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R. T. H. HALSEY: AN IDEOLOGY OF COLLECTING
AMERICAN DECORATIVE ARTS.

UNIVERSITY OF DELAWARE (WINTERTHUR PROGRAM),
M.A., 1980

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R. T. H. HALSEY: AN IDEOLOGY
OF COLLECTING AMERICAN DECORATIVE ARTS

BY

Wendy Joan Kaplan

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A thesis submitted to the Faculty of the University of
Delaware in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of
Master of Arts in Early American Culture.

May 1980

R. T. H. HALSEY: AN IDEOLOGY
OF COLLECTING AMERICAN DECORATIVE ARTS

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INTRODUCTION

The American Wing at the Metropolitan Museum of Art opened on November 10, 1924, the first permanent gallery space within a major art museum to be devoted to the exhibition of American decorative arts. As William Ivins, Curator of Prints at the Metropolitan until his retirement in 1946, pointed out some years later, the establishment of the American Wing "marked not only the coming of age of a particular kind of collecting but a new departure in this country's museum practice."¹ The influence of the American Wing was widespread; for, as the Metropolitan Museum of Art was America's most famous and oft-visited museum, innovations there received national attention. The Metropolitan's American Wing became the model for period installations all over the country.

Richard Townley Haines Halsey (1865-1942), acting as curator for the American Wing, assumed responsibility for the installation of the rooms and their furnishings. In the light of his importance as the creator of this model of period rooms in art museums, Halsey has never received the serious attention that he deserves. A prolific author, indefatigable lecturer, prominent educator, consultant, and collector, he served the cause of legitimizing the collection and exhibition of American decorative arts.

The Winterthur Museum Library has been given the Halsey papers, which include lectures, manuscript notes, correspondence, photographs, and scrapbooks. Using these papers, materials in the Metropolitan Museum archives, Halsey's published books and catalogues, contemporary newspapers, and interviews with his daughters as source material, this thesis will explore the development of Halsey's thought and his influence in shaping attitudes about objects made and used in America.

NOTES TO INTRODUCTION

¹William M. Ivins, Jr., "R. T. H. Halsey," in Handbook of the American Wing, seventh edition, R. T. H. Halsey and Charles O. Cornelius (New York: The Metropolitan Museum of Art, 1942), p. x.

CHAPTER I

Richard Townley Haines Halsey, known as R. T. by his friends, was born into an upper middle-class family which traced its ancestors back to 1630. Halsey's unmarried sister Rosalie Vrylina wrote an unpublished family history entitled "Some Records of a Family for a Family by one of the Family" in 1928. Information concerning Halsey's family background comes largely from her account, verified when possible by Halsey's daughters Elizabeth Villani and Carolyn Harbour. The founding member of the family in America was Thomas Halsey, who migrated to Lynn, Massachusetts, from England in 1630. In 1640 he moved to Southampton, Long Island, where the house he built still stands. In the middle of the eighteenth century Thomas Halsey's descendants moved to New Jersey, where most of the family remained through the nineteenth century.

Rosalie Halsey described her mother's side of the family, stating "Our Great Grandmother Electra Barrell [was] a descendant of the Bingham, Pierces, Greenes and Heard, whose names abound in the development of Boston and its social life..."¹ She wrote that the Barrell family produced "generations of bankers and merchants"² and noted proudly that family members were painted by such well-known artists as John Singleton Copley and John Vanderlyn.

The Halsey family was immensely proud of Luther Halsey, R. T.'s great-grandfather, an aide-de-camp on General Washington's staff. Throughout his lifetime R. T. owned and cherished Luther's certificate of membership in the Society of the Cincinnati. It presently hangs on a wall in Mrs. Harbour's house.

R. T. H. Halsey was born August 28, 1865, in Elizabeth, New Jersey, the eldest child of Fanny and William Halsey. A year later his father was transferred to New Orleans to open an agency for the banking house of Brown Brothers of 59 Wall Street, New York. After his mother's death in 1875, R. T. was sent back to New Jersey. He spent one winter at the Pingry School for Boys in Elizabeth, living at his grandmother's house, before attending St. Paul's School in Concord, New Hampshire. Halsey went on to Princeton University, where he developed what was to become a lifelong interest in the history and heroes of the Revolutionary War era.

After graduation in 1886, Halsey's father bought him a seat on the New York Stock Exchange. A very successful broker, R. T. eventually became a partner in the firm of Halsey and Hudnut and subsequently, Tefft, Halsey and Company. In 1899, he was elected to the Board of Governors of the New York Stock Exchange, a position he retained for twenty-five years, serving for part of that period as President.

In a lecture delivered later in life to students at Johns Hopkins University, Halsey shed light on the development of his interest in American history, crediting Johns Hopkins with starting him on his "real education." Apparently, education at Princeton in the 1880s was a dull affair:

We boys rather had the idea that if education made men like our professors, that education was not especially worthwhile wasting much time over... This state of mind continued on eight years. Then I had the luck to have a brother-in-law made a member of the Faculty of Johns Hopkins... I came down frequently from New York and met a number of the Johns Hopkins faculty at his home...

Halsey was introduced to Dr. Welch, Professor of Medicine, and discovered that

Dr. Welch put that great mind of his on baseball, just as intently as he ha[d] on everything else. He knew not only the batting and fielding averages, past and present, of the Orioles, but also of most of the other players in the other seven clubs of the league. He set me thinking - there did seem some use in education, if a man could be highly educated and yet be human.³

Halsey established friendships with many other men on the Johns Hopkins faculty, all of whom impressed him with the multifaceted nature of their interests and abilities. "The result of my knowing these men was that I started to try and educate myself and have been having an interesting time keeping at it ever since."⁴

Perhaps his friendships with these men inspired Halsey not to let his responsibilities on the Exchange curtail his interest in American history and art, for the year of his election to the Board of Governors, 1899, coincided with the publication of his first book - Pictures of Early New York on Dark Blue Staffordshire Pottery.

Halsey was a passionate collector in many different media. In addition to Staffordshire pottery, his collection included Chinese export porcelain, Wedgwood medallion portraits, American silver, architectural books, textiles, and American furniture.

Before World War I, Halsey designed and had built an estate on Long Island, Tallwood, to house his acquisitions. Knowing that Francis P. Garvan, another noted collector, intended to give his collection to Yale University, Halsey sold to Garvan much of his own furniture and silver in the late 1920s. Upon Halsey's death in 1942, the rest of his collection was dispersed through auction sale and dealers to meet the terms of his will. Thus, the furniture and silver which had been sold to Garvan are the only substantial assemblage of Halsey's collection in a public institution.

Not content with the mere possession of objects, Halsey meticulously researched his collection and shared the results of his scholarship with the general public. Pictures of Early New York... was only the first of his many publications or exhibitions based largely on objects from his own collection.

In 1911 Halsey wrote the catalogue for a Metropolitan Museum of Art exhibition of American silver. Of the 200 items displayed, about a quarter were from his own collection. With Joseph Downs, then Curator of the American Wing, Halsey organized the 1936 exhibition "Benjamin Franklin and His Circle." Halsey wrote the introductory essay and as the Baltimore Sun reported, "Wedgwood medallion portraits taken from the extensive collection made by R. T. H. Halsey...form[ed] the nucleus of the...exhibition."⁵ In 1939 he organized and wrote the catalogue for the show "Impolitical Prints: An Exhibition of Contemporary English Cartoons Relating to the American Revolution," held at the New York Public Library. Over half the prints were his own.

Halsey played an important role in nearly every early exhibition of American decorative art. He wrote the catalogue for the 1906 Boston Museum of Fine Art exhibition of seventeenth- and eighteenth-century American silver, which was the first display of American craft products in an art museum. In the preface to the catalogue of the Metropolitan's 1909 Hudson-Fulton show, the Museum Secretary thanked Halsey for "the complete showing of furniture by Duncan Phyfe...for the loan of his collection of silver, and for valuable assistance in the preparation of the catalogue of silver."⁶ Halsey lent about a third of the objects in the Metropolitan's famous 1922 Duncan Phyfe show, which contributed to the rage for furniture attributed to this maker. As the New York Tribune pointed out, Halsey was "known as the largest collector of Phyfe furniture" and was

"instrumental in promoting the exhibition."⁷ Halsey also lent objects to the Girl Scouts Loan Exhibition of 1929, a display of what were considered to be the quintessential examples of American design.

