The Evolution of

WINTERTHUR ROOMS

By JOHN A. H. SWEENEY

The Winterthur Museum is a collection and a house. There are many museums devoted to the decorative arts and many house museums, but rarely in America is a great collection displayed in a great country house. Passing through successive generations of a single family, Winterthur has been a private estate for more than a century. Even after the extensive renovations made to it between 1929 and 1931, the house remained a family residence. This fact is of importance to the atmosphere and effect of the Museum. The impression of a lived-in house is apparent to the visitor; the rooms look as if they were vacated only a short while ago—whether by the original owners of the furniture or by the most recent residents of the house can be a matter of personal interpretation. Winterthur remains, then, a house in which a collection of furniture and architectural elements has been assembled. Like an English country house, it is an organic structure; and the house, as well as the collection and the manner of displaying it to the visitor, has changed over the years. The changes have coincided with developing concepts of the American arts, increased knowledge on the part of collectors and students, and a progression toward the achievement of a historical effect in period-room displays. The rooms at Winterthur have followed this current, yet still have retained the character of a private house.

The concept of the period room as a display technique has developed gradually over the years in an effort to present works of art in a context that would show them to greater effect and would give them more meaning for the viewer. Comparable to the habitat group in a natural history museum, the period room presents the decorative arts in a lively and interesting manner, and provides an opportunity to assemble objects related by style, date, or place of manufacture. The difficulty in designing such installations is in determining the validity of the relationship of the objects. Do
certain objects "go with" each other, or is their compatibility a factor imposed upon them by the knowledge and taste of the curators or collectors creating a period-room display? The answer to this question is difficult to determine, and it, too, has undergone a number of changes as the concept of the period room has emerged. In growing over the past forty years, the Winterthur collection has paralleled the development of the period room.

Joseph Downs wrote that the period room was best suited to the display of American decorative arts with their varied origins, materials, and dates and that regional differences, a factor of particular interest in the American arts, might be emphasized through this use of small units. The American Wing of the Metropolitan Museum of Art pioneered in this type of display, attempting to provide a sympathetic and appropriate background for American furniture with woodwork and other architectural elements contemporary with it; but shortly after its opening, Homer Eaton Keyes, then editor of Antiques, raised two significant questions with regard to the installations. He doubted the "relative correctness of proportion" in a room where certain objects were installed—perhaps in greater number than would have been there originally—because the more appropriate objects were not available; and he wondered about the use of complete or partial reproductions of early American rooms to augment "those examples of the early home-builder's art which chance circumstance had preserved intact to the present day." In answering his own questions, Keyes indicated the evolutionary nature of period-room displays and insisted upon the process of refinement that has been an essential factor in the Winterthur collection and in the rooms in which it is displayed:

. . . All this care concerning backgrounds carries with it important responsibilities for finishing each picture with full regard for the value of even the minutest details. That is an accomplishment not immediately to be wrought. Such pictures, like all thoughtful works of art, grow slowly. In the end they frequently owe less to initial inspiration than to an infinitude of patient correction.

In speaking of the changes made at Winterthur, Henry Francis du Pont reflected this concept when he remarked that "period rooms, which have never been plentiful, were bought as they came on the market and were reconstructed as nearly as possible in their original form; but it has taken all these years to get all the correct furniture and period rooms we needed, and needless to say every time a paneled room or mantelpiece was installed, I moved to this room the furniture that best suited it." The rooms at Winterthur can be considered to have evolved, anticipating the discovery of new information or the availability of the perfect piece which would contribute to what Keyes thought of as the "picture" in a period room. It is desirable for a period room to contain woodwork of a specific place and date, reconstructed as nearly as possible in its original form, and for the furniture in it to be of the same region and period in order to achieve historical consistency. The Winterthur rooms have developed in this direction;

2 Homer Eaton Keyes, "The Editor's Attic," Antiques, VII (April, 1925), 182.
3 Ibid.
the development is illustrated by recent photographs of the rooms compared with pictures taken of the same rooms in the 1930's.

