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THE Home

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The Primal Urge to Embellish

Collage by Joan Hall

By ADA LOUISE HUXTABLE

ONE of the most basic human instincts is the need to decorate. Nothing is exempt — the body, the objects one uses, from intimate to monumental, and all personal and ceremonial space. It is an instinct that responds to the eye, for pure pleasure; to the rules of society, for signals of fitness and status, and to some deep inner urge that has been variously described as the horror of a vacuum and the need to put one's imprint on at least one small segment of the world.

Embellishment is an irresistible and consuming impulse, going back to the beginnings of human history. More than just a way of changing or improving a surface or a setting, it is meant to bring about artful and magical transformations that evoke surprise, delight, even awe. All early ornament was tied to the supernatural and sublime. The decorative cycle parallels civilization; there is a line that goes right through ancient cave paintings to contemporary graffiti, with the entire history of the decorative arts in between.

Probably the strongest motivating force is the simplest: the inability of almost everyone to ever leave well enough alone. The temptation to fill a blank space is common to all; a child will scribble on a wall, and the arbiter of taste and fashion will decree those decorative parameters that establish the charmed circle of social acceptability.

But one man's, or woman's, decoration can be another's atrocity, and no other art form can range from the elegant to the awful with such ease. Crimes of decoration — by the very surface or additive nature of pattern and ornament and their cumulative effect — are the easiest to commit.

Adolf Loos, one of the leaders of the modernist revolution, damned all decoration — a response understandable to any historian who has had to grapple with the excesses that spilled out of the 19th century and into the 20th. Loos is famous for equating ornament with crime. Only the unschooled and savage find ornament necessary, he declared, pointing out the taste of criminals for tattooing. This, he said, is conclusive evidence that ornament is to be associated with the debased and lawless elements of society.

Still, it takes a heroic resolve to dispense with the traditional synthesis of detail and delight. One is easily seduced by the superb library-gallery of Syon House in Middlesex, England, for example, where the brothers Adam stretched a neoclassical ceiling completely across the building and filled it with a pastel rainbow of Pompeian-inspired garlands, medallions, urns and arabesques.

The message fades in the shadowed salon of a Venetian palazzo, where the reflected water light of the green canal dances on heavy, ornate gilt and blends with the greens of painted furniture, faded velvets and frescoed ceilings filled with rosy putti. None of this is plain. And none of it has anything to do with savages or social misfits. Each example provides a superb decorative vocabulary that speaks the language of a particular taste and time.

There is no way to play down, or downgrade, the attractions of richness and the accouterments of style. The uses of enrichment go beyond surface decoration. The ornament on a Louis Sullivan building in Chicago defines the early art of the skyscraper by making the revolutionary structural frame visually clear while elevating it to something beyond engineering. Eighteenth-century painted rooms and

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Consumer Magazine For the Younger Set

By MARYANN BIRD

TO the littlest consumers, buying power means penny power. And to help youngsters from ages 8 to 14 decide how best to budget their weekly allowance, which bicycle is right for them, or what after-school snack is the most nutritious, Consumers Union is publishing Penny Power, the nation's only consumer magazine for children.

"Kids are pretty important consumers — they spend a lot of money," said Rhoda H. Karpatkin, executive director of Consumers Union, the not-for-profit organization that has been evaluating consumer goods and services since 1936.

But because they *are* children, Mrs. Karpatkin said, "Kids are in a tough spot — they are the recipients and victims of hard-sell advertising that pressures them to buy, advertising that creates a value system, teaching kids to go for the brand names, the glitter, the pizazz."

"Adult consumers," she added, "have a better body of skills to deal with it. They've acquired some skepticism in their lives. Penny Power hopes to develop a set of skills for children to use now, as child-consumers, and one that can also be incorporated in their adult lives."

In September 1977, Consumers Union joined forces with the Fordham University Learning Center, under a Federal grant, to provide consumer education to children and their families. Two Penny Power prototypes were tested in urban schools around the country before the third and final prototype came off the presses in October 1979.