In 1914 Halsey was elected a Trustee to the Metropolitan Museum of Art and immediately became the chairman of the Committee on American Decorative Arts. In this capacity, he was responsible for the installation of the rooms in the American Wing, and, with the assistance of collaborators, for the publications that resulted from this work: A Handbook of the American Wing and The Homes of Our Ancestors. The installation of the American Wing and these two publications were his two most significant contributions to the field, and will be fully discussed in later chapters.

In addition to books and exhibition catalogues, Halsey wrote many articles on the subjects of American history and art. Through membership in clubs like the Walpole Society, he generated further interest in the field. An inexhaustible lecturer, Halsey spread his ideas about American decorative arts throughout the country.

Halsey's contributions to the study of American cultural history and arts did not go unrecognized by his contemporaries. In 1934 he was selected as the honorary American member of the Wedgwood Club for his scholarly work on the subject and his role in promoting an appreciation of Wedgwood ceramics. For his work in the American

Wing and "profound knowledge of American craftsmanship," the American Institute of Architects made Halsey an honorary member.⁸ Columbia University awarded him an honorary Master of Arts in 1917.

In 1923 Halsey sold his seat on the Stock Exchange in order to devote all his time to the American Wing. Although he remained chairman of the Committee on American Decorative Arts until his death, Halsey looked for other challenges after the Wing was fully established.

In 1928 he received the honorary degree of Doctor of Letters at St. John's College in Annapolis and accepted the position of Professor of Colonial Art. At St. John's, Halsey established the first academic course in American crafts. Entitled "The Background of American Life," the course was described in the 1928-29 college catalogue as "the study of Colonial America: its architecture, its furniture, its silver, glass and pottery."⁹ John Marshall Philips, often credited with offering the first course in American decorative arts, followed Halsey's precedent three years later at Yale University.

St. John's had embarked upon a program of purchasing and preserving historic houses in Annapolis, and Halsey was deeply involved in these activities. His particular interest was the Hammond-Harwood house, which according to the archivist at St. John's "with the aid of some of his friends he developed into a Colonial museum of outstanding quality."¹⁰ During these years at St. John's, Halsey lectured throughout the country and published extensively on the subject of colonial life in Annapolis. The breadth of his knowledge of eighteenth-century

Maryland was extraordinary. In addition to publishing a monograph on the architecture of the Hammond-Harwood house, Halsey spoke on such subjects as eighteenth-century literature in Annapolis, social life in Annapolis, government and culture in Maryland, and Charles Carroll's attitudes towards education.

Resigning from St. John's in 1932 when his five-year contract expired, Halsey returned to his home on Long Island, where he continued to lecture, write, and work for the Metropolitan Museum of Art. Although Halsey's total absorption with the Wing ceased after the opening, he continued to be an active participant in all major decisions concerning purchases of rooms and furnishings. Letters in the Museum archives between Halsey and the Museum Director attest to Halsey's decisive role in the acquisition of additions to the American Wing. When the Hart house was purchased in 1936, Joseph Downs negotiated the purchase in Ipswich. Herbert Winlock, Museum Director, wrote to Halsey:

I think the matter is left to you and me. I would be glad enough to close the matter now and report it as an accomplished fact at the meeting on June 15th. If you are of the same opinion please telegraph Downs to settle the matter up before he comes back, and to call on me for a first payment to bind the transaction.¹¹

However, Halsey no longer seemed to be initiating purchases.

In 1936 Halsey was invited to teach at Yale University, where being over the age of retirement, he held the honorary positions of

Research Assistant at the Sterling Library and Assistant Professor. Always a popular lecturer, his courses there were oversubscribed.

In 1894 Halsey had married Helen Homans, who died in childbirth several years later. He subsequently married Effie Underhill, an unstable woman who spent much of their marriage in mental institutions. In 1924 Henry Watson Kent, Secretary of the Metropolitan, hired Elizabeth Tower, a young college graduate, to be Halsey's secretary and assist him in the writing of The Homes of Our Ancestors. Three years later Halsey divorced his wife on the grounds of insanity in order to marry Miss Tower. Two daughters were born of this happy marriage: Elizabeth, born in 1929, and Caroline, born the following year.

Halsey died in New Haven in February 1942, at the age of seventy-six. While crossing the street he was struck by an automobile and died eighteen days later.

Although eleven and thirteen years old when their father died, Halsey's daughters retain vivid memories of their life together at Tallwood and in New Haven. According to Mrs. Harbour and Mrs. Villani, the Halseys enjoyed an upper-class life style. Their household was rather formal and staffed with many servants: maids, cook, and butler. The ladies rested after lunch; tea was served in the late afternoon; and there were guests for dinner every night. The Halsey family was close, and relatives would come and stay for weeks.

The daughters' childhood was happy and peaceful. Although they had a governess, the girls were not isolated from their parents and the family always had their meals together. The house was not as formal as it might have been, for Halsey did not hold his collection sacrosanct. A reporter recalled how one of the daughters "rode around through the house on a velocipede, bumping into fenders and Duncan Phyfe furniture, and how her father indulgently remarked that furniture was meant to be used and could be mended if necessary."¹²

Halsey is remembered as a very kind man with a strong, dominating personality, often absentminded about such matters as losing umbrellas, yet dynamic and meticulous about his research and collections. When asked what values her father had taught her, Mrs. Villani responded that above all he gave her the assumption that one should do something with one's life, care about some cause passionately, and give it all one's energy. Both daughters remember Halsey as an upright and uncompromising man of the highest moral standards. Halsey's integrity was remembered by William Ivins as well, who noted, "Before God he hated a fake, be it man or object, and 'pious fraud' of the kind that unfortunately sometimes shows its head in museums was anathema to him."¹³

In an article written about Halsey just after his death, a reporter for the New York Sun concluded, "this country owes more to him than to any other antiquarian."¹⁴ Of all his many activities,

Halsey's greatest contribution to the study of early American life was his work in the American Wing at the Metropolitan.

NOTES TO CHAPTER I

¹Rosalie Vrylina Halsey, "Some Records of a Family for a Family by One of the Family" (unpublished typescript, Princeton, New Jersey, 1928), p. 1.

²Ibid.

³R. T. H. Halsey Papers, Downs Manuscript and Microfilm Collection (hereafter cited as DMMC), Winterthur Museum, Winterthur, Delaware, shelf Number 75 x 80.14, pp. 2, 3.

⁴Ibid., p. 3.

⁵"R. T. H. Halsey Medallions in New York Exhibit," Baltimore Sun, 1936, Section 2, p. 11. Metropolitan Museum of Art Archives.

⁶The Hudson-Fulton Celebration Vol. II. Catalogue of an exhibition (New York: The Metropolitan Museum of Art, 1909), p. IX.

⁷"Metropolitan to Show Phyfe Cabinet Work," New York Tribune, October 15, 1922. Metropolitan Museum of Art Archives.

⁸"Architect Honors Bestowed on 39," New York Times, May 27, 1934. Metropolitan Museum of Art Archives.

⁹St. John's College Catalogue, 1928-29. I am grateful to Miriam Strange, archivist at St. John's College, for giving me this information.

¹⁰Letter from Miriam Strange, Archivist, St. John's College, to author, August 22, 1978.

¹¹Letter from Herbert Winlock to R. T. H. Halsey, June 6, 1936, Metropolitan Museum of Art Archives (hereafter cited as MMAA), New York City, New York.

¹²"R. T. H. Halsey, Militant Antiquarian, Man of Service to Colonial American Arts," The Quester column, New York Sun, February 1942. Typescript copy of this article in possession of Mrs. Carolyn Harbour, Falls Church, Virginia.

¹³Ivins, p. XV.

¹⁴"Halsey," New York Sun, February 1942.

CHAPTER II

Fifteen years before the opening of the Wing, the Metropolitan did not own a single piece of American furniture. The Director of the Museum felt that "the American arts and crafts were not worthy of exhibition." He was not alone in this conviction; his colleagues at the Boston Museum of Fine Arts and most of the academic community viewed American decorative arts with equal disdain.¹

However, many people had begun to cherish American objects, if not as art, then as expressions of patriotism or nostalgia for colonial days. The extraordinary popularity of the "New England Kitchen of 1776" at the Philadelphia Centennial, the vogue of reproduction colonial-style furniture, and the emergence of a small group of collectors and antiquarians were manifestations of this growing interest in American artifacts which helped create an atmosphere receptive to the inclusion of American decorative arts in the Metropolitan's 1909 Hudson-Fulton Celebration.

