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1232 Pine Street, Philadelphia, PA 19107-5944 • Richard J. Betts, President • Michael A. Tomlan, Chairman
of the Committee • Editor: Antoinette J. Lee, Suite 203, 1717 Massachusetts Avenue, N.W., Washington, D.C. 20036.

THE HISTORIC HOUSE MUSEUM: SYMBOL OR REALITY?

by William Seale

Historic house museums are among the earliest manifestations of successful historic preservation in the United States. They continue to satisfy a yearning of Americans for a tangible past—indeed, a romantic past as well—and they provide an environment removed from faster cycles of change.

Although much of the effort in historic preservation today is directed toward adaptive use—barns as restaurants, dwellings as bed-and-breakfasts—the number of museum restorations of old houses increases all along. Rare is the region without its historic house museum. The quality and application of historical research distinguishes the house museum from the adaptive use project. A practitioner of adaptive use is usually a far cry from a restorationist.

Beyond an obvious interest in the building itself, what does one want from a historic house museum? A specimen of architecture? An authentic restoration of a moment in time? A representation of what some historians think occurred in the past? What is the role of the historic fabric itself—both exterior and interior? And finally, how important are the objects that furnish the house?

There is no special mandate to furnish an interior in a manner compatible to the restored building. Rooms can be left vacant, speaking to us as architecture. But when we introduce furnishings, they rapidly offer a broader communication in the field of history. They begin to tell of human habitation and customs. They become value judgments on the past through the visual power of their totality as well as their parts.

The furnished interior of a restored building is inevitably an essay in history on one level or another. The shell, at least, is readily identifiable as “past,” if only because it is old. The contents of a room may be alien to the oldest past of the structure—philosophically an interior flawlessly preserved to its 1810 date may through furnishings echo the barren Bauhaus or even the witless fluff marketed by today’s interior “designers.” Either is in a

sense valid. Moreover, with antiques or reproductions carefully selected to suit the style and era (not necessarily the particular history of the place), the interior will reflect the Beaux-Arts ideal that marked the first “period” interiors of the late 19th century, and characterized our most famous house museums for most of the 20th century. They are also valid, but not true.

In the restoration that attempts historical accuracy, the central issue is not style, but the occupancy of a place by human beings. The process appears relatively simple. Historical research here takes many forms—literary remains and the scientific analysis of structure and details—and all together comprise the documentation. From a thoughtful interpretation of the resulting material, an intellectual framework is established before the restoration work begins. This interpretation, or point of view, fleshed out in all its details, physical and intangible, guides the restoration, anticipating far in advance not only the finished product but what it is to say about the past and how this is to be done. These steps are absolute requirements with a museum house, but they are being followed interestingly also in private houses, state capitols, churches, and other public buildings.

In the context of this historical understanding, the material details, though vital, are only part of a broader picture. Yet for the validity of the whole, their accuracy if not to place, certainly to locale, and their honesty, become more important than they ever were in the more immediately visual ideal of the lingering Beaux-Arts model. When the physical details are inaccurate in this context, they often glare.

History in any of its forms must speak to its own time. Today’s historic house and its interior represent a turn from abstract symbols to representations of reality. Now whether this involves truth of time and place, plausibility of time and place, or just a guess is another question. And there is, of course, the added question, “Can we ever be

genuine—really authentic?”

Not so long ago, it was mainly the architect who restored. The architect's principal role descended to us from the Beaux-Arts point of view. From his vision, the entire restoration unfolded. Yet a public who went to the site for history found beyond its initial awe, confusion, something to swallow rather than to absorb, and gained generally mixed signals about history. Electric light switches were carefully hidden, while air-conditioning blasted unashamed from the fireplace. Glass-covered cuts in the wall showed timbers and lath, a peek at how the house had been built, but historical substance elsewhere was not so penetrating. In its place was a sort of glorification of the house. Not much could be found out about what the place meant.

As time passed, displeased curators, who took over the historic houses after the architects left, decided to reconcile the sterile and baffling “restoration” with a “collection.” Enter then the even harmonies of the decorative arts interior. With the art historians' eye to design, curators and committees assembled collections of furnishings to fill the sterile interiors the architects left behind. Sometimes a frail historical interpretation—an entirely oral exer-

cise—was sprinkled over all this after the physical part was done, yet having little organic relation to any of it.

Today, we have lived long enough with house museums to better understand what they can do. When history is concerned, they have a remarkable ability to evoke. Each is different and before the house is changed in any way, it has much to say. The strongest emotional qualities may lie, for example, not in the year or century in which it was built but in some later time that makes the house more vibrant than it was in its infancy. More importantly, the house must be allowed first to speak, both through an investigation of the physical survivor itself, and also the life breathed into that survivor by intensive and creative research into the human lives that passed through it. A variety of skills is brought to bear.

