The American Wing in 1957

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The history of the American Wing from its inception to present times has been written and rewritten so often in various publications of the Museum and elsewhere that it scarcely seems worth while to retrace the different physical developments, improvements, and additions to the collections that have taken place since its opening in 1924. The concern of this article is for our present status and the role that the American Wing will play in the future in the field of American decorative arts. It might be pointed out, however, that in the past decade there have not been any changes of major importance. During the period of the Museum’s current reconstruction program this particular branch of the Museum has not exactly been neglected but it has been held by those concerned that, since it was the most modern area of the entire building, all other sections should receive priority for modernization. So during this period activities in the American Wing have been confined generally to lighting improvement, repainting, reupholstery, and some rearrangement and reinstallation of permanent exhibits, in short, to good housekeeping. The growing interest in this field and the many new developments that have occurred in recent years are of such major importance that at this time it might be of interest to pause and take stock of our present situation and suggest an over-all plan for the future.

Some decisive events that have taken place elsewhere have drastically affected the position of the American Wing in comparison with former days, when it had the distinction of being the primary exhibition devoted to our native arts and crafts. Other institutions followed the Metropolitan Museum’s lead, installing period rooms and acquiring through gift or purchase examples or collections of furniture, silver, pewter, and glass made in this country from the middle of the seventeenth century through the early years of the nineteenth. While this was going on the American Wing improved slowly, occasionally substituting or adding a room of superior quality or acquiring an item of particular rarity. On the whole it would appear that the backbone of the collection, made up of a few outstanding collections, was considered very superior and sufficient to state the case for American decorative arts. There can be no doubt that this is true today. Within the present galleries any interested observer, although he may have no prior knowledge of the subject, may grasp at first hand a rather complete education in this field.

That so many fine objects are part of the collection is due, for the main part, to the keen foresight of a handful of early collectors who, after the turn of the century, were astute enough to recognize that in past centuries America had artisans capable of turning out products comparable to those produced in Europe at the same time and that their work was well worth preserving. It might be noted, however, that some enthusiasts of the American school are often carried away in their zeal and refuse to recognize one simple fact. It must be admitted that the most skillful artists chose to remain in England or on the continent, where financial security was more or less assured in the close proximity to their very wealthy patrons. To be sure, for various reasons, such as religious persecution, many skillful artisans emigrated to these shores, but it would be untruthful to say that the best did. Those who came to America were trained in the old traditions but were quick to adapt their techniques to the demands of this new and growing country, where wealth was limited in comparison to the world they had left behind.

Pages could be written on the subject of when, why, or how Americans got interested in their own art, but actually it can be summed up very briefly. Towards the end of the nineteenth century a very few men, who had accumulated enough wealth to “make the Grand Tour” in the
manner of the British, traveled throughout the various cultural centers of Europe and returned home bearing various works of art, good, bad, and indifferent. The next generation and those to follow copied their example and happily for the most part profited by their mistakes and by the lessons of that "dear teacher, Time.” The American public will ever be indebted to these men and women, for they are mainly responsible for the establishment of our great public museums.

Meanwhile a very small group were busily at work at home, roaming the countryside and exploring the old houses of our more venerable cities, particularly Boston, Philadelphia, and New York, and buying up for a few dollars objects that today sell for thousands. Today we envy these “pioneers.” But we must first of all admire their judgment and foresight. They can be closely compared to those who were the initial collectors of the works of Degas, Gauguin, Renoir, and the other impressionists for a very few francs, paintings whose value can hardly be estimated at this time. Our envy and admiration, however, is not primarily directed towards the financial rewards reaped by these connoisseurs but towards their ability to discern the hitherto unrecognized artistic qualities of these works and the genius of their creators.

This digression on the old-time collectors and on the collecting of American art may seem entirely irrelevant to the purposes of this article, but it is included for a very good reason. These are the people who are mainly responsible for the American Wing. Without their interest there would be no such museum. Their taste has dictated the actual physical plans, the period rooms,
and the furnishings. They were and are responsible for its present status.

Today the American Wing occupies a more sharply defined position in its field than when it played the role of leader. Many events have occurred, some of them in recent years, to bring this about. Perhaps the most important has been the opening to the general public of the Henry Francis du Pont Winterthur Museum in Delaware in 1951. For many years Mr. du Pont, without doubt the greatest student and collector of early American art, had built up his extraordinary collection with the intent of eventually giving it to the American public. This vast array of period rooms and galleries devoted to special exhibitions far and away overshadows anything else of the sort that has ever been attempted. There is no doubt that this is the headquarters for early American art and for scholarship on the subject. In addition to these impressive collections there is the most complete library of reference material in existence. Also a training program of the most successful nature was inaugurated simultaneously with the opening to provide personnel for research and museum work in this field. Admissions are regulated in a manner that permits more complete and more detailed installations than are possible in museums that must accommodate very heavy traffic on certain days.