It was Henry Watson Kent (1866-1948), then serving as Assistant Secretary to Museum Secretary Robert de Forest (1848-1931), who suggested that the Museum include American objects in this exhibition.² In 1909 most New York museums and civic organizations were planning special events to commemorate either the three hundredth anniversary of

Henrik Hudson's voyage up the river which bore his name or the centennial of the maiden trip of Robert Fulton's steamboat. As its contribution, the Metropolitan planned a show of Dutch paintings of Hudson's period. Kent argued that it would be appropriate to exhibit American objects up to Fulton's time as well.³ De Forest, chairman of the Art Committee for the Celebration, who lived in a house filled with Duncan Phyfe-style furniture, was sympathetic to the idea, and the show was approved.

Kent had come to the Metropolitan in 1905 after serving both as curator of the Slater Memorial Museum and librarian at the Norwich Free Academy in Norwich, Connecticut, and subsequently as librarian of the Grolier Club in New York. He brought special organizational skills to the Museum, having studied under Melvil Dewey, originator of the decimal classification system for library books, at Columbia University as well as great enthusiasm for the American past. His knowledge of American history and art was developed in Norwich, but its genesis went back much further. He began his autobiography with this statement:

I am of Yankee stock, all my forebears having come to Massachusetts in its beginning, and I was brought up on stories of these ancestors, their ways and manners... Puritans, Pilgrims, Indians, and royal governors were all subjects of the talk I heard in my early days... I was started out in life in true New England fashion, with a love of the past.⁴

Robert de Forest, a wealthy lawyer from a well-established New York family, was married to an enthusiastic early collector of American "loot," as she called it. She later donated much of her collection to the Museum.⁵ Long a Museum Trustee, de Forest became its Secretary in 1905 or thereabouts and President in 1913. A good friend of Kent's, de Forest supported his election to Secretary when he became President.

Although Kent was not a wealthy man, he shared with Halsey and de Forest a background in the old-established upper-class, a pride in this heritage and an eagerness that its worth should enjoy general recognition. In addition, all three shared a strong impulse to public service and a web of connections with others of similar background and beliefs.

In fact, neither the Hudson-Fulton show nor the American Wing could have been created without this network of contacts. During his twelve years in Norwich, Kent had become very friendly with the leading collectors in New England. Since the Metropolitan had no American objects of its own, Kent borrowed from the private collections of friends to create the American part of the Hudson-Fulton Celebration. Most of the seventeenth- and early eighteenth-century furniture came from H. Eugene Bolles, a Boston lawyer, and the later styles were borrowed from Bolles's cousin, George Shepard Palmer, a manufacturer from Norwich and New London.⁶ As mentioned earlier, Halsey made substantial contributions of silver and furniture from his own collection,

and participated in the preparations for the exhibit. Many other collectors, such as Irving Lyon and Harry Harkness Flagler, also loaned objects but the bulk of the exhibit came from the Bolles and Palmer collections.

The Hudson-Fulton Celebration was an enormous success. The public flocked to see the American paintings, furniture, silver, and ceramics assembled by Kent. As Charles Montgomery pointed out in an unpublished decorative arts dateline, the Hudson-Fulton Exhibition made three major contributions. It encouraged the recognition of American decorative arts, the classification of objects in a new way, by period and by form, and introduced the important collectors of the period to one another.⁷ De Forest, Kent, and Halsey all saw the purpose of the Exhibition as "an opportunity to test out the question of whether American domestic art was worthy of a place in an art museum, and to test it out not theoretically but visually."⁸ American domestic art passed the test, and before the Hudson-Fulton exhibit had closed, the Metropolitan acquired the entire Bolles collection.

Kent's account of this acquisition provides insight into the emotional association with the American past that was one of the most important impulses in the creation of the American Wing:

Soon after the exhibition, Eugene Bolles told me of his desire to sell his collection, which consisted chiefly of seventeenth-century furniture, and I promptly reported the opportunity to Mr. de Forest. To emphasize the importance of the collection to the Museum, I invited Mr. and Mrs. de Forest and R. T. H. Halsey to go with me as my guests to Boston, where we

would see what Boston and its vicinity had to show of American arts and crafts. We went, and had dinner at the Copley-Plaza Hotel, to which I had invited Hollis French, Joseph Chandler, Sumner Appleton, prominent collectors of American things, to meet my friends. The next day we motored to Salem, and then to Danvers, Topsfield, and Beverley; we devoted our attention to seventeenth-century buildings and other things, saw the Essex Institute, the Rebecca Nurse house, the Parson Capen house, and lunched with Charles Tyler and had a real fish chowder, which these New Yorkers had never eaten before. Back in Boston I showed them Christ Church, the Paul Revere house, and the old State House. Then we came home, I think with my purpose already accomplished, namely, to emphasize the importance of showing the history of American objects in an American museum. The Bolles collection was forthwith purchased for the Museum by a gift of Mrs. Russell Sage, and it became the nucleus which in time developed into the American Wing.⁹

In 1918, the Museum acquired Palmer's collection of eighteenth-century furniture as well. With these two major purchases, the Metropolitan owned an exceptionally fine collection of about 500 pieces of American furniture.

The question of housing this collection was answered when Mr. and Mrs. de Forest announced they would fund the building of an American wing. In his address at the opening of the Wing, de Forest explained why the American objects needed their own space.

Our attempt to exhibit this collection in our large Museum galleries [at the Hudson-Fulton Celebration] made it perfectly clear that in such environment our American art lost its distinctive charm of simplicity and that it could be adequately shown only in the modest rooms for which it was made. Since then we have consistently planned to

obtain a number of original American rooms in which we could show it in historical sequence, and to frame them in a small annex located in a prospective court.¹⁰

Halsey, as Chairman of the Committee on American Decorative Arts, carried out the duties of Curator, but as an unpaid volunteer, never officially held this title. However, in contemporary correspondence he is referred to as "performing the function of curator."¹¹ With the help of Durr Freedly, Acting Curator of Decorative Arts, and Charles O. Cornelius, Assistant and later Associate Curator, Halsey located and secured architectural interiors, purchased decorative arts, and carried out the planning and installation of the American Wing. According to a letter from Robert de Forest, Halsey was also responsible for hiring Grosvenor Atterbury as architect of the Wing.¹²

Henry Watson Kent served as a member of the Committee on American Decorative Arts and participated in decisions concerning the installations. Kent had visited European museums in 1893 and according to his autobiography, returned with notebooks filled with "sketches and notes, laying my emphasis on the methods of exhibition and on all the details connected with the display and presentation of the collections." He used these notebooks to help him draw the first sketch plans for the American Wing.¹³

In an article entitled "The American Wing in its Relation to the History of Museum Development," Kent discussed the influence of museums in Germany, Scandinavia, and especially Switzerland on the

Wing installations. Kent wrote that the new displays and period rooms in these museums were inspired by "the desire to encourage the industrial development of the crafts along national lines."¹⁴ He announced that the installations of the American Wing would follow the example set by the Swiss National Museum at Zurich, whose rooms were begun in 1893 and finished in 1898. He felt that the Swiss Museum had found the most intelligent, humane, and effective way to display the arts and crafts of an earlier age. Describing these principles of exhibition Kent wrote:

This system expressed itself in two ways: by the exhibition in sequence of rooms, taken from historic houses architecturally expressive of given periods, and arranged to the least detail with the objects belonging in them - furniture, ceramics, metalwork, etc.; and by the bringing together in galleries introductory to these rooms, and harmonious architecturally with them, of the bulk of the museum material of the periods, for instance, the objects of Renaissance art in the room or rooms devoted to it, of Gothic art in a series of galleries, and so on.¹⁵

The Metropolitan followed the Swiss prototype almost to the letter. The 1924 American Wing was a chronological series of rooms divided into three periods. On each floor the period rooms surrounded a large gallery space where objects were arranged "to show their relationship in styles and decoration."¹⁶ On the third floor were the earliest rooms - from the seventeenth century through the first quarter of the eighteenth. The second-floor rooms exhibited "the Early

Republic," while the first floor included rooms dating from "the Early Republic" to 1825, the cut-off date for the period installations.

