For Joan Mertens

IN HONOR OF HER YEARS OF DEDICATION TO THIS PUBLICATION
AND HER EXEMPLARY ERUDITION, GENEROSITY, AND WIT
MANUSCRIPT GUIDELINES
FOR THE METROPOLITAN MUSEUM JOURNAL

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ABBREVIATIONS
MMA The Metropolitan Museum of Art
MMAB The Metropolitan Museum of Art Bulletin
MMJ Metropolitan Museum Journal

Height precedes width and then depth in dimensions cited.
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Eighteenth-Century Ironwork from Great George Street, London

In the summer of 1931, Joseph Breck, then acting director of The Metropolitan Museum of Art, conducted a purchasing trip to Britain. The excursion is best remembered for resulting in the major acquisition of the dining room from Lansdowne House (1766–69), designed by the architect Robert Adam. While in London, however, Breck also visited the architectural salvage company T. Crowther and Son to acquire examples of eighteenth-century ironwork. On August 8, he bought thirty-seven staircase balusters and three decorative panels.

Research has revealed some items in this group to be of particular interest. T. Crowther and Son’s laconic notes on provenance, written on catalogue cards by an unknown hand, constitute the only clues to the balusters’ origins. The firm has been described as “notorious for forgetting or even inventing provenances,” so the notes must be treated with caution.¹ Some accurate provenances,
Unidentified smith. Baluster, ca. 1756. Wrought iron, 33 × 10 1/2 in. (83.8 × 26.7 cm). The Metropolitan Museum of Art, Rogers Fund, 1931 (31.92.22)
made of stone and the balusters had to be fixed into them with molten lead. The motifs of the balustrades were derived from seventeenth-century ironwork, such as that by Jean Tijou for the great stairs at Chatsworth House in Derbyshire (ca. 1689–93). Typically these forms comprised an abstracted urn shape rendered in elegant lines and embellished with water-leaf additions. Designers of the mid-eighteenth century eliminated the continuous composition and upward tilt of the seventeenth-century source material, creating a new and distinctly English decorative element. By 1756, the untilted style of the ironwork at Great George Street had been employed for only a little more than a decade. The balustrades would not have seemed old-fashioned, then, despite being indebted to old motifs.

A house closer to the corner of Delahay Street, 32 Great George Street, departed from the others with interior decoration in a new style associated with Robert Adam. A plan of the house in the Survey of London shows that it was architecturally almost identical to those next door at numbers 29–31, indicating that the decoration of the house was executed at a later date. The lease of the house had been granted at the same time as the other houses, in November 1755, but it went unoccupied for nearly three decades. In 1781, its owner, the banker Henry Drummond, invited Adam to

However, can be established by cross-referencing the notes with photographic records of buildings in London that were demolished in the 1920s.

One baluster may be definitively attributed (fig. 1). The catalogue card records it as having been taken from “Great George Street,” surely identified now as the street in Westminster that leads from the southeast corner of St. James’s Park toward Westminster Bridge. Before they were razed, some of the houses on the street were photographed (fig. 2). A cluster east of the corner with Delahay Street includes the same baluster design: numbers 29–31 on the north side of the street (fig. 3), as well as numbers 6 and 8–10 on the south side (7 was not photographed). The houses with this baluster are recorded in the Survey of London as constructed in 1756.

A signature of London town houses of the late eighteenth century is the top-lit cantilevered staircase with a balustrade of repeating units of wrought-iron ornament. British architects had experimented with cantilevering consistently since the time of Inigo Jones, creating staircases with no visible means of support, but only in elite locations. In the 1740s, when technology allowed for glazed roof lights, and consequently the creation of bright open-well staircases, architects began to apply cantilevering techniques in London town houses. For their balustrades, iron was used because the steps were...
produce designs for a new house on the site. Adam’s new style drew on motifs from antiquity to create a vocabulary distinctly different from that of the 1750s, and five plans and an elevation for Drummond survive at Sir John Soane’s Museum. They were not executed, but it may be inferred that instead of producing an entire Adam house, Drummond chose to hire Adam’s craftsmen to simply replace the old fittings, about 1782–84. In 1785 it was recorded as being occupied, suggesting that Drummond had succeeded in making the old house fashionable.

Photographs show that one aspect of the redecoration scheme was the iron balusters, which are characteristic of Adam’s craftsmen (fig. 4). The stair steps in the photographs show lines separating two individual stone blocks, close to the outer ends. These lines indicate that sometime after the initial construction of the staircase, the stone was cut and the outer end of the step replaced with new stone. The motivation was evidently to install new iron balusters that were permanently fixed into the stone on the outer ends of the steps. Part of the redecoration of the house, then, was to replace the original ironwork of 1756 with designs in the new style of the 1780s. It was done by cutting out the edges of the stone steps, replacing them, and installing new iron balusters into the new stone.

Two balusters identical to those in the photographs were purchased by Breck and must have been among those added to 32 Great George Street (fig. 5). The catalogue card note identifies them as from Portland Place, but no corresponding designs appear in any photographs of that development, and it seems likely that Crowther simply named a large Adam project to identify the designer. The houses on the north side of Great George Street were all demolished together, and the balusters probably entered Crowther’s collection at the
same time. The original balusters removed from number 32 would have been in the same style as those of other houses built in 1756 (see fig. 1). Breck’s purchase is particularly illuminating for the study of eighteenth-century stylistic development because it includes a pair of balusters in a design that was the direct replacement for another in the collection.

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