A Feast of Victoriana: In Westchester, a Feast of Victoriana How to Get There

By ADA LOUISE HUXTABLE

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WEARY of museum supershows? Tired of treasures? Sated with gold? Worn out by acres of opulence? Try a change of pace from the wall-to-wall splendor and institutional one-upmanship being featured by the big museums these days. Take a short trip up the Hudson to Yonkers and the Hudson River Museum, where a small exhibition called "The Gilded Age in Westchester" opens Sunday. A modest but fascinating display, in which the gold is more figurative than literal, it celebrates both the Victorian mansion in which the museum is housed and one of the most maligned and misunderstood periods of American art and culture.

If the emphasis is on Westchester history and objects, the theme applies to the taste of all of America in the decades from the 1870's to 1910 — a time known as the Gilded Age. This is a taste that is currently on a rising curve of appreciation as Victorian architecture and interiors come into favor again. Add to the delights of the show the pleasures of the Hudson River landscape these late fall days, with the colors gentling from autumn to winter and the river vistas opening to view.

However, "The Gilded Age in Westchester" is not just a random display of currently collectible items. It has a large theme which it compresses into a small space. Through selective documentation, it deals surprisingly well with the total picture of art, architecture and society in the last quarter of the 19th century.

This compact selection of artifacts, ranging from furniture and bric-a-brac to toys and clothing, complements the newly-

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At Westchester County's Hudson River Museum, housed in a Victorian mansion, top left, the Gilded Age is glimpsed in a Kirkson silver vase, left; a ceramics-filled bookcase, above, and bisque dolls, circa 1880.

In Westchester, a Feast of Victoriana

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restored period rooms in the 1876 Trevor Mansion that are the heart of the museum, and also the heart of the show. All of the material on view has been chosen with a larger point in mind by the guest curator, Marvin Schwartz, an expert on 19th-century art and design, with the assistance of Catherine Conn, associate curator of the museum.

Three galleries of montages of portraits, people, buildings, silver and glass, bicycles, prints and pottery, illustrating High Victorian life from gracious living and the newly popular spectator sports to work and transportation, have been installed by Ivan Chermayeff and Keith Helmetag of Chermayeff, Geismar Associates.

But it is the furnished rooms that give the theme an immediate and highly evocative human dimension. They are particularly fine interiors in the Eastlake manner of the 1870's — a "progressive" kind of design that used comparatively straight lines, simple surfaces and restrained decoration, with an emphasis on "honest" craftsmanship. This was a trend that rejected the rococo excesses of the 1850's and 60's, much as the International Style of the 1930's rejected the Gilded Age.

The taste for Victoriana today has progressed from the sentimental keepsake to a growing scholarly knowledge of the series of late 19th-and early 20th-century styles that made up the Gilded Age. This interest ranges from the pure collection to an eclectic mix — but the Victorian esthetic has a place again in the American home.

The rest of the museum, a 1969 modern addition, wraps around the high Victorian house with its towers and mansards. According to Richard Kashalek, the museum's director, the show is the first step in a campaign to complete the restoration of the period interiors. Funds for the current exhibition have come from the National Endowment for the Humanities and several corporations.

As happens so often with Victoriana, the history of the Trevor Mansion is both checkered and ironic. Designed by Charles W. Clinton, it was the home of John Bond Trevor, a Philadelphia businessman who made a fortune in New York in securities and gold. Called Glenview, the house was elegant, luxurious and the dernier cri. The exterior, of rough gray local granite and smooth Ohio sandstone, is conservative for its day. The interiors were in a much more "enlightened" style.

These interiors continue to please. Their order and restraint suggest an educated, intellectual taste. Mr. Trevor employed the best craftsmen; Pabst of Philadelphia did the very handsome inlaid, ebonized bookcases and overmantle of the library and the impressive hall stairs. Golden birdseye maple forms the cabinet work of the parlor.

The "living hall," an innovative feature espoused by the architect H. H. Richardson a few years earlier, focused on a superb fireplace wall of Armenian black walnut, and had a floor of richly patterned Minton tiles. All ground floor walls and ceilings were delicately stenciled in color and gold leaf, with geometric designs and stylized water lilies, chrysanthemums and papyrus plants.

The library, above, with its ebonized overmantel and 1870's furnishings, is one of the newly restored rooms in the John Trevor mansion

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The house was simultaneously saved and destroyed in the 1920's. Purchased by the city of Yonkers for a museum in 1923, the furnishings were immediately auctioned off. They were, of course, considered totally distasteful at the time. During the 1930's, most of the magnificent mantles were removed. Paneling was taken out of the billiard room and replaced with pegboard for hanging. Nothing was saved; the library and parlor survived only by luck.

The current restoration is being carried out from photographic documentation and archeological scrapings. Appropriate furniture has been purchased and rugs and curtains reproduced. Not surprisingly, Armenian black walnut is hard to find; a mahogany replica mantel stands in its place.

We now recognize the Trevor house rooms as an example of the most sophisticated design preferences of the 1870's. The rest of the exhibition tells us still more about the Gilded Age. The phrase, coined by Mark Twain, has had pejorative connotations of nouveau riche ostentation and commercial values. And the end of the 19th century was a period that held ideals of financial and domestic security based on the obvious possession of material goods.

But it was also a time when the technological and industrial advances of the previous decade made those goods — and the art and life style that they represented — available to almost everyone for the first time. The objects shown to illustrate this point are not the high art treasures or the rare museum examples of the Victorian period, but "luxuries" to which all classes could aspire.

A diamond thumb print compote of pressed glass demonstrates how more expensive handcut glass evolved into a different kind of decorative design as a result of industrial development. Patterned repoussé silver began to be produced inexpensively by machine stamping and hand finishing. Britannia ware, made of a new, cheap metal alloy, was silver-plated and embellished with fashionable designs. All the new techniques drew on rich, eclectic and exotic design sources: Moorish, Gothic, Oriental, Eastlake, Arts and Crafts.

Today we are intrigued again by this unabashed exploration of techniques and esthetics in the decorative arts, with results that ranged from the ludicrous to the sublime. But we lack the courage of our Victorian forebears. We still cannot quite face their grand salon pieces, in which scale, ornament and emotional content are carried to overreaching heights of Laocoon complexity and bathetic intensity, in an orgy of entwined female nudes and sentimental scenes of high historical drama.

It is the more modest and accessible work shown at the Hudson River Museum that pleases us now. The illuminating insights that the exhibition provides into the standards of those who made and used these pieces show how far apart we are in life styles. This is a fascinating chapter in art and social history still to be written.

How to Get There

The Hudson River Museum is open from 10 A.M. to 5 P.M. Wednesday through Saturday and from 1 to 5 P.M. on Sunday. It is closed Monday and Tuesday.

Directions: By car, take the West Side Highway to the 250th Street exit. Pick up Riverdale Avenue, which becomes Warburton Avenue. The museum is at 511 Warburton Avenue. By train, from Grand Central Terminal take the Hudson Division line to Glenwood Station. Walk across Trevor Park to the museum.