The third floor was a model of the precedent set by the museums in Zurich and Munich. The exhibition gallery contained furnishings from the "first period" in a modern installation which was a direct copy of the interior of Old Ship Meeting House in Hingham, Massachusetts. This provided a sympathetic setting for the objects, and the catalogue carefully noted that it was a reproduction. Surrounding this exhibition gallery were rooms taken from homes in Connecticut, New Hampshire, Rhode Island, and Long Island. (The two rooms from Massachusetts were reproductions, and were described as such. This was later remedied with the installation of authentic Massachusetts interiors.) The architect of the Wing, Grosvenor Atterbury, largely succeeded in his effort "to do nothing original himself, but frame in a whole lot of rooms with all their old corners and all their irregularities."¹⁷

While both Kent and de Forest were deeply involved with the actual installation, Kent selecting the prototypes for the rooms and de Forest providing the funds, it is Halsey who by locating the rooms, selecting the objects, and writing the catalogue, deserves the most credit for the establishment of the American Wing.

Halsey was assisted in the writing of the Handbook of the American Wing, the catalogue of the collection, and The Homes of Our Ancestors, a book that interpreted early American furnishings through

the period rooms of the Wing. The Handbook of the American Wing was co-authored by Charles O. Cornelius, assistant curator of decorative arts and The Homes of Our Ancestors by Elizabeth Tower, Halsey's assistant and future wife. Halsey was generous in giving credit to his associates, but there is no doubt that Halsey's was the dominant voice in the two publications.

Although interpretation of the rooms was often romantic, the Handbook of the American Wing attests to the advanced level of scholarship that went into the creation of the rooms. The Handbook was both text and guidebook - each floor description was preceded by a lengthy discussion tracing the development of the decorative arts in that period. Halsey made extensive use of inventories, wills, newspaper advertisements, travelers' accounts, and design books to help explain the selection of furnishings in the rooms.

He sought to furnish the rooms appropriately to the time period, location, and economic condition of the man who had originally occupied the house. For example, Connecticut furniture and paintings were placed in the room from Newington. Describing a room taken from Portsmouth, Rhode Island, a merchant's summer home, the Handbook explained,

In furnishing this room we rely upon our knowledge that the owner was a rich merchant of Newport whose country house this was, and whose town house was one of the finest in the city. Here would, no doubt, have been found many fine pieces of furniture of a

slightly earlier period than the room, which might not have found a place in the city home where the latest fashion ruled.¹⁸

Halsey avoided the common collector's flaw of dating objects too early, for he noted

the unevenness of growth in provincial communities makes a definite assigning of dates to general periods well nigh impossible...For this reason it is more satisfactory to base any grouping or arrangement upon the homogeneity in form and decoration, and to assume as dates for the beginning and end of each particular style of expression the approximate time in which it was most general.¹⁹

However advanced in the recognition of such issues as the influence of English rural architecture on American building and the hazards of attribution merely on the basis of where furniture was found,²⁰ Halsey shared some of his contemporary scholars' limitations and excesses in attribution. In articles such as "William Savery, the Colonial Cabinet-maker and his Furniture," Halsey helped foster the myth that all high style furniture made in Philadelphia was a product of this craftsman.²¹ His participation and promotion of the 1922 Duncan Phyfe furniture exhibition contributed to the assignation of all New York Federal furniture to Phyfe's shop.

Although they contained some errors, Halsey's publications were outstanding pioneer works. He seemed to follow the precedent of painstaking documentation set by Irving Lyon, author of the 1891 Colonial Furniture of New England, in using primary sources and

carefully noting period terminology. In the Handbook, a reference to a "highboy" was footnoted, "The term highboy is of modern usage. The piece was originally called a high chest."²²

The leading role that Halsey played in the installation of the American Wing was recognized by everyone at the Metropolitan. In the preface to the second edition of the Handbook Edward Robinson, then Museum Director, acknowledged that:

the work of arranging the collections in their present galleries has been done by members of the Department of Decorative Arts, under the inspiring direction, with tireless energy, of the Chairman of the Committee on American Decorative Art R. T. H. Halsey.²³

As Robert de Forest noted at the opening addresses of the American Wing: "Except for Mr. Halsey you might have had an American Wing, but you never would have had this American Wing."²⁴ In his appreciation of Halsey published in the seventh edition of the Handbook William Ivins wrote: "Other men naturally played their parts in the task of the American Wing...but when all is said, it was Mr. Halsey who was the dominating personality and the man who in fact did most of the work."²⁵

NOTES TO CHAPTER II

¹Henry Watson Kent, What I am Pleased to Call My Education (New York: The Grolier Club, 1949), p. 162.

²Ibid., pp. 83-84.

³Ibid.

⁴Ibid., p. 1.

⁵Marshall B. Davidson, "Those American Things," Metropolitan Museum Journal 3 (1972), p. 222.

⁶Ibid., p. 228.

⁷Charles Montgomery, Kevin Stayton, David Curry, "Major Events in American Decorative Arts Since 1875" (unpublished manuscript produced for the Yale University Art Gallery, Mabel Brady Garvan Collection, 1976), unpagued.

⁸"Address by the President, Robert W. de Forest in the Chair," Addresses at the Opening of the American Wing (New York: The Metropolitan Museum of Art, 1925), p. 4. See also R. T. H. Halsey, "Early American Rooms in the Museum," Metropolitan Museum of Art Bulletin 17 (November 1922, Part II), p. 6.

⁹Kent, Education, pp. 160-161.

¹⁰"Address by Robert W. de Forest," Addresses at the Opening of the American Wing, p. 5.

¹¹Extract from the minutes of the meeting of the Executive Committee held December 15, 1924, MMAA. Extracts from the minutes of the Executive Committee's February 15, 1932, meeting demonstrate that Halsey was still "acting as Curator of the American Wing."

¹²Letter from Robert de Forest to R. T. H. Halsey, May 8, 1929, MMAA.

¹³Kent, Education, pp. 90, 163.

¹⁴Kent, "The American Wing in its Relation to the History of Museum Development," Metropolitan Museum of Art Bulletin 17 (November 1922, Part II), p. 14.

¹⁵Ibid.

¹⁶Ibid., p. 15.

¹⁷Chairman's remarks, Addresses at the Opening of the American Wing, p. 16.

¹⁸R. T. H. Halsey and Charles O. Cornelius, A Handbook of the American Wing: Opening Exhibition, second edition (New York: The Metropolitan Museum of Art, 1925), p. 92.

¹⁹Ibid., p. XVIII.

²⁰Halsey Papers, DMMC, "The American Wing - its character and its purpose" (shelf 75 x 80.4), p. 8 and "Eighteenth-Century Annapolis" (shelf 75 x 80.7), p. 33.

²¹R. T. H. Halsey, "William Savery, the Colonial Cabinet-maker and his Furniture," Metropolitan Museum of Art Bulletin 13 (December 1918), pp. 254-266.

²²Halsey and Cornelius, Handbook, second edition, p. 15.

²³Ibid., p. VII.

²⁴Addresses at the Opening of the American Wing, p. 8.

²⁵R. T. H. Halsey and Charles O. Cornelius (revised by Joseph Downs), A Handbook of the American Wing, seventh edition (New York: The Metropolitan Museum of Art, 1942), pp. XIV-XV.

CHAPTER III

In order to understand the furnishing of the American Wing, it is not only necessary to investigate Halsey's attitude toward the installation but the social climate which helped shape it as well. Halsey grew up in the last quarter of the nineteenth century when, against a background of anti-immigration and anti-mechanistic sentiment, the arts world was developing interest in the Colonial Revival, and Arts and Crafts movements. The rooms of the American Wing must be seen in the context of these historical events, for the way they were installed was determined by Halsey's perception of the world.

The American Wing can be seen as a hymn to individual achievement and a rejection of the values of the machine age. During the years before the opening of the Wing, as William Leuchtenburg points out in The Perils of Prosperity,

machine power replaced human labor at a startling rate... Lewis Mumford warned that the assembly line was destroying the sense of pride and sense of self of the craftsman. In fear and dislike of a machine age, many intellectuals turned toward more primitive societies...¹

Halsey shared these fears of the loss of individuality in a mechanistic society. He had witnessed the growing specialization of occupations which weakened the worker's control of his product from

inception to production, the replacement of human labor with machines, and the absorption of small, individually-owned companies by large corporations.

