A little museum that teaches: Design: A bit of saved Victoriana ...
By Ada Louise Huxtable
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Design:

A bit of saved Victoriana displays the best of Americana

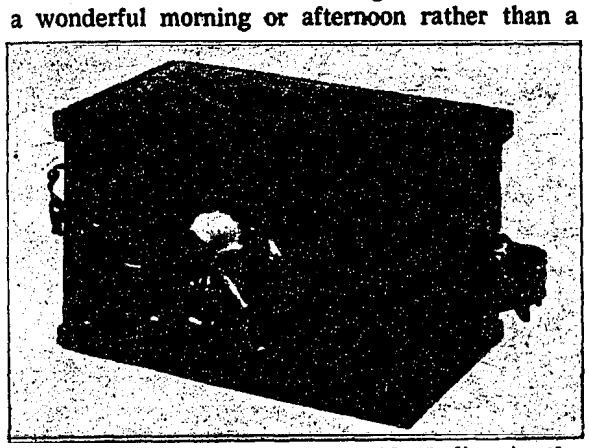
A little museum that teaches

By Ada Louise Huxtable

A small, special museum is rapidly becoming Washington's "in" museum among a small, special public. The Renwick Gallery, located at 17th Street and Pennsylvania Avenue, just next door to Blair House and across the street from the White House, is one of Washington's more delightful architectural experiences. It is the official showcase for the American design, craft and decorative arts collections of the Smithsonian Institution.

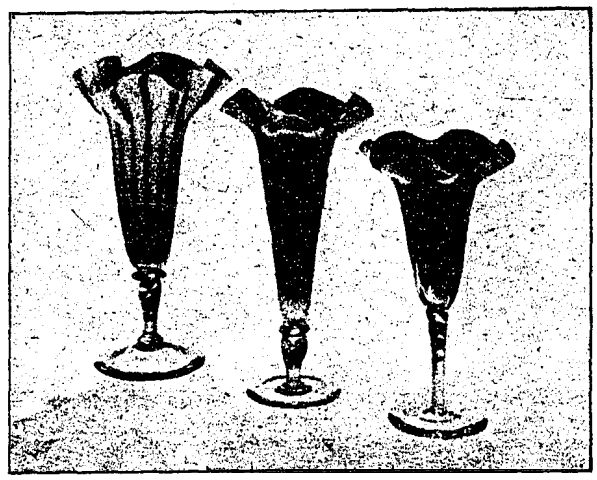
The appeal of the Renwick is in the building itself, a delectable bit of Victoriana that had a cliff-hanging escape from the bulldozer, and in the nature of its mini-exhibitions. At present it features a small, special show of Shaker furniture, objects and drawings.

But there is more to the Renwick's appeal. It belongs to a genre of museum that might be called the personal, individual, special-interest, or even eccentric and sometimes accidental museum, small enough to be encompassed without exhaustion and possessing a distinct character and delight of its own. It leaves the visitor feeling that he has had a wonderful morning or afternoon rather than a crushing cultural experience (and this experience may have a more lasting impact than the overwhelming riches and perfect pedantry of the great treasure houses).



Striking chest, carved by a Haida Indian in the eighteen-eighties, is from a show of decorated boxes and bowls by Indians of the Pacific Northwest that will be on view until Nov. 31.

Everyone has his favorite "little" museum, often treasuring it with fiercely possessive pride. It can be a Frick (New York), Gardner (Boston), Soane (London), or one of the unusual collections in places from Dubrovnik (the ethnic and maritime museum in the city's sea-washed wall) to Salem, Mass. (the Peabody's marvelous evocation of the early China trade).



Straw opal vases designed by Frederick Carder were made at the Steuben Glass Works in 1907 or thereabouts. From the Carder Art Glass Retrospective at the Renwick until May 14.

