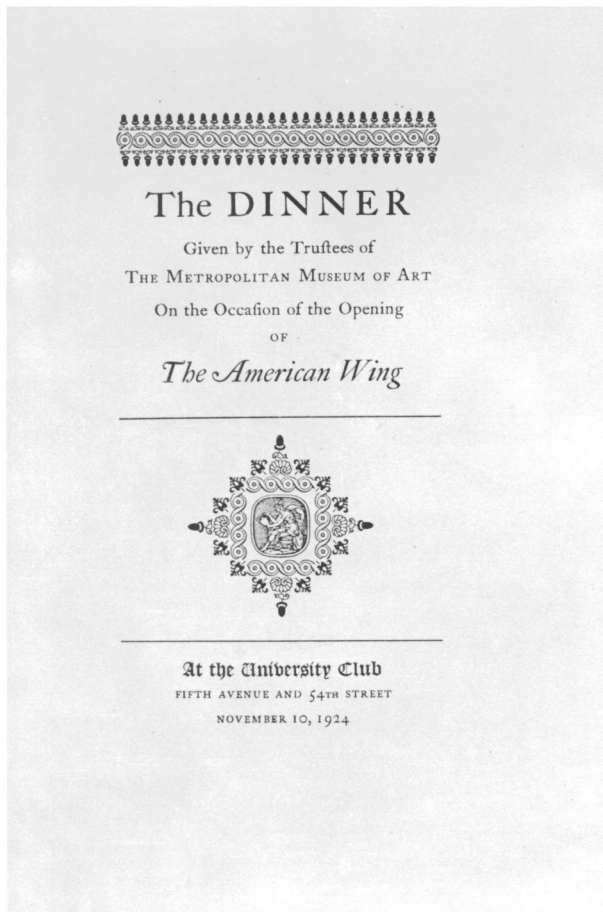
architecture and civilization that was meeting with wide acclaim. Among other things, he had forebodings that the very success of the Wing might lead to “a sickly desire to counterfeit the past” with machine-made reproductions of such treasures as were displayed there. His doubts were justified to a degree. Only shortly thereafter the *D.A.R. Magazine* suggested that “patriotic Americans who treasure the memory of our forefathers can do no better than to reproduce in their homes the furniture and decoration which have been so well preserved and arranged by the builders of the American Wing.”

“How can we turn this spinsterly desire for ancestors,” Mumford asked, “into a virile effort to beget a new issue? . . . An exhibition of historical art is justified when it gives us courage to make our own history. . . . To go forward, we must draw back again to fundamentals.” Like the Ruskinians and other reformers of the last century, he saw that point of return in medieval practices—or, rather, in those seventeenth-century American forms that preserved the lingering traditions of the Middle Ages. But as Ruskin and some of the others could not, Mumford saw in the simplicity and austerity of such models qualities similar to those that modern machine design could most appropriately emulate in its own terms.

The Museum was, of course, committed by the terms of its Charter to encourage “the application of arts to manufactures and practical life” (following the highly successful precedent of the Victoria and Albert Museum in London). That, in its early years, it did not move very far in such a direction was partly because of the apathy of the industry itself.²³ However, when American manufacturers were cut off from their European sources of design during the First World War, their interest in the Museum’s resources was aroused,

FIGURE 9

Cover from the menu of the trustees’ dinner on the night of the opening of the American Wing, designed by H. W. Kent and printed under his supervision by the Museum Press



21. *Addresses on the Occasion of the Opening of the American Wing*, New York, 1925 (printed by D. B. Updike at the Merrymount Press, Boston).

22. During the thirty years of Kent’s management of it, the Museum Press was celebrated for the quality of its productions. In 1939 the Pierpont Morgan Library held a special exhibition of the Museum’s printing, honoring Kent. On that occasion it was fairly said that “thanks to Mr. Kent the printing of the Metropolitan has been carried to a greater diversity of uses and a higher perfection of utility than that of any other art museum in this country and probably in the world.”

23. Kent, *My Education*, pp. 153 ff.

and the Museum responded. Once again, it was Kent's informed interest and understanding that put a spur to this new program. With advice and encouragement from members of the Arts-in-Trades Club, a New York group whose purpose was the study of art principles in their application to trades connected with the decoration and furnishing of buildings, a series of industrial exhibitions was inaugurated in 1917, continuing over the years. Kent's hand in such endeavors had been greatly strengthened in 1918 by the appointment of Richard F. Bach, Curator of the School of Architecture of Columbia University, as Associate in Industrial Arts. As R. L. Duffus wrote some years later, with special reference to Kent and with mention of the American Wing, the Museum "was putting its collections to work. It was making people see what the past has to do with the present."

With the passage of time since the American Wing's opening, our understanding of what the past has to do with the present has inevitably gained new perspectives. Scholarship in the field of the decorative arts—and in the fine arts to be sure—has provided an immense amount of information that was not available to earlier generations; information that has added fresh and rich interest to the story of colonial craftsmen and their achievements. Not only have once unknown or obscure artisans emerged as influential contributors to

the development of our regional and national traditions in such matters, but new knowledge of methods of workmanship, sources of materials and designs, relationships between producer and consumer—all these and more—have thrown revealing light on our social history.

Beyond that, the passage of time has led to a more sympathetic appraisal of the accomplishments of the later nineteenth century, years excluded from the original scheme of the American Wing, than was easily possible forty-five years ago. As becomes increasingly clear, that part of the past has quite as much to do with the present as the earlier periods. In its current emphasis on this point, the Museum rebalances the scales of history, as must continually be done if we are to profit from the records that have come down to us. In the end, every effort to interpret the arts of the past from the changing point of view of the present enlarges and deepens their significance.

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

With exceptional generosity Linda Hyman, Centennial Researcher at the Metropolitan Museum, turned over to me the results of her research in the Museum's archives and other records, which I have used to great advantage. I am also indebted to Anne Palmbaum for tracing other sources that I have relied upon.