In The Response to Industrialism, Samuel Hays observes that industrialism produced the attitude that "impersonal forces...seemed to place one at the mercy of influences far beyond one's control."² Halsey looked at the Colonial period as a time when Americans had greater command of their environment; products of the Colonial craftsman became symbolic of control over "impersonal forces." Describing two pieces of silver, he asserted that "they eloquently testify to a personal relationship, simplicity of thought and certainty of the future, alas! too lacking in these days of materialism."³

Halsey was delighted to spend a few years in Annapolis, as the heinous effects of industrialism were not felt there. In a speech to a New England group about Annapolis he proudly stated that "Annapolis was aptly characterized by that great English statesman, the late Lord Balfour, on his visit here in 1922, as the one unspoiled Georgian town of the world. We haven't a steam railroad, tug boat or manufactory in our city of twelve thousand people."⁴

It is, therefore, not surprising that the cut-off date for the period installations in the American Wing was 1825. Since growing industrialism was seen as destroying the age of craftsmanship, objects made after this date were not considered worthy of collection. This reasoning depended on three erroneous perceptions - that the definition

of Colonial included the period of the Early Republic,⁵ that the Colonial craftsman produced an object in its entirety, and that hand-craftsmanship ended with Victoria's ascension. Halsey's determination to believe this suggests that he had other motivations for setting the cut-off date.

Kenneth Ames has noted that the elite in the 1920s did not recognize Victorian artifacts because changes in this period threatened their world.⁶ One could deny the recent past by not recognizing or saving objects which represented it. Similarly, by preserving objects produced in a period when the elite group flourished one could elevate their significance, and thus the status of the group.

The primary concern of the Arts and Crafts movement was the loss of artistic production resulting from the advent of machine technology and assembly lines. Leaders such as William Morris and John Ruskin sought to restore aesthetic standards and pride in hand-craftsmanship by a return to the construction principles of the pre-industrial world. Progressive European museums were sympathetic to these goals and, as earlier suggested, wanted the crafts displayed in their exhibitions to serve as models for contemporary design. This sentiment was echoed in a clause of the Metropolitan Museum charter which stated as one of its functions "the application of arts to manufactures and practical life."⁷

In 1907 Kent was made Supervisor of Museum Instruction, which put him in charge of all educational programs. In his memoirs, he described the Museum as an educational institution, stating,

We showed,...that a museum need not be just a peep show for the curious or a place for students of the history of art to do their studying in, but might be a really practical place for the artists and designers of the future to see what others of their various arts and crafts have done and to learn how to make these same things fit into our modern life and needs. This, of course, was what the writers of the Charter intended should be done. This is exactly what Ruskin and William Morris in England wanted, what in the Machine Age people were puzzled about, and what it seemed to some of us a museum of art should teach its public.⁸

Kent also described William Morris as "My long-time beau ideal."⁹

Halsey participated in Museum activities designed to promote public and commercial involvement in American decorative arts. As part of the 1909 Hudson-Fulton celebration, Halsey delivered a lecture on early American silver. A letter to Kent from the Gorham Silver Company indicated that many silver manufactories were interested in Halsey's presentation: "A number of our of town manufacturers of silver goods have intimated their willingness to have their designers and employees made a special trip to New York to hear this lecture."¹⁰

Halsey's actions indicate that he saw the "application of arts to manufactures and practical life" in terms of advocating the reproduction of objects made or used in Colonial America. In 1931 he wrote to Kent:

I have suggested to the Williamsburg people that in the new store there which will contain reproductions of much of the fine old furniture being installed, that they consider the reproduction of a number of my old prints in order that those anxious to furnish an eighteenth century atmosphere at very moderate prices might have the use of reproductions of the old engravings.¹¹

In the same year Halsey helped the Shenago Pottery of Newcastle, Pennsylvania

in improving the quality of the blue plates they are making for the various small institutions throughout the country... I made the suggestion to them...that they make a set of plates which would tell the history of the great events in our Naval history. These were to be sold among those interested in the United States Navy.¹²

He arranged to borrow relevant prints from Francis P. Garvan and to have them photographed by the Metropolitan. He argued with Kent about the price of photographing the prints, insisting that the Museum should charge him a special low rate for reproducing the plates "if we are sincere, as I believe we are, in our attempt to help American manufacturers."¹³ It is not known if Halsey received payment as a consultant from the Shenago Pottery.

Halsey seemed more concerned with the recreation of what was used in colonial times than the duplication of the methods of eighteenth-century craftsmen. Instead of acting as an inspiration for contemporary design, the response to the American Wing resulted in efforts to reproduce the environment of colonial leaders. The Daughters of the American Revolution Magazine suggested that

patriotic Americans who treasure the memory of our forefathers can do no better than to reproduce in their homes the furniture and decoration which have been so well preserved and arranged by the builders of the American Wing.¹⁴

It is not merely an accident of history that the American Wing opened during the same year an act restricting immigration was passed, for the creation of the Wing was in part a reflection of the same attitudes which led to the 1924 passage of the National Origins Act. This bill established a total annual immigration quota and stipulated that national quotas be calculated on the basis of the proportion of descendants of each nationality resident in the country in 1920.¹⁵

Although American nativism had existed as an ideology before the last quarter of the nineteenth century, the elite did not actively participate in movements associated with it until the number of immigrants of non-Anglo origins swelled to unprecedented proportions. The new arrivals came mostly from Central and Southern European countries, bringing languages and cultures alien to predominantly English and Northern European Americans. In the first fifteen years of this century an average of 1,000,000 immigrants entered the United States each year.

Many native Americans felt threatened by this enormous influx of foreigners. They felt that the immigrants endangered the security of their jobs, the cleanliness of their cities, and most of all, their sense of identity. They perceived the immigrant as coming to America

with no knowledge of its democratic institutions or worse, with Communist or anarchist sympathies. The elite felt threatened by a loss of fixed social distinctions, displaced by the growing power of ethnic groups such as the Irish and frightened that the hordes of foreigners would destroy the American way of life. Thomas Bailey Aldrich expressed these fears when he wrote in 1892:

Wide open and unguarded stand our gates,
And through them presses a wild motley throng -
Men from the Volga and the Tartar steppes,
Featureless figures from the Hoang-Ho,
Malayan, Scythian, Teuton, Kelt, and Slav,
Flying the Old World's poverty and scorn;
These bringing with them unknown gods and rites,
Those, tiger passions, here to stretch their claws.
In street and alley what strange tongues are these,
Accents of menace alien to our air,
Voices that once the Tower of Babel knew!¹⁶

Losing faith in America's ability to assimilate new groups, Boston Brahmins like Henry Cabot Lodge led the movement for immigration restriction whose rationale became racial in tone, based on the superiority of the Anglo-Saxon and Teutonic races. Around the turn of the century terms like "master race," "superior physical stock," and the definition of anarchy as "a blood disease" became common among patrician nativists.¹⁷ Lodge, who believed that non-English or Nordic groups were constitutionally incapable of assimilation, became the champion of immigration restriction in Congress.

In Strangers in the Land: Patterns of American Nativism, John Hingham discusses the attitudes of upper-class men with nativist sympathies like R. T. H. Halsey, who "rejoiced in their colonial

ancestry, who looked to England for standards of deportment and taste, who held the great academic posts or belonged to the best clubs or adorned the higher Protestant clergy." These men "worshipped tradition in a deeply conservative spirit, and in the tumult of the nineties, it seemed to them that everything fixed and sacred was threatened with dissolution."¹⁸

In 1918 Halsey wrote a long letter to de Forest outlining his plans for the American Wing. Of the use of prints in the rooms he wrote: "Such prints which would be particularly appropriate are a few of the early views and plans of this City and Boston. In addition to the general effect which they would give, they would have intense interest to all Americans as well as to many of our people of foreign ancestry who are attempting to become good Americans."¹⁹

Assimilation by education was part of the Americanization movement that originated in the 1890s. The movement consisted of two groups attempting to achieve social unity in different ways. The first worked through settlement organizations. People like Jane Addams at Hull House emphasized what immigrants could contribute to their new country rather than stressing the necessity for immigrants to submerge their own identities in the dominant native-born culture. The second group was motivated more by nationalistic anxieties. The Daughters of the American Revolution and the Society of Colonial Dames were its leaders, devising programs of patriotic education designed to indoctrinate the foreigner with loyalty to America.

Throughout their Americanizing efforts the patriotic societies preached a loyalty that consisted essentially of willing submissiveness. Above all, in the words of the D. A. R., they 'taught obedience to law, which is the groundwork of true citizenship.' The main object of such self-constituted champions of America was to combat the danger of immigrant radicalism or discontent, their chief motive, fear.²⁰

At the end of World War I Americanization blossomed into a great popular crusade. The aftermath of the War reinforced the conviction that evil came from alien groups and ideas. Americans felt betrayed by the ideals with which they had entered the fighting. Instead of a battle for freedom in the "War to end all Wars," they saw only the senseless carnage that had demonstrated the folly of meddling in European affairs. The refusal to join the League of Nations was the counterpart to growing American hostility to aliens and resistance to any further immigration.

