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Source: *Objects Specialty Group Postprints, Volume Seven, 2000*

Pages: 42-45

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A CONTEXT FOR THE MAKING, USING AND MAINTENANCE OF REPRODUCTIONS AT COLONIAL WILLIAMSBURG

Chris Swan

In today's age of social history interpretation in living history museums, the use of thematic story lines has steadily increased, while object-oriented interpretation in general is diminished. Conservators constantly struggle to maintain historic houses with period objects in the face of thousands of visitors and dramatic storytellers. Because of the fragile nature of materials, and this growing indifference to period objects themselves, the use of reproductions in historic areas is on the rise. We seem to be at a crossroads between solely using reproductions for interactive educational programming, and simply exhibiting period objects. Colonial Williamsburg is in a unique position not only to make period reproductions, but also to use, maintain, and interpret them (in some cases, alongside collections objects) as an integral part of the visitor's experience. Whether we view reproductions as essential to an educational mission and therefore valuable in themselves, or just theatrical props, they are a reality in some of our historic houses, and, as such, deserve our attention.

One of our challenges as conservators lies in our ability to augment the interpretation of our cultural materials by our investigations into historical and material circumstances. In this context, the role of the conservator applies to reproductions and historic collections in similar ways. A conservator provides a thorough understanding of period construction, materials, effects of aging and deterioration, and also safely carries out molding and casting when exact copies are required. Moreover, a conservator can investigate design and construction details, and offer a protocol for distinguishing new objects.

Reproductions in a living history museum can take various forms as illustrated by two objects representing the Capitol building at Colonial Williamsburg. The first is a commemorative tea towel featuring the woven image of the so-called *Bodleian Plate*, an eighteenth century engraving of the capitol, along with the royal governor's palace and several buildings of the College of William and Mary. The plate was found at the Bodleian Library at the University of Oxford during the early days of the restoration of Colonial Williamsburg. The second is the actual reconstructed Capitol building itself. The tea towel, offered for sale at the Craft House Store and by catalogue, and the 1950's capitol building both are reproductions in their own right, both project the educational mission of the museum, and both support the museum with the revenue from their sale or ticketed presentation. The tea towel falls into the commemorative object category, derived from a historic subject but manifested in a more familiar modern form. Its primary function is to support the general operations of the museum. The capitol building, as a reconstruction of the original capitol, is partly based on the image from the Bodleian Plate, and partly on archaeological findings and other historical research.

From the time Colonial Williamsburg opened its doors to the public in the 1930's, several things became immediately apparent. First, it was obvious that the general public wanted to take home

Swan

with them a small piece of the Colonial Revival they had experienced in the reconstructed historic village. Secondly, outside artisans started making reproductions of varying quality and fidelity to meet that demand. The Colonial Williamsburg Foundation determined to capitalize on this opportunity to educate the public and provide an outlet for such reproductions in a tightly controlled Restoration Reproductions Catalogue. Outside manufacturers copied collection objects for review by a Craft Advisory Committee made up of senior administrators, curators, historians, architects, and sales managers. Upon approval, the objects were branded with a registered CW trademark and sold in one of the geographically distributed Craft House Stores. Even the stores conformed to a Colonial Revival design standard by copying the home store in Williamsburg. This tradition continues today in the remaining Craft House Stores, all located in Williamsburg, and through catalogue sales. Only in more recent decades has the emphasis shifted away from the educational mandate and moved toward new marketing strategies, in order to increase revenue for the Foundation in general. This condition reflects a general trend toward specialization not unlike many contemporary corporate structures.

The educational objective is evident in many of the early vendors of Craft House merchandise. One of the earliest vendors was the Kittinger Furniture Company in Buffalo, New York. Life-sized sepia diazo (blueprint-type) prints from the 1940's, now in the CW Archives holdings, illustrate the precision and attention to detail characteristic of these early endeavors. The young furniture collection was selectively copied for sale, and further promoted by the marketing influence of popular demand.

Another example is found in the ceramics of Palin Thorley. The works of this Wedgwood-trained ceramist, now collected in his own right, illustrate the high degree of fidelity sought in copying cream ware in the 1940's and 1950's. Ironically, a former ceramics curator has noted that some of these pieces were conspicuously "better" than their original counterparts—a recurring theme among many different objects of the Colonial Revival period. In his effort to leave his mark, man often improves on the object of inspiration before him. This effect is not unlike individually restored art objects. Restored elements are essentially localized or myopic "reproductions," and are often over-embellished, over-colored, enlarged, or otherwise accentuated by an unconscious human impulse to achieve immortality. Conservators are aware of these phenomena in their daily encounters with restored objects.

Commercial merchandising has advanced in the recent past to include adaptations, loosely categorized as commemorative items. Current featured examples are the Comical Hotch Potch doll, otherwise known as the Alphabet Turned Posture Master and derived from an illustration, the miniature Johannes Spitler decoratively painted chest at one-quarter scale, and the very successful 'water-slide decal' mocha ware.

Endeavors to license and manufacture goods from the 1930's onward paralleled the development of the historic area craftspeople and historic or experimental archaeology as it came to be practiced at Colonial Williamsburg. Trade shops came into being following historical and

Swan

archaeological research. These shops included the blacksmith, gunsmith, silversmith and brass founder, cabinetmaker and others. This experimental archaeology dovetailed with a burgeoning desire for an artistic satisfaction akin to the arts and crafts revival at the turn of the twentieth century, and was further reinforced by the artistic revival of the 1970's. Although the emphasis of these trade shops is on preserving the period technology of manufacture, they nonetheless result in reproduction objects that may reflect the highest achievement of truly workmanlike goods.

Clearly these varying aspects of reproductions are central to the practice of interpreting a living history museum such as Colonial Williamsburg. Conservators, collaborating with curators, routinely play a vital role in interpreting objects whether in the actual making, patination, and maintenance of reproductions, molding and casting for licensed vendors, educating the public through museum exhibits or lectures on period technology, or in the conservation treatments of collection objects. In fact, the collection would seem to include the reproductions following a literal translation of the museum's stated mission, "That the Future May Learn from the Past." It has been argued that making and maintaining reproductions is itself a preservation activity by the fact that they allow the removal of period objects from vulnerable environments.

In the Department of Collections and Conservation, reproductions are routinely accessioned if they are deemed valuable, based on their initial cost, interpretive value, and on the copied objects' value in the collection. The making of furniture in particular ranges from hand-made objects using period or reproduction tools and techniques, to outside contracts for objects to fill gaps in historic house inventories, to objects manufactured by licensed companies for catalogue sales. Conservators are regularly charged to collaborate on the design, making, patination and subsequent maintenance of a variety of objects. Currently, the furniture laboratory is host to a full-time volunteer cabinetmaker.

Ultimately, treating reproductions—whether in the making and/or maintaining them—depends upon their use in fulfilling the mission of the museum. An ongoing goal is to strike a balance between the historic interpretation work incorporating reproductions, and the larger body of object-specific research and treatment of period artifacts. Ideally, reproductions, whether like the tea towel or the reconstructed Capitol, embody a dual purpose toward a common museum goal. Colonial Williamsburg strives to accurately portray eighteenth century life based on careful and thorough research, tells the stories of the American colonial heritage, and exhibits and publishes period collections for the instruction of the general public. In the historic village one can step up to a Newport chest of drawers in the Dewitt Wallace Museum, and then stroll through the historic area to see a chest of drawers being crafted in the Anthony Hay Cabinet Shop. Finally, one can stroll home in eighteenth century shoes from the Prentis Store for mere sum of one hundred and ninety-five dollars.

Swan

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