Design Notebook

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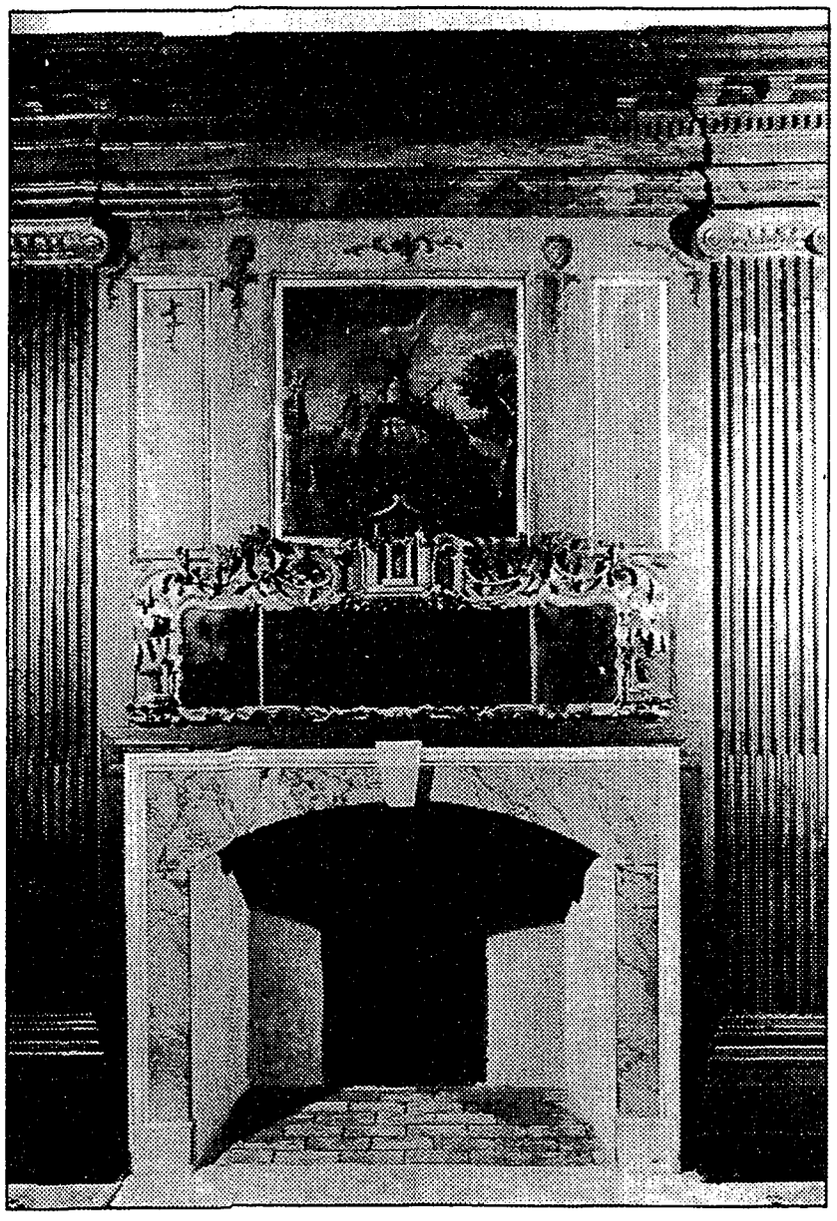
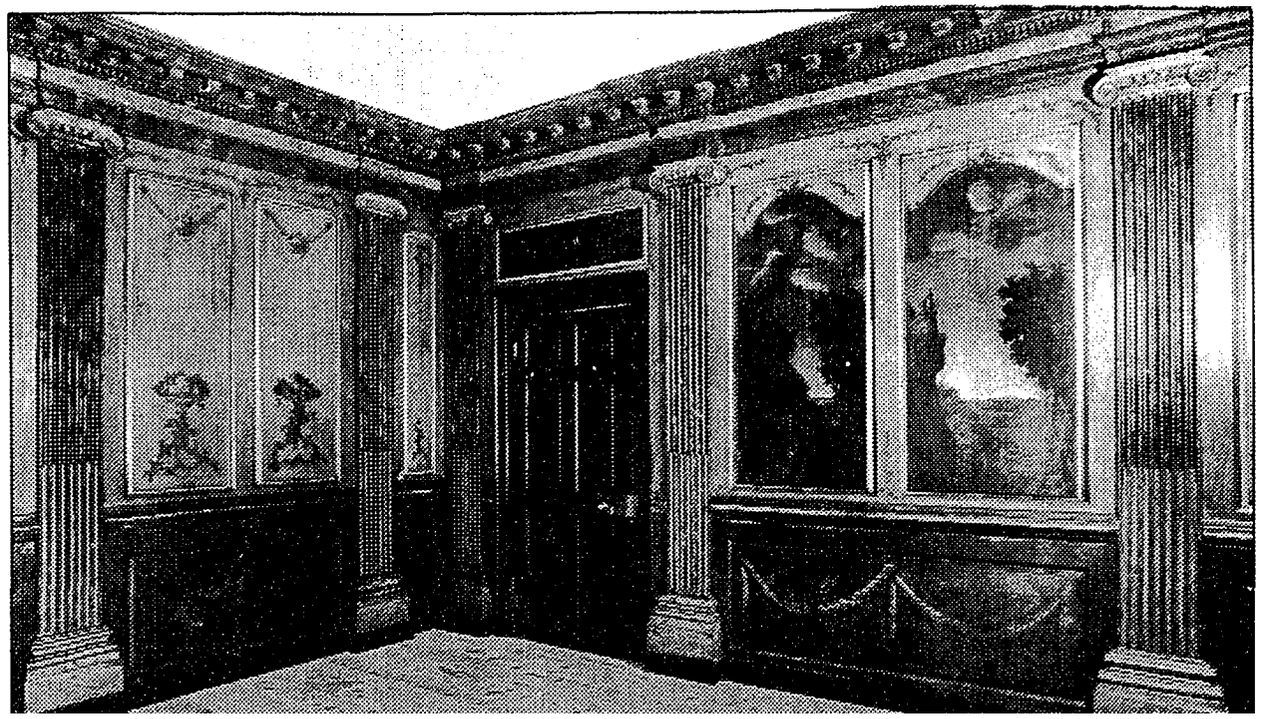
The Met's Marmion Room is a superb 'New World' artifact.





