

A DEBT TO INSPIRATION: ON THE OCCASION OF THE 25TH ANNIVERSARY OF JAYNE DESIGN STUDIO

BY THOMAS JAYNE



Fig. 1. The Queen Anne Dining Room at Winterthur

It is an honor and a privilege to serve as honorary chair and deliver the keynote lecture at the 2015 Delaware Antiques Show, benefiting one of this country's most important cultural institutions. It is especially gratifying to me, a graduate of the Winterthur Program in American Material Culture, that this year we celebrate the twenty-fifth anniversary of Jayne Design Studio. I see myself as a scholar-decorator much as Henry Francis du Pont, the founder of Winterthur, saw the ideal curator as part decorator, part librarian. In fact, all of us at the Studio are very much inspired by the museum and the estate. In many ways, to turn Mr. du Pont's phrase, my colleagues and I are decorators who are part librarian and part curator, seeing traditional design as an important component of contemporary decoration.

I remember the first time I visited Winterthur. It was deep summer, and the estate was covered in a fog of humidity. The museum appeared as if in a vision. To me,

this mirage was a natural metaphor since I had long imagined the opportunity to do my graduate work there. My time studying architecture and art history at Oregon as well as the summer fellowship at Historic Deerfield were preludes to my two years in residence at this great repository of Americana—175 rooms of American furniture with almost 90,000 objects. While I was prepared for the depth and quality of the collections, the subtle beauty of the place astounded me. Indeed, I had come upon a remarkable vision, and it was real.

One of the first museum rooms I visited was the Queen Anne Dining Room, a beautiful arrangement of rare New York armchairs, covered in linen dyed in a blue-resist pomegranate pattern (*fig. 1*). The chairs encircle an oval table in a room sheathed in early paneling, restored to its original warm pale green. The decoration impressed me deeply. As we stood in the room, we had a far-ranging discussion about the origin and authenticity of the furnishings, especially the unique chairs. This was my introduction to the combination of scholarship and beauty that is at the heart of the Winterthur experience.

In 1984 I was selected to be a Winterthur Fellow and participate in the two-year course in American material culture that draws upon the extraordinary museum and library collections. As Fellows, we were encouraged to independently study each of the rooms and their furnishings. This gave me the opportunity to closely observe Mr. du Pont's remarkable ability to communicate his knowledge of history in an artful way.

The question “what does this object say about the people who made and used it?” often led off discussions at Winterthur. Those exercises in connoisseurship were opportunities to develop the skills necessary to identify objects by comparing them to related examples. Looking back, they trained my eye and broadened my talents as a decorator, enabling me to create meaningful and, I think, beautiful rooms. Most certainly, Winterthur instilled in me the rigor of a trained curator.

Along with my academic training, the time I spent in design apprenticeships at the decorating firms of Parish-Hadley and Kevin McNamara helped me understand that a fine room needs an object of focus around which a decoration scheme can be developed. That object might be a work of art, a treasured heirloom, or perhaps something of merit recently found. It can be modest or grand, but it must have a personal appeal or resonance with the owner of the room.

I also believe that the best rooms always contain something antique and something new, a combination that can be as bold as the contrast of a modern piece of art with an antique cabinet or the employment of a fashionable color or furniture arrangement that includes old things. And, of course, at the core of great decoration are color and texture along with the care taken to create visual relationships between design elements, a skill mastered beautifully by Henry Francis du Pont.



Fig. 2. The Chinese Parlor at Winterthur

Winterthur's Chinese Parlor epitomizes Mr. du Pont's exceptional decorating talents (*fig. 2*). Here the object of particular focus is the eighteenth-century Chinese wallpaper, notable for its condition and the quantity used in the room. Select examples of Georgian furniture are arranged in a convivial twentieth-century way that allows for modern entertainment and gives the room a contemporary freshness. The decorative scheme is derived from the colors in the wallpaper with such attention to detail that four sets of curtains were created, from yellow silk to green damask, to allow for seasonal changes. Derbyshire spar vases on the mantel, with pink and purple veining, offset the greens and blues that dominate the coloration of the paper.

As a scholar-decorator, the interiors I design convey knowledge through beauty by incorporating something old and something new. I offer two examples here. The drawing room at Drumlin Hall is an explicit homage to Winterthur and the neoclassical rooms created in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries (*fig. 3*). Most of the furniture is antique, save the low tables and the pair of settees, which are modern adaptations. The newness in the room comes from an unexpected color scheme—like those used at Winterthur—much different from the oft-repeated red, blue, and green common to classical rooms. And, importantly, the newness is further enhanced through the personal collection of art arranged to reflect the very good taste of our patron.



Fig. 3. The drawing room of Drumlin Hall, Dutchess County, New York, is an homage to the neoclassical rooms at Winterthur. Photo, Pieter Estershon



Fig. 4. The dining room of a Philadelphia townhouse with a Karl Springer Parsons table and Portuguese chairs. Photo, Pieter Estershon

In another room for collectors of decorative art in Philadelphia, we designed a dining room around a Parsons-type table created by Karl Springer (*fig. 4*). As an object of focus and something new, the table's bright blue gives the room an immediately fresh appearance, with Portuguese dining chairs providing sculptural contrast. Clearly, for these two rooms and others that Jayne Design Studio has decorated over the last quarter century, I owe a great debt to the inspiration, the genius, and the vision of Henry Francis du Pont.

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