No one forgets the Frick's elegance, with its great paintings enhanced by the perfect French pretensions of great American wealth, offering the combined esthetic and social lesson of a collector, a taste and a time. Or the Gardner, with its conservatory court filled with fragrance and the ghostly presence of Mrs. Jack, and the El Greco that can never be moved from her favorite position, visibility be damned. Or the Soane's magpie collection of the coins, casts and corbels adored by the early 19th-century intelligentsia, in Sir John's own house, an architect's triumphant demonstration of domed skylit spaces and mirrored *trompe l'oeil.*

These unorthodox collections in their equally significant containers give museum directors preoccupied with completeness, chronology and anonymous factory spaces the shakes. But they give people a particular pleasure. That pleasure is a reaction to a memorable cultural experience on several levels. Art, place, period and personality reinforce each other through the building, its history and its contents. It is a simple, evocative pleasure principle, forgotten by those vast, impersonal, Olympian institutions, obsessed with adding wings and collections, that deliver magnificence, awe and terminal fatigue.

In its earlier lives, the Renwick, built in 1859-61, served as a warehouse for uniforms during the Civil War, then opened in 1871 as the first Corcoran Gallery of Art, and later became the Washington Court of Claims. It is now named for its architect, James Renwick Jr., the fashionable 19th-century designer who was also responsible for the turreted fantasy of the original Smithsonian buildings on the Mall.

In style, it progressed (or descended precipitously) from ornate, pudding-rich, French-inspired "Second Empire" high fashion to creeping institutional green and standard partitions. It was ultimately abandoned to the pigeons, and in 1958, Congress signed its demolition papers. The best thing the legislators could call it was a "firetrap."

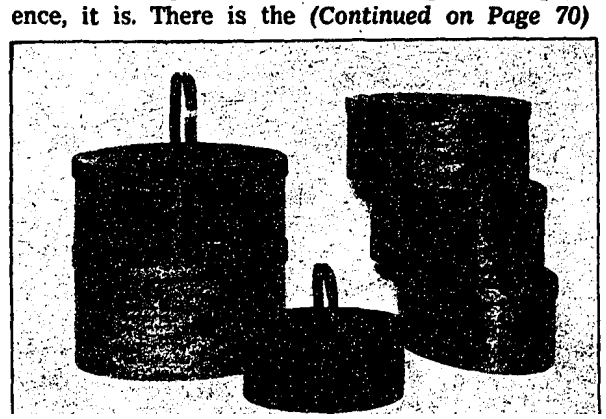
The bulldozer was almost literally turned around by the Kennedy Administration (the word came directly from the White House) when a last-minute rescue operation was set up to save the adjoining Lafayette Square from Washington's official, and imminent, "white death" redevelopment. This was a bold and unconventional step at the time, when historic buildings, and Victoriana in particular, were being plowed under like surplus crops.

The architect for the revised Lafayette Square project, John Carl Warnecke, included the Renwick in the preservation plans, and keyed his new red brick buildings to it. The building's $2.8-million restoration was begun by Warnecke, and the interiors were completed with taste and discernment by Hugh Newell Jacobsen.

It is not a "facsimile" restoration. Too much had disappeared or been changed. The red brick exterior was cleaned, patched and repaired. Almost 90 per cent of the original sandstone trim was reconstructed through a special molding, casting and carving process. The work was done by Universal Restoration, Inc., cued by remnants and Mathew Brady photographs.

Inside, the incremental disaster of standard General Services Administration installations from lights to toilets had to be dismantled, and new heating, wiring and air-conditioning installed as inconspicuously as possible. Much detail is "discretionary," following the pattern books of the day. But the whole is close to the original architectural experience.

And a delightful, and even unexpected experience, it is. There is the *(Continued on Page 70)*



Chastely detailed oval boxes of maple and pine are part of the Renwick's Shaker exhibition, which will be on display through April 7.