A passage from Halsey's address at the opening of the Wing, repeated in his introduction to Homes of Our Ancestors, illustrates his sympathies with the Americanization movement.

Traditions are one of the integral assets of a country. Much of the America of today has lost sight of its traditions. Their stage settings have largely passed away along with the actors. Many of our people are not cognizant of our traditions and the principles for which our fathers struggled and died. The tremendous changes in the character of our nation and the influx of foreign ideas utterly at variance with those held by the men who gave us the Republic threaten, and unless checked may shake, the foundations of our Republic.

A journey through this new American Wing can not fail to revive those memories and bring with it a spirit of thankfulness that our great city at last has a setting for the traditions so dear to us and invaluable in the Americanization of many of our people to whom much of our history has been hidden in a fog of unenlightenment.²¹

Halsey's tone changed significantly from the 1918 letter to the 1924 speech. The attitude that began as a well-meaning desire to help the immigrants understand their new country became laced with fear that if these aliens did not conform to the values of Anglo-Saxon America, the country would be irrevocably lost.

Halsey's deepening concern about the immigrants during the post-World War I period was shared by many of his countrymen and helped create an atmosphere that tolerated the terrible excesses growing out of this fear. During the Red Scare of 1919-20, hundreds of innocent foreign-born Americans were deported for suspicion of Communist sympathies. Attorney-General A. Mitchell Palmer ordered the invasion of private homes, union headquarters, and meeting halls. Any involvement with unions or leftist groups was considered sufficient grounds for investigation and possibly arrest. The Red Scare only lasted about a year, but it left a bitter legacy of suspicion of aliens, organized labor, and political reformers.²²

The Ku Klux Klan, a racist, anti-foreign, and anti-Semitic organization, experienced a stunning revival in the early 20s. In 1920 it had fewer than 5,000 members; at its height in 1924, it may have enrolled as many as 5,000,000. Devoted to the interests of native-born,

white Protestant Americans, the Klan grasped power through intimidation and violence. Although drawing most of its support from rural, less-educated, and poorer communities, the Klan's influence was felt throughout the country. When the Democratic party convention of 1924 met in New York City, the delegates were so closely divided on the issue that a resolution to eliminate mention of the Klan by name in the platform was passed by only one vote.²³

In Ancestors and Immigrants Barbara Solomon points out that as upper-class citizens lost the balance of power in a divided society, English antecedents became the measure of all good things. The elite turned from "the contemporary ruptures in the status quo to the past triumphs of the Anglo-Saxons in America."²⁴

The elevation of Anglo-Saxon culture incorporated both ancestor worship and fear of immigration. Upper-class leaders of the anti-immigration movement like Henry Cabot Lodge were also the primary exponents of rapprochement with England.

Intense Anglophilia pervades Halsey's writing. In innumerable speeches such as "The American Wing - Its Character and Purpose," Halsey emphasized America's cultural debt to England. "Naturally, the English was the predominant note, as our Colonies were English, and Anglo-Saxon pride was prevalent long after we had fought two wars with England. Was it not Nathaniel Hawthorne, that great word painter of New England life and customs, who entitled his book describing his sojourn in England 'Our Old Home'?"²⁵

Halsey became noted for his efforts to demonstrate that most Englishmen actually supported the American Revolution. In 1940, the New Haven Register reviewed the Franklin show Halsey had mounted for Yale, noting:

Mr. Halsey is a recognized authority on Benjamin Franklin and his times and has made a special study of that phase of the American Revolution which is emphasized on this occasion; that is, the great unpopularity in England of the British government's American policy.²⁶

In order to prove English support of the American Revolution, Halsey made a study of English cartoons and caricatures of the American Revolution. In the many lectures he delivered on this subject, Halsey argued that the ready availability of the prints in London shops and the success of pro-American prints demonstrated English sympathy for the American cause. Except at the end of the war, when many Englishmen were upset about French participation and England's impending defeat, the great majority of the cartoons Halsey examined indicated that the English people were against their government's American policy.²⁷

Halsey wrote many essays about Josiah Wedgwood's support of the Revolutionary cause.²⁸ As both his sympathies and products suited Halsey's taste, Halsey became an avid collector of Wedgwood ceramic portraits of heroes such as Franklin and Washington.

Anglophilia was another justification for the inclusion of prints in the American Wing. In the 1918 letter to de Forest, Halsey wrote:

The mezzotints of our Colonial Governors, and many of the British Statesmen have superb decorative qualities; and if properly explained in catalogues, lectures, etc., could not fail to have influence in dispelling that unfortunate tendency of mind which we all grew up with, i.e.; an antagonism to all things English. This unfortunate mental state has been brought about largely by the erroneous writings of American historians, who failed to discern that the American Revolution was the nature of a Civil War, and that our freedom could not have been secured unless we had the backing of the better portion of the English people.²⁹

By redefining the Revolutionary War as a civil war, Halsey was saying that the Americans were really English after all, and support of the Revolution by the English citizenry was further proof of the essential unity between the two countries. Halsey's love for England continued throughout his lifetime. His daughter Carol recalls that before the United States entered World War II Halsey was very upset that the country was not doing more to help England.

The ideas embodied in the Arts and Crafts, Colonial Revival, immigration restriction, and Anglophilia movements were important factors in the creation of the American Wing. Objects made by individual craftsmen were glorified and endowed with moral qualities. A generation overwhelmed by technology found solace in the values assigned to the handmade object. The "honesty" of colonial craftsmanship legitimized its inclusion in the Museum even to those who had little belief in its aesthetics.

The furnishings of the period rooms were not only perceived as embodying the virtues of individual achievement but as symbols of a noble colonial past. These silent objects were transformed into eloquent assertions of American ideals which would remind citizens of the integrity, honesty, and courage of their forefathers, and encourage them to emulate these qualities. Immigrants to America would be given ancestors to adopt, thus speeding the assimilation of what was perceived as a menacing group.

NOTES TO CHAPTER III

¹William E. Leuchtenburg, The Perils of Prosperity 1914-32 (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1958), pp. 179, 152.

²Samuel Hays, The Response to Industrialism 1885-1914 (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1957), p. 2.

³R. T. H. Halsey, American Silver (Boston: Museum of Fine Arts, 1906), pp. 9-10.

⁴Halsey Papers, DMMC, shelf 75 x 80.6, p. 1.

⁵For the purposes of consistency, I have followed Halsey and his contemporaries' definition of "Colonial" throughout this paper.

⁶Kenneth Ames, class notes for seminar on Victorian furniture, Winterthur Museum, September 1978.

⁷Kent, Education, p. 153.

⁸Ibid., pp. 158-159.

⁹Ibid., p. 154.

¹⁰Letter from Joseph D. Little, The Gorham Company Silversmiths and Goldsmiths to Henry W. Kent, October 12, 1909, MMAA.

¹¹Letter from R. T. H. Halsey to Henry W. Kent, June 1, 1931, MMAA.

¹²Letter from R. T. H. Halsey to Henry W. Kent, July 31, 1931, MMAA.

¹³Ibid.

¹⁴Davidson, p. 232.

¹⁵Leuchtenburg, p. 208.

¹⁶Thomas Bailey Aldrich, as quoted in Barbara Miller Solomon, Ancestors and Immigrants: A Changing New England Tradition (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1956), p. 82.

¹⁷John Higham, Strangers in the Land: Patterns of American Nativism 1860-1925 (New Jersey: Rutgers University Press, 1955), p. 138.

¹⁸Ibid., p. 139.

¹⁹Letter from R. T. H. Halsey to Robert de Forest, January 21, 1918, MMAA.

²⁰Higham, pp. 236-237.

²¹"Address by R. T. H. Halsey," Addresses at the Opening of the American Wing, pp. 9-10.

²²Leuchtenburg, pp. 78, 81.

²³Ibid., pp. 208-213, 133.

²⁴Solomon, pp. 60, 75.

²⁵Halsey Papers, DMMC, shelf 75 x 80.4, p. 1; shelf 75 x 80.13, p. 3; shelf 75 x 80.13, p. 1.

²⁶New Haven Register, November 10, 1940, MMAA.

²⁷Halsey Papers, DMMC, 75 x 80.11, .12. R. T. H. Halsey, Impolitical Prints (New York: New York Public Library, 1939), introduction essay to exhibition.

²⁸Halsey Papers, DMMC, 75 x 80.30.

²⁹Letter from R. T. H. Halsey to Robert de Forest, January 21, 1918, MMAA.