The basic importance of the period-room installation was recognized by three students of Americana—Chauncey C. Nash, William D. Miller, and Norman M. Isham—after a visit to Winterthur reported in The Walpole Society Note Book for 1932:

The visit to Mr. du Pont's house, on Saturday, was something unique in Walpole experience. That group of peripatetics has seen many Early American rooms in many places... All kinds have we passed through in museum after museum, but they were all rooms—museum rooms, silent places with polished floors, filled with polished, silent furniture standing in polite but aristocratic aloofness. Study and admiration they invite, intimacy is impossible...

We have seen restored houses, beautifully done, like that of Mr. Perry, or new houses like Mr. Palmer's, both unforgettable delightful as homes. Yet never have we seen so many old American rooms under one roof... Nor could we imagine that there could be put into one house so many rooms so different, in size,
period and character, in such way as to make it liveable—to make a home of it. But Mr. du Pont has done it. Here are rooms that welcome the guest, furniture which seems glad to receive him. There is nothing of the museum in the air. We are not among the dead.\(^5\)

Placing antique furniture, paintings, and other decorative objects in such a context achieved a definite and desired effect. Writing in the same publication of the Walpole Society, the late Luke Vincent Lockwood described the appearance of one of the rooms at Winterthur as “a great comfortable room on the mezzanine floor furnished with the substantial, dignified, simple, oak and pine furniture of our early years.”\(^6\) Lockwood thus conceptualized the atmosphere of seventeenth-century America, and a photograph of the Wentworth Room as it appeared in 1935 (Fig. 1) suggests the impression it had made upon this distinguished collector and writer. He went on to describe the room:

Two cupboards, open below, our rarest type, a chest of drawers, the carving picked out in color, three seventeenth century washstands. Connecticut chest and chairs and tables of the period. The silver represents examples of all the best known early silversmiths and the three painted panels in their original frames are unique. On the floor is a splendid seventeenth century Asia Minor rug such as are occasionally mentioned in our inventories.\(^7\)

The furniture described has since been relocated in other rooms of the Museum. Coming from a seventeenth-century New Hampshire house remodeled about 1710, the Wentworth Room was for a number of years the earliest room at Winterthur; and all the seventeenth-century furniture in the collection was originally placed there. When a room from the Thomas Hart house, built about 1670 in Ipswich, Massachusetts, was installed in 1938, the court cupboard shown against the far wall in the photograph was moved to that room. The court cupboard has a history of ownership in Ipswich and is attributed to the master joiner Thomas Dennis, who worked in that town in the late seventeenth century. It is, therefore, in a more appropriate setting. The chest of drawers, its “carving picked out in color,” is also attributed to Thomas Dennis and is a remarkable example of seventeenth-century painted furniture. It is now installed in the Oyster Bay Room, next to the Hart Room, and it relates to seventeenth-century furniture of a similar type grouped with it. The long panel painting above the court cupboard now forms part of the fireplace wall in the Flock Room, where it is reunited with the woodwork from the house in which it was originally used. The restoration of this panel to its framework (from Morattico in Richmond County, Virginia), discovered and acquired for Winterthur ten years later, is a remarkable example of architectural reconstruction. The resulting Flock Room was described by Thomas T. Waterman, who supervised its installation, as “the finest of its type in Virginia, if not in the country.”\(^8\)

\(^6\) Ibid., p. 22.
\(^7\) Ibid.

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Through the years, other rooms in the Museum have changed in a similar manner. In some cases the objects displayed have been adjusted or replaced as others have been acquired; in other rooms the architectural setting has been revised. China Hall (Fig. 2), as shown in 1935, contained a large service of Chinese export porcelain ordered by George Washington in 1785 for his own use and ornamented with the arms of the Society of the Cincinnati. The service was displayed in tall cupboards framed by moldings and carved lintels which repeat details in the woodwork of the adjacent Chinese Parlor. In front of the cupboards were Philadelphia side chairs made about 1760. They combine features of the Queen Anne and Chippendale styles and are appropriate to the bold moldings of the woodwork. About 1940 the architectural details in the China Hall were removed, and the doorway was replaced with late-eighteenth-century reeded trim ornamented with plaster composition figures, from a house in Georgetown, District of Columbia (Fig. 3). Matching trim frames the window. The woodwork is contemporary with the porcelain and is closely related to it by its neoclassical decoration. The shelves have been replaced by arched cupboards designed by Waterman to complement the woodwork. The furnishings of the hall have also changed. Replacing the Chippendale chairs are a window seat and side chair made in Salem, Massachusetts, about 1795 and probably carved by Samuel McIntire, the master carver of that seaport city. A richly embroidered mull curtain hangs at the window,
Fig. 3 China Hall, woodwork from a house in Georgetown, District of Columbia, 1790-1800, photograph made in 1962.
draped in a manner suggested by engravings and design-book illustrations of the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries.