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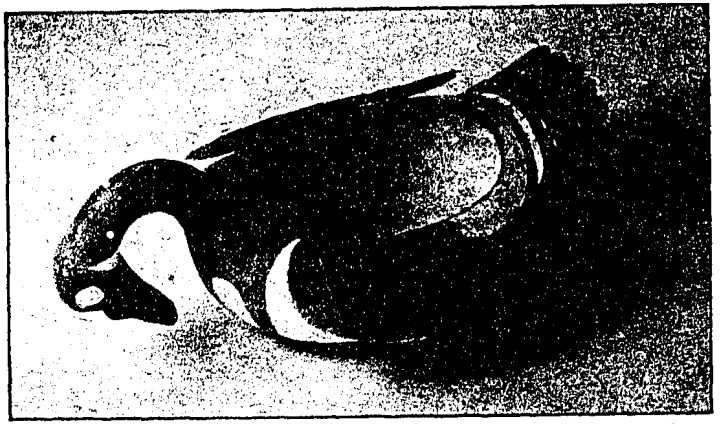
unchanged grand stair behind the oversized, round-headed front doors bowling the visitor up to a superb, skylit salon. This room extends a full 95 feet and reaches up 24 feet to a heavy, carved cornice and ceiling rising to the 38-foot-high skylight.

The walls are now the 1871 "plum" hue, and they are hung with many of the paintings from the original Corcoran collection, tiered, or "skied" to the cornice. Two velvet island settees topped with huge urns restage the Victorian setting. There are period chairs from the Smithsonian collection. It would be a smashing place for a party (full-size galas—yet to be realized—were part of the rehabilitation plans).

The restoration is at once plainer—the elaborate ceiling and cornice decoration is missing because the money ran out—and more elegant than the original, in which a wood floor and benches added a kind of dark brown schoolroom austerity to its posh pretensions.

Those pretensions reached their apogee in the Octagon Room, just across the stair hall at the front of the building. This has been quite carefully restored, from the deep red walls and blue and gold cornice to the reproductions of trailing draperies and bordered carpet. The room was designed for the most famous art object of its day, Hiram Powers's titillating classical nude, "The Greek Slave," which stood at its center, a position now occupied by a mid-19th-century, 5-foot-high vase from the Berlin Porcelain Factory, depicting Guido Reni's "Aurora."

There are other titillations today: the discovery of a Brobdingnagian mirrored hatrack console tucked away in a Gargantuan nook under the stairs near arched doors with grained wood frames marked "Authorized Personnel Only," and a series of lovely Corinthian columns that divide the soaring, slender space of a ground-floor gallery.



Wooden bowl with relief carving is painted black, red and blue. From the Renwick's Pacific Northwest Indian show.

One approaches the current Shaker show, for example, through a marble-floored, bay-windowed hall behind the stairs, fitted up with commendable understatement and potted palms. It is a handsome, generalized period space that adds immeasurably to the act of entering the exhibition.

The Shaker exhibition is about as perfect as a small show can be. It says it all, without esthetic overkill. In fact, most of the Renwick shows prove that in a time of cultural overreaching, an exhibition, and even a museum, does not have to be big to be beautiful, a principle that is well understood by Lloyd Herman, administrator of the Renwick.

The gallery has other, even smaller and more special exhibitions, all from the National Collections. They usually go on for a leisurely year or two and are distinguished by a notable lack of the kind of overdesigned overinstallation that is another popular form of museum overkill.

At present, there are decorative boxes and bowls by the Pacific Northwest Indians on view through November, and art glass by Frederick Carder, which will be dismantled in May. Each can be seen, virtually in its entirety, by revolving in the center of one room. And each represents a succinct culling, or tightly comprehensive survey, of one informative and beautiful aspect of the endless arts of design.

On the Renwick's renewed exterior, installation of the metal roof cresting on the mansards has just been completed, and copies of two facade statues, that somehow found their way to the Norfolk Botanical Gardens, were hoisted recently into second-story niches. The sense of "restoration" is softening and settling in, and admission is still free. The building, risen from opprobrium to preservation triumph, is quietly taking its place as one of those special favorites of the art world. ■