CHAPTER IV

In "Search for Identity," an article published in the Journal of Social History in 1970, Jack Greene makes an argument about eighteenth-century patterns of behavior that can be applied to Halsey's generation. Greene presents two models to which colonials looked for normative values. One is the idealization of English society and culture, a result of three developments during the late seventeenth and early eighteenth centuries. "The first of these developments was the emergence of recognizable and reasonably permanent colonial elites." The second was deepening economic ties between the Colonies and England. "Still a third development which helped to intensify the mimetic impulses among the colonists was the cultural degeneration that seemed to occur among the second and third generations."¹ The Colonial elitist fear of the barbarizing effects of the wilderness and Indians is analogous to the fear within the same class of industrialization and aliens during the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. Both upper-class groups turned to England for reinforcement of their threatened identities.

Greene's other model is the "idealized conception of the character and achievements of the several colonial societies during their early years of settlement... As the clergy continued to dilate

upon the theme of New England's decline, the great 'Leaders of the First Generation' assumed heroic, almost saintly proportions."² Just as the early eighteenth-century clergy condemned contemporary behavior and idealized that of the Colonies' founders, so men like Halsey decried twentieth-century life and looked to the "Fathers of Our Country" for inspiration.

Idealization of the past as a reaction to fears of foreign contamination, industrialization, and irrevocable change in American life was symptomatic of a movement Leuchtenburg called "political fundamentalism" and defined as

an attempt to deny real divisions in American society by imposing a patriotic cult and coercing a sense of oneness. Admiration for the Constitution became a tribal rite; in the 1920's, Americans, as one English writer noted, were "a people who, of all the world, craved most for new things, yet were all but Chinese in their worship of their Constitution and their ancestors who devised it. Constitution-worship was a kind of magical nativism, a form of activity in which, as the anthropologist Ralph Linton writes, 'the society's members feel that by behaving as the ancestors did they will, in some usually undefined way, help to recreate the total situation in which the ancestors lived.'³

Simulating the ancestral environment was still another way of reestablishing ties to the past. Halsey built his Long Island estate in the Colonial style and installed reproduction woodwork inside in the belief that living among American antiques in a Colonial Revival house would enable him to approximate the life-style of his forefathers.

In a lecture delivered to a women's Republican club in the 1920s, Halsey revealed the connection between collecting American furniture and using the past to assuage uneasiness about contemporary America.

[It] is our pride in ancestry that adds to the appeal which American furniture makes to some of us...first because it was made by some of our forefathers by whose united efforts this republic was made possible, and second, because it represents the home furnishings of our people in the days when our country was struggling to get on its feet, of those who protected this country from enemies within just as you women in this last campaign did such convincing work to preserve us from the dominating influence of foreign ideas.⁴

As Halsey himself put it, objects made in the Colonial period were cherished because of "the halo of association with manifold phases of the life of our fathers."⁵ The makers of these objects were praised not only for their products untainted by industrial processes, but also for their participation in the founding of the United States. Halsey repeatedly describes their accomplishments in lectures.

Our early craftsmen were a splendid lot of men, some of them filled important civic positions. Others fought in the frequent wars with France for possession of the New World. Others were active in the American Revolution and the events which preceded it. Can any foreign pieces of silver have greater human interest to an American than that possessed by a piece hammered out by that picturesque American rider, Paul Revere?⁶

This elevation of the craftsman was characteristic of collectors in the 1920s. In the catalogue for the 1929 Girl Scouts Loan Exhibition, Louis Guerineau Myers established the lineage of the American craftsman by asserting "...it is an unquestionable fact that our silversmiths and pewterers whose names and pedigrees are well established were...almost without exception descendants of earlier settlers."⁷ For a craftsman to assume heroic proportions, he was required to have been born an American, son of an American. How the authors would have dealt with Myer Myers, Johann Christoph Heyne, or John Will is interesting to contemplate.

Not only was the status of craftsmen elevated and attempts made to identify them more closely with the Founding Fathers, but their products were perceived as extensions of American values. As Halsey observed in the 1906 silver catalogue, "The early American silver, as in the case of our early architecture and furniture, is thoroughly characteristic of the taste and life of the period in America. Simple in design and substantial in weight, it reflects the classic mental attitude of the people."⁸

Throughout his writing, Halsey praised the quality of simplicity in decorative arts and architecture. The American interpretation of the Adam style manifested in the Wing's Baltimore Room was superior to the "over elaboration of the old world." The chasteness of American teapots made them more desirable than their ornate British counterparts.⁹

However highly he touted this quality of simplicity, Halsey's taste always seemed to lean toward the most highly carved and decorated objects. In a lecture about the American Wing, Halsey explained how American Chippendale furniture was simpler in design than its English prototype. Yet he added:

This statement cannot be verified by an examination of our furniture on the second floor of the American Wing, however: as for this opening exhibition, and in order to show the excellence of the craftsmanship of our mid-eighteenth century cabinet-makers, we have borrowed freely pieces of ornamental workmanship, which are a revelation to almost all students of American furniture. Our more characteristic types are not yet on exhibition.¹⁰

Interestingly, Halsey chose admittedly atypical furniture for display.

In a speech on Chinese export porcelain Halsey discussed how the porcelains made for the American market were less elaborate than those made for Great Britain and the Continent, but only considered enamel decorated and special-order porcelains.¹¹ His own collection of silver showed no inclination towards simplicity in form.

The Girl Scouts Loan Exhibition catalogue exhibited the same conflict. Though it extolled the simplicity, directness, and character of American furniture, the objects termed "masterpieces" were those with the most complex ornamentation and design.¹²

Similarly, there is a paradox inherent in Halsey's insistence on the uniqueness of American design and his choice of furnishings for the American Wing which come closest to English prototypes. Halsey's

perception of the singularity of American design was based on several observations. In addition to the concept of American art's greater simplicity, he also discussed the contributions of German, French, and Dutch craftsmen to American individuality. Furthermore, he attempted to tie aesthetics closely to the American experience. Halsey reasoned that something in the American soil promoted invention and that "certain furniture forms which fitted closely the needs of the colonists became particularly popular and these, by reason of frequent reproduction, took on much of the expression of the maker." Finally, only American Federal-style furniture exhibited "the pride or love of country as we find in American pieces which bear representations of the American eagle."¹³

Ultimately, Halsey confessed the inferiority of American art: "Let me emphasize the fact that none of us enthusiasts claim that our Colonial Art was a great art. It cannot be compared with the masterpieces of the Old World." However, it "makes a human appeal such as is almost never made by the great masterpieces... Colonial art makes its real appeal to our people, first because it is good art, which has to do with home life, and second because it is concerned with the homes of men who made this republic possible."¹⁴ Therein lies the conflict, for the best art is not going to represent typical American home life. Just as Halsey extolled simplicity for the moral values it represented, but preferred elaborate objects as an expression of personal taste, so he chose the historical point of view in the period rooms for didactic

reasons while his sense of aesthetics dictated that the rooms only be furnished with the objects of the elite.

In the 1918 letter to de Forest, Halsey outlined his objectives for the Wing. He originally intended that American objects be viewed as art. Since the chief function of the Museum was to cultivate a love of the beautiful, "We should endeavor to show in the rooms things which have class. The furnishings should be restrained and no semblance of crowding permitted... The exhibition of the quaint and curious should be left to our historical museums."¹⁵ Halsey's emphasis on the artistic aspects of the installations may be a function of legitimizing the inclusion of American decorative arts at the Metropolitan to the man who is paying for the Wing. By the time rooms were actually set up there was no differentiation between the rooms illustrating history and those which represented the best in art. In a radio address Halsey informed his listeners:

The Metropolitan Museum has just opened an entire building devoted to colonial art... Some of the rooms are fitted up in the style of those lived in by Captain John Underhill and Miles Standish. Others are actual rooms where some of the signers of the Declaration of Independence visited. There is a room where Washington danced with Franklin's daughter, and another where Lafayette was given two historic dinners.¹⁶

Though he asserted that the purpose of the Wing was to demonstrate the artistry of the Colonial period, historical associations were made before the first mention of craftsmanship. Describing the reproduction seventeenth-century rooms in the Handbook he attested that "almost all

of the political history and romance of seventeenth-century New England could be written against the background of such interiors as these."¹⁷