"We're casting this in the direction of all children," Mrs. Karpatkin said of the glossy magazine, "but especially in the direction of the low-income child, who has a limited amount of disposable money, but is barraged by all the same advertisements and desires" as other children.

Edited by Charlotte Baecher, Penny Power is published six times a year and has a circulation of about 108,000, including approximately 21,000 copies used in classrooms. Miss Baecher, a former teacher, works closely with instructors and students in producing the magazine, and the children themselves participate in all product evaluations.

"What Penny Power is about is respect for the kids," said Phyllis Beinstein, who teaches consumer education to sixth graders at P.S. 81 in the Riverdale section of the Bronx. "It says to them that they are important consumers. They are making buying decisions."

Mrs. Beinstein's students, and those

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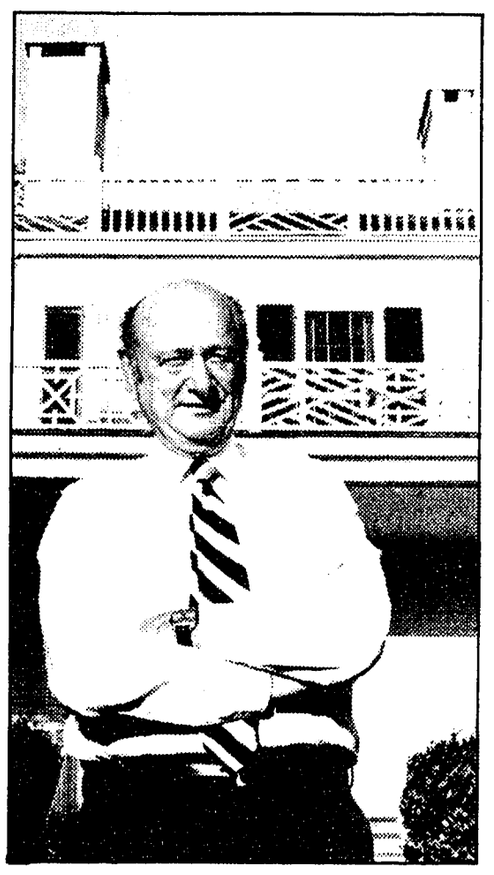
Rethinking Gracie Mansion, Once More



Collection of Virginia Macy; The New York Times/Robert Levin

Mayor Koch in front of Gracie Mansion, his official residence, right. View of the house, around 1870, above.

By SUZANNE SLESIN

GRACIE MANSION, the official residence of the Mayor of New York, is an exquisitely sited house with a spectacular view of the East River. A wide veranda graciously circles the white farmhouse structure. Inside, the generously proportioned rooms are not so much appointed as furnished with antiques, some of museum quality, most not.

The current resident, although reluctant to make too many changes, is nevertheless more than willing to reconsider the furnishings of the house. And Mayor Koch says that the planned renovation of Gracie Mansion won't cost his constituents anything and won't make him change his relaxed way of living.

"Without costing the city a single sou, we want to bring back the house to the way it was originally at its height in the 19th century," the Mayor said, "but it has to be comfortable."

Joan K. Davidson, who was persuaded by the Mayor to organize and direct the Gracie Mansion Project, an independent fund raising effort, said, "The task is to define the character of the house, make the most of its glorious setting by the river, and find a way without fakery to imbue it with history, and allow it to be both beautiful and practical."

"This is not a chi-chi operation," said the Mayor of the project, which was announced to coincide with the current National Historic Preservation Week.

Mrs. Davidson is a newly elected trustee of the National Trust for Historic Preservation, president of the J.M. Kaplan Foundation and a former chairman of the New York State Council on the Arts.

Involved at this time in the project are Charles A. Platt of Smotrich & Platt, as the coordinating architect, Dianne Pilgrim, decorative arts curator at the Brooklyn Museum, and David McFadden, decorative

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