The Chestertown Room contains woodwork from a house built about 1762 on Water Street in Chestertown, Maryland. Its architectural interest is derived from such features as the sunk panels on the wall, dentil cornice, pedimented overmantel, and mahogany cap above the fret-carved chair rail. In 1935 (Fig. 4) the room was furnished primarily with important pieces of Philadelphia Chippendale furniture. A rare easy chair, displaying carved arm terminals and a scalloped mahogany skirt above cabriole legs, stands beside the fireplace. A Philadelphia side chair is in the window recess, and another one stands next to the easy chair; a historic American looking glass hangs above a New York Chippendale card table. Because the date of the woodwork coincides with that of the high point of the Chippendale style in Philadelphia and because the architecture is similar to that fashionable in Philadelphia at that time, the furnishings shown here are entirely appropriate. Two factors contributed to a change in the furnishings of this room. Over the years there has come into the Winterthur collection an important group of furniture made in Newport, Rhode Island. An urn stand, attributed to the shop of John Townsend, stood next to the
easy chair in the 1935 view of the Chestertown Room. Since then, it has been joined by other pieces of furniture made in Newport (Fig. 5), including a drop-leaf breakfast table labeled by John Townsend, a block-front chest of drawers, a straight-legged card table, and two mahogany tea tables, one of which is documented to the shop of John Goddard. Still hanging on the wall at the right is the looking glass given by Martha Washington in 1795 to the wife of John E. Van Alen, congressman from Rensselaer County, New York. That the pieces of furniture are from the
same city—some of them even from the same workshop—is an important coincidence which makes it possible for the student to study the characteristic features of a related group of objects. Here, the change in furnishings has also involved a process of bringing together pieces of a scale appropriate to the proportions of the architecture, a process which might be termed purely aesthetic, aimed at improving the visual effect of the room. A fact of interest to the student of American history is that the Newport cabinetmakers engaged in a lucrative export trade to cities along the eastern seacoast. The little port of Chestertown on Maryland's Eastern Shore was among those to which ships brought pottery and furniture from Rhode Island, and thus it is possible that Newport furniture might have been in a Maryland room. A few examples have been recovered in the South. In 1938 the elaborately carved woodwork from the parlor of the Blackwell house on Pine Street in Philadelphia was installed at Winterthur, and the Philadelphia furniture which had been in the Chestertown Room was moved to the new room, where the relationship of the architecture to the furniture is dramatically obvious.

Changes in the Baltimore Drawing Room (Fig. 6), used as a morning room before Winterthur became a museum, indicate a development toward
a greater concentration of furniture from one region. The physical arrangement of the room is similar to that of the front rooms of Baltimore town houses built at the turn of the nineteenth century, with windows on the long wall facing the street and the fireplace on the wall at right angles to it. The mantelpiece is decorated with plaster composition ornament probably made at the factory of Robert Wellford in Philadelphia; similar examples of plaster ornament appear in Baltimore houses. In 1935 Baltimore card tables flanked the projecting chimney breast. A mahogany and satinwood desk characteristic of Baltimore stood at the left of the window, and Baltimore side chairs were to be seen in the room. A New England sofa, probably made in Salem, Massachusetts, was at the right of the fireplace; it faced a Connecticut or New York upholstered armchair, beside which was a satinwood sewing table from Philadelphia. These objects have been moved. Replacing the Baltimore card tables are unusual marble-topped corner stands decorated in a manner peculiar to Baltimore (Fig. 7).
Where the Martha Washington chair stood, there is now a Baltimore sofa with a curved back and tapered legs inlaid with satinwood bellflowers typical of Baltimore design. A small Baltimore urn stand is beside it. The same Baltimore side chairs flank the desk. The consistent factors in the room, such as the carpet, the curtains, and the pictures on the wall, suggest the ability of such objects to be used sympathetically with various furnishings. While these particular items do not have histories of ownership in Baltimore, they are presumably similar to things available in Baltimore at the time that the furniture was made. Their use demonstrates the important practice in period-room display of including examples of the lesser household equipment that give the room a lifelike quality.