Halsey perceived the Founding Fathers as the personifications of American ideals. Champions of liberty, hard work, and integrity, they had tirelessly struggled to establish a new nation. In the interpretation of the American Wing, Halsey made every effort to establish a connection between Revolutionary War heroes and the architecture of the rooms. While George Washington was actually a visitor to the Assembly Room at Alexandria, Virginia's, City Tavern displayed in the Wing, Halsey had to strain in order to conjure up his presence in many of the other spaces. A room from Maryland, whose original occupants were unknown, was described as "fairly representative of the homes of the men who officered the famous Maryland Line, whose valor saved Washington's army from destruction at the battle of Long Island."¹⁸

Patriotic associations were emphasized in the Federal rooms as well. The first statement Halsey made about the room from Baltimore is that the Star Spangled Banner "was sung for the first time in a tavern near the original location of this room."¹⁹ The objects in the room as well as the architecture were first seen as backdrops to historical events before they were interpreted as artifacts. Describing the rooms from Haverhill, Massachusetts, Halsey wrote, "Their furnishings are of the order of those in many a New England seaport home of the Early Republic, when the New England shipwrights launched

by scores the splendid vessels which carried our flag into every port of the globe, and returned with cargoes which brought wealth to their owners and the attendant luxury of living to the community."²⁰

However committed to historical interpretation, Halsey was more devoted to aesthetics than was Henry Kent. Over the years the two men often argued about changes and additions in the American Wing. In 1933, when Halsey planned to replace the reproduction seventeenth-century rooms with outstanding examples from the eighteenth century, Kent wrote him a letter of protest. He pointed out that the function of the Wing in the public mind was "the illustration of social conditions as exhibited in house-furnishing from the 17th to the 19th century."²¹ If the seventeenth-century rooms were replaced, the Wing could not fulfil its function of interpreting American social history from the Colonies' inception. The fact that Halsey, while respecting Kent's opinion, maintained the correctness of removing the reproduction rooms indicates that his priorities were not as clear-cut as Kent's. Happily, the Museum was spared the dilemma when it acquired authentic seventeenth-century rooms from the Thomas Hart and Samuel Wentworth houses in lieu of the reproduction spaces.

Halsey served the muses of both history and art by interpreting the past through the life-style of the wealthy and powerful. Another way Halsey resolved the conflict of history versus art was in his insistence that the Founding Fathers were avid supporters of the arts. He wrote a speech about Washington's interest in the humanities as

exemplified in the President's print collection.²² Halsey introduced the catalogue to the Metropolitan Museum of Art's 1936 exhibition Benjamin Franklin and His Circle with an essay entitled "Benjamin Franklin: His Interest in the Arts." The Founding Fathers, like most educated eighteenth-century gentlemen, were sensitive to the arts. However, possession of engravings did not make George Washington a devotee of the arts, and Franklin was far more interested in the technical aspects of the engraving process. From the quotes that Halsey used in his text, Franklin does not seem to demonstrate more than an ordinary interest in acquiring attractive furnishings for his home. Halsey exaggerated both Washington and Franklin's commitment to the arts in order to unite his own interests.

In Halsey's writing, there is an ambivalent attitude towards the value of American objects. On the one hand, he insists that American furnishings belong in an art museum. On the other, he seldom mentions their aesthetic qualities. If the historical significance of the objects is what is most precious, they why include only high-style objects in the room? And if their beauty is of primary concern, then why insist that the displays are historically accurate? This tension was not perceived in the twenties. No discrepancy was seen between viewing the rooms as historically valid and having them furnished only with high-style objects.

NOTES TO CHAPTER IV

¹Jack P. Greene, "Search for Identity: An Interpretation of the Meaning of Selected Patterns of Social Response in Eighteenth-Century America," Journal of Social History 3, no. 3 (Spring 1970), pp. 205-207.

²*Ibid.*, pp. 191-192.

³Leuchtenburg, p. 205.

⁴Halsey Papers, DMMC, shelf 75 x 80.1, pp. 4-5.

⁵Halsey, American Silver, p. 9.

⁶Halsey Papers, DMMC, shelf 75 x 80.2, p. 2.

⁷Loan Exhibition of Eighteenth and Early Nineteenth Century Furniture and Glass. Catalogue of an exhibition, September 25 to October 9, 1929 (New York: Girl Scouts, Inc., 1929), Louis Guerinneau Myers's introductory essay on Queen Anne and Chippendale furniture, unpag.

⁸Halsey, American Silver, p. 9.

⁹Halsey Papers, DMMC, shelf 75 x 80.4, pp. 15, 12.

¹⁰*Ibid.*, p. 9.

¹¹*Ibid.*, shelf 75 x 80.18.

¹²Loan Exhibition, Myers's introductory essay and catalogue entries on Hepplewhite and Sheraton furniture, unpag.

¹³Halsey Papers, DMMC, shelf 75 x 80.13, pp. 3, 4; Halsey and Cornelius, Handbook, second edition, p. 9; Halsey Papers, DMMC, shelf 75 x 80.4, p. 1.

¹⁴*Ibid.*, shelf 75 x 80.15, p. 5, or 75 x 80.2, p. 2.

¹⁵Letter from R. T. H. Halsey to Robert de Forest, January 21, 1918, MMAA.

- ¹⁶Halsey Papers, DMMC, shelf 75 x 80.13, p. 2.
- ¹⁷Halsey and Cornelius, Handbook, second edition, p. 74.
- ¹⁸Ibid., pp. 166-167.
- ¹⁹Ibid., p. 237.
- ²⁰Ibid., p. 246.
- ²¹Letter from Henry W. Kent to R. T. H. Halsey, November 17, 1933, MMAA.
- ²²Halsey Papers, DMMC, shelf 75 x 80.28.

CONCLUSION

The American Wing was immediately successful. As Halsey pointed out in 1925, "The proof of the appeal our colonial art has made is that in the past three months over 120,000 people have visited our little building."¹

The Wing established a precedent for the installation and interpretation of period rooms that influenced museums all over the country. The Boston Museum of Fine Arts, whose curators had initially scorned the Metropolitan's efforts, opened its own period rooms in 1928. Those at the Philadelphia Museum of Art were displayed the same year, followed by Brooklyn, Baltimore, and St. Louis.²

Contemporary reaction to the Wing in the press was overwhelmingly favorable and confirms the fact that the rooms were valued more for their historical associations than their aesthetics. Lewis Mumford viewed the installation as "superb" and declared: "It is not merely an exhibition of art; it is a pageant of American history."³ In Scribner's Magazine Royal Cortissoz described visiting the Wing in terms of "apprehend[ing] in singular vividness the spirit in which those men who made the Colonies and those who founded the Republic lived their lives at home..."⁴ Antiques, one of the few journals with

any reservations about the Wing, discussed its historical accuracy rather than its aesthetic content. The editors questioned whether the objects in the room constituted "a true ensemble" and objected to the

absence of such lesser household equipment as coverings on the floors, books on the tables, garments hung against the walls or cast across chairbacks, and those innumerable half useful, half decorative accumulations which constitute the spoor of family existence...⁵

The popularity of the Wing can be attributed to its fulfillment of the psychological needs of early twentieth-century Americans. As reminders of individual achievement in a more personal, homogeneous society, the period rooms appealed to Americans uneasy about the effects of industrialism and immigration. Despite the attention lavished on the documentation of the furnishings and architecture, the period rooms were primarily seen as symbols. Their presence was associated with cherished ideals which contributed to a national identity. The objects themselves - their construction, materials, and decoration - were not examined as primary resources; the objects were simply the material manifestation of the interpretation.

Through his lectures, books, articles, exhibitions, and especially through the American Wing, R. T. H. Halsey exerted a profound influence on Americans' perceptions of their past. He legitimized the collection and exhibition of American art. In so doing, he highlighted the conflicts and paradoxes inherent in the display of objects which function both as artistic and historical

statements that are still with us today. By viewing Halsey's American Wing in a historical perspective, we can better understand contemporary museum display, and enter exhibitions with more sensitivity to the presentation of objects and thus, our perception of them.

NOTES TO CONCLUSION

¹Halsey Papers, DMMC, shelf 75 x 80.15, p. 5.

²Dianne H. Pilgrim, "Inherited from the Past: The American Period Room," American Art Journal 10 (May 1978), p. 13.

³Lewis Mumford, "American Interiors," The New Republic, XLI, no. 525 (December 31, 1924), p. 139.

⁴Royal Cortissoz, "The American Wing of the Metropolitan Museum of Art," in Homes of Our Ancestors, reprinted from Scribner's Magazine, January 1925.

⁵The Editor's Attic, "The New Metropolitan Wing," Antiques, VII, no. 4 (April 1925), p. 182.

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