Although Colonial Williamsburg is not a recent development and is probably the most nationally well-known monument to our past, recent changes there entitle it to a re-evaluation in comparison with the American Wing. This town is for the most part a frank restoration, and, while this is readily admitted, until a few years ago reproductions of furnishings were considered as desirable as original pieces. A new policy, happily adopted, has meant that a very fine collection of early American art, truly of major importance, is being acquired.

Deerfield Village, a restoration dedicated to the true seventeenth-century pioneers of our country, where a complete town is gradually being returned to its original character and all the houses are actually of the period, is yet another museum of importance.

Sturbridge Village, Massachusetts, the Shelburn Museum in Vermont, and the work being done at Newport, Rhode Island, are only a few of many other developments of interest that limited space will not permit mentioning in greater detail. Today there are numerous individual historic houses in which every effort is being made to obtain suitable, authentic furnishings. These are cited for two important reasons: each was established for a single purpose, and interest and growth and improvement have never ceased.

By comparison how does the American Wing stand up today? Improvements of a "housekeeping" nature have already been noted. Additions of importance to the collections have not been of especial significance, particularly over the last ten years. What then of the future? Is the

collection of high enough caliber to warrant only very occasional additions? And perhaps the most important question of all, for whom should any changes and improvements be made, primarily?

To the staff of the American Wing the various types of visitors have always been an object of the utmost importance and interest. There is ample opportunity to engage many of these people in conversation and to learn a great deal from talking with them. Strange as it may seem, it has not been uncommon to meet visitors who have toured all three floors and still ask where the American furniture may be seen. A number of people today refuse to admit, despite utmost publicity, that in this country anything in the way of wood was used for household furniture but oak, pine, and maple. Such visitors are few. Another group comes to compare our objects with family heirlooms. Some of them depart feeling that their heirlooms are far superior to anything in the American Wing. Yet another type is contemplating a purchase of a piece of fine Americana and is sent by the vendor to make a comparison of the object for sale with one in the American Wing. Architects, industrial designers, and students preparing for a career in these professions constitute a large group that makes serious use of the Wing.

But all these represent a small proportion. The visitors that are most in evidence, especially during the fall and winter months of the year, are the public school children of New York City and those from out of town. Whether led by their own teachers or the staff lecturers provided by the Museum, their interest is enormous and
gratifying to all concerned. For here it would seem they receive their very first real impressions from the tangible evidence of our past. Seated on the floor of a room, two hundred years or more old, surrounded by the furnishings of the same era, it would appear that for the first time they grasp the meaning of our country's antiquity. The eager answers to the questions of teacher or lecturer leaves no doubt of their interest in the mind of anyone who has listened to these sessions.

The future course of the American Wing in regard to its primary purpose and its main audience is clear. Since other institutions have so completely assumed their separate and special roles, expansion of our own coverage is not indicated at this point. The superb examples of period rooms, with gradual additions, seem adequate to satisfy the most eager student or the most knowledgeable collector.

Within its present physical limitations, by wisely adding to the collections only the very best examples of decorative art, devoting attention to authenticity of decor, some rearrangement of permanent exhibits, and the substitution of comparatively few period rooms for those now installed, the American Wing could, for practical purposes, be considered complete.

What, in detail, are the changes to be made? First of all the galleries of Pennsylvania-German art should be reinstalled. This rather small but nevertheless complete collection donated by Mr. and Mrs. Robert W. de Forest, who gave the original building, was necessarily removed during the reconstruction program with no provision for its reinstallation. For convenience's sake, the three entering galleries on the second floor should be reinstalled with the collections of glass, silver, and pewter. Since there is little opportunity to study American exterior architecture, one gallery should be devoted to a photographic panorama of this subject. A few significant architectural elements could be displayed in rotation to augment this exhibition and give it more interest and importance. Several of the period rooms could be replaced with more distinctive and distinguished examples. These might include a New England Chippendale room, a complete New York room of the seventeenth century, and a true McIntire room, representing the best that New England had to offer in the closing years of the eighteenth century. A room from the Deep South dating from the Greek Revival period would not be amiss. There have even been many suggestions of continuing through the Victorian period and even further, but at this point the Metropolitan Museum is for various reasons not prepared to consider such developments.

With this accomplished full attention could be given by the staff to educational work and the revival of the very popular, important special exhibitions of earlier years like the Greek Revival show, the China Trade show, and Benjamin Franklin and His Circle.

In this way our role in the foreseeable future will definitely be established—a Wing presenting only the very best of American decorative arts and an information and educational center for this subject.