When Winterthur was enlarged in 1929, paneling from an early house in Virginia (the Ritchie house at Tappahannock) was used to line the walls of the Dancing Room (Fig. 8). This provided a pleasing background for Windsor chairs, early-eighteenth-century tables, hooked rugs, and nineteenth-century pottery. The spirit of the room conveyed the direct charm and simplicity usually associated with early American life, and a period-room display was not attempted. Subsequently the room was revised completely and the woodwork installed as it was believed to have been in the
house in Tappahannock (Fig. 9). When the Walpoleans visited Winterthur again in 1948, Thomas T. Waterman described the change: "In deference to their great importance as among the oldest of Virginia paneled rooms du Pont had them reconstructed last year, in exact accordance with
**Fig. 10** Court, *Port Royal Façade composed of architectural elements from Port Royal, Frankford, Pennsylvania, 1762, photograph made in 1950.*
Fig. 11 Court, Banister Façade, from Banister-MacKaye house, Middletown, Rhode Island, 1756, photograph made in 1963.
their original state. The hall room has one wall plastered as of old, but this is now covered by a painted cloth wall covering, with a soft green background.\footnote{Pilgrimage to Winterthur and Hunting Hill, The Walpole Society Note Book (privately printed, 1948), p. 52.} Originally a parlor and hall, or passage, the two rooms are now installed side by side rather than as one large irregularly shaped room; and the furniture in the room has been adjusted to include objects made in the Middle Colonies in the second quarter of the eighteenth century, approximately contemporary with the woodwork. Such a revision marks a move on the part of the collector to bring into alignment the architecture and furnishings of a room. Rather than the woodwork's being utilized merely as the background and unifying factor in the display of the collection, the two are coordinated in an ensemble which has a specific meaning of its own.

At about the time that the change was made in the Tappahannock rooms, an interior badminton court was turned into a courtyard designed by Waterman "not only to display a collection of outdoor furniture, but architectural fragments as well."\footnote{Ibid., p. 49.} The walls of this interior space were faced with house fronts, one of which simulated the exterior of Port Royal, built in 1762 at Frankford, Pennsylvania, from which a number of interiors at Winterthur had come (Fig. 10). Waterman described it as "stuccoed as so many Philadelphia houses were. . . . The west wall, then, is in the Philadelphia style of, say, 1765-1775 and forms a setting for a beautifully designed and worked Doric doorway."\footnote{Ibid., p. 50.} In 1959 the doorway was removed for use as a new entrance to the Museum. The entire façade was later replaced by the actual rusticated wooden exterior of the Banister-MacKaye house, built in 1756 near Newport, Rhode Island (Fig. 11); and thus the adjustment continues. In this instance a display, which was not part of a conventional domestic setting for a collection of antiques and which had more of an educational character than the earlier installations, was replaced in time by an actual house front which "chance circumstance had preserved" and which also illustrated an important aspect of American architectural history.

As an evolving setting, Winterthur reveals the growth of a collection and the development of the interests and tastes of the collector in the course of the process described by Homer Eaton Keyes as the "infinitude of patient correction." Mr. du Pont has said that he wanted his collection to show Americans how Americans have lived and that to this end he bought every period of furniture and interior architecture between 1640 and 1830 that could be accommodated in his house. With the purpose of utilizing a collection of the decorative arts to demonstrate history, the arrangement of the objects passes beyond the furnishing of a house and takes into consideration historical and anthropological factors. The period room is suited to such a purpose, and at the same time provides a setting which shows to advantage the objects made by, used by, and available to early Americans. As the knowledge of the Americans and their arts increase, and as the hoped-for perfect pieces become available, these settings are bound to change. In so doing they reflect the dynamic qualities of the collector and the collection.

\footnote{Pilgrimage to Winterthur and Hunting Hill, The Walpole Society Note Book (privately printed, 1948), p. 52.}
\footnote{Ibid., p. 49.}
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