After everything that can reasonably be learned is found on the surface, the house calls for a still deeper inquiry. We have learned that the structure can be probed and in the hands of experts (of which there are very few) made to express the genesis of the building and in so doing reveal also the movements of the occupants in making the house fit and refit changing patterns of living. A house built in 1750, for example, very likely has undergone by 1816



(PHOTO CREDIT: INTERNATIONAL MUSEUM OF PHOTOGRAPHY, GEORGE EASTMAN HOUSE)

Entrance Hall, George Eastman House, Rochester, New York, ca. 1909

Documentary photographs such as this are being used to recreate the house to reflect the man. The Kodak king rearranged his interiors frequently, often documenting them with high-quality photographs, taken sometimes by himself. J. Foster Warner designed the house, and McKim, Mead & White were consultants. Every detail was approved by Eastman, from the character of the lighting devices to the dimensions of the paneling. His attention to detail extended to the most minute item of furnishing.

many small alterations in the interest of privacy and convenience, those revolutionary ideas of life that parallel the age of the democratic revolutions in the Western World. Back stairs, ante-rooms, draft chimneys, service bells, sometimes even a toilet, or a range—all these were innovations of that time. Changes reflect lives and life itself. Like a good biography, the well-wrought restoration will illustrate its subject on many levels.

Inquiry on the historical side magnifies as the building and the human story merge. Questions about living emerge. Details of the house become clearer. In some cases, as Maryland's neoclassical Riversdale in Prince George's County, the written documentation of the contents and arrangement from about 1805 until the 1820s are abundant in colorful details. Other houses may require conjecture. The conceit of showing a room empty except for its one known artifact might work sometimes, but very seldom; such antiquarian efforts are too rarified for most people. It is a deliberate retreat from speculation. Why? Conjecture is nothing new to historical scholarship. It is always present to one degree or another. Since the empty room with no objects except for one clock is to most people an obviously inaccurate statement, conjecture is in that

case a more logical course.

Enlightened conjecture is drawn from a thick stew of related information. It is the sort of material a historical writer uses to paint a picture of an environment, to bring to understanding the obscure childhood of a figure of whom much was known about later in his life. Conjecture is a product of study, not invention. In historic house museums, it is through conjecture that we build up many of our supporting details; it is here we can effect our fine-tuning, to control the context for established facts. It is also in the area of conjecture that we eternally seek improvement. Thus the research goes on and on, long after the house museum's doors are open to the public.

Conjecture naturally has its dangers, making ever more important the accuracy of what we can know for sure. But conjecture has its place in every house museum, fleshing out not only the story, but visual details, which must at least ring true. Accordingly, the debate over how to upholster a chair and how to stuff it for an accurate external appearance is significant. The particular manner in which a surface was painted becomes critical, as much as the color which has emerged from scientific analysis. Light's admission or prohibition from a room is a major issue, as



(PHOTO CREDIT: ERIK KVALSVIK FOR THE NATIONAL SOCIETY OF THE COLONIAL DAMES OF AMERICA IN THE STATE OF FLORIDA)

Sitting Room, Ximenez-Fatio House, St. Augustine, Florida, 1985

This room was restored almost entirely from written documents of other houses in the city—newspapers, court testimony, inventories, personal papers—but very few documents of the actual place. The floorcloth, however, came from an illustration of the interior in an 1860s *Harper's Weekly* on St. Augustine. Shown to the public for years in the guise of its earliest role as an 18th century Spanish inn, the house was reinterpreted to the mid-19th century, when a succession of women managed the old coquina stone building as a winter hotel, perhaps Florida's first.

well as the accurate effects of artificial light; how a curtain hangs; how a wallpaper is applied; how a pattern is matched—or how it should not. Contrasts in a house of, say, 1820, may speak louder than the architecture—the elegant japanned furniture, the crude wood-box—play equally strong parts in the same essay.

Much of this is likely to be conjectural. Can house museums ever be authentic? Any historical exercise is a backward-looking endeavor, and total recall is futile. Accepting that as inevitable, we can still achieve an honest representation of a slice of time and a feeling for the lives of historical personalities through museum houses. If the essay of place (visually and otherwise) is under careful control, explanation can be made for what it is impossible to resurrect. Any historical work emphasizes these things that cause emotional responses in us today. A tiny part of an infinite picture is the most we can ever hope to recreate of the past. Which part depends upon our present needs. And I would imagine that these same things are what would attract us first if a time machine transported us back to the scene. Accuracy has its detractors: personal taste, civic pride, self esteem (or esteem for an ancestor), and not the least the social—as in Society—values placed on

antiques. Nobody wants an “ugly” monument. Yet, I am always surprised by the universal acceptance of historical fact, pretty or not.

The most effective and useful course of interpreting interiors in most American houses is along humanistic disciplines and values, not connoisseurship. One can sense past times and human living through objects, textures, and uses more in the historic interior than almost anywhere else. If the average historic interior today is not especially true, this shortcoming does not demean the effect in general. Some are quite good, and more are becoming so. The level of criticism is higher today because a discipline has emerged, and more laymen also approach the subject with a cultivated eye.

The best restoration projects today set their interpretive goals above considerations of private taste and thin symbolism. None too soon. The historic house has graduated into another and more useful phase: textbooks are poor; films have failed us. It may well be that a decade from now, when we are even more certain in our task, that the best popular forums for teaching history will be in our historic house museums.

William Seale is author of *Temples of Democracy: The State Capitols of the U.S.A.*, *The Tasteful Interlude*, *Recreating the Historic House Interior*, and the two-volume *The President's House*. He also is a consultant in interiors restoration and historical interpretation of historic buildings. Among his current projects are the George Eastman House in Rochester, New York; Traveler's Rest in Nashville, Tennessee; Stratford Hall in Westmoreland County, Virginia, and the Michigan State Capitol at Lansing. This essay is based on a paper presented at the Interiors Conference and Exposition for Historic Buildings, Philadelphia, Pa., December 7-9, 1988.