The New York Times/Gene Maggio

The Marmion Room's corner mantel, left, is enriched by gilded rococo mirror and romantic painting. Large vertical panels, above, are filled with painted views and framed by fluted and reeded pilasters.

THE Fitzhughs of Virginia built their first home in 1674, on a point overlooking the Potomac River in King George County that was far enough on the outskirts of the colonies to be vulnerable to Indian raids. It survived, however, and according to family tradition, the original structure was incorporated into a second and more elegant building in 1719.

The house, called Marmion, still stands. Inside, it is similar in plan and room size to Mount Vernon — two sitting rooms, a drawing room and a dining room flanking a central hall have the corner chimney pieces that were fashionable at the time. The proportions are handsome and the rooms are paneled with taste and skill. It would have been a nice home, but not a particularly unusual one, except that sometime in the 1770's or 1780's, Major John Fitzhugh decided to make it more elegant still.

This was done by remodeling the parlor. Elaborate new paneling was installed in a large, rear room, and the walls were painted with a series of romantic scenes and decorative designs. Marmion's was not the only painted room in Virginia, but it was probably the finest.

Its richness and beauty surprised visitors until the 1920's, when the family offered the room for sale and it was bought by the Metropolitan Museum in New York. The Marmion Room was installed prominently in the museum's first American Wing in 1924.

In all the hoopla attending the opening of the museum's greatly enlarged and reinstalled new American Wing last spring, few may have noticed the absence of the painted room. It was there; it just wasn't ready. The reappearance of this superb domestic artifact took longer than expected and required the joint efforts of the American Decorative Arts curatorial staff — Berry Tracy assisted by Morrison Heckscher and R. Craig Miller — with the restorer Ezra Mills and the restoration architect Daniel Hopping.

The Marmion Room has only now been quietly opened to the public, very gently cleaned and glowing and with a few minor installation errors corrected. It is unfurnished this time, so that all the attention is on the room itself, undistracted by some conjectural arrangement of chairs and tables.

And what a room it is! A superb example of its type, virtually unique in its quality and completeness and in the miracle of its survival, this painted room is all the more appealing for the combination of sophisticated ideals and naive execution that marks its "new world" aspirations. The landscapes are beautiful, strange, and ever-so-slightly gauche, and there is an ingenuous mixture of classicism and rococo that betrays a moderate confusion of taste.

The walls are paneled from the broad floorboards to the ceiling, with fluted and reeded pilasters topped by flat ionic capitals framing the doors and windows and the painted scenes.

A modillion and entablature unify the room; with the full-height pilasters, a handsome scale is created. The carpenter was skilled and clever. When the rear wall was pushed back to enlarge the room and provide an extra window, it threw the corner fireplace off angle. He added diagonal cupboards at either end of the wall to fill the gap and restore a pleasing symmetry.

A series of large, vertical panels on two walls is filled with painted views of cliffs and castles; smaller panels contain fruit-filled cornucopias and flower-topped urns, with delicate festoons of roses at the top. Below the chair rail are horizontal panels with swags of leafy garlands. Anything that is not lavishly decorated is sumptuously marble-grained.

The colors are warm browns, bronzes and ochres, with a golden undertone or overlay probably due to age; it was all undoubtedly much creamier when new. Reds and yellows of still-brilliant depth give a vibrant realism to the floral bouquets. The landscapes are marvelously murky — grandly imaginative settings out of Poussin and Salvator Rosa, a good many times removed.

The corner mantel, faced in a yellow-brown marble, is doubly enriched by a gilded rococo mirror with a painted panel above. The focus of this overmantel scene is a huge, arched rock forming a grotto surrounded by water, a common theme in romantic landscapes of the 17th and 18th centuries. But this artist topped the ominous rock with a jaunty windmill, and for good measure, threw in a tassel clinging to one side. Then he added an elaborate portico with an equestrian statue astride the pediment, for an almost surrealist touch. The scene is illuminated by a pink sunset gleaming through dark clouds.

Still more unbridled romanticism appears in a narrow panel over the door, where a lighthouse and ship in distress are set in a stormy sea. Other panels feature chateaus and mansions in dramatic landscapes with distant views.

But the effect of these curious scenes is serene and wonderfully pleasing, and the sense of the mildly exotic and remote only heightens their magic. It would seem that one would have to feel some sense of permanence, and of security about the future and one's place in the world, to commission such a special work of domestic art. Such sentiments are increasingly rare today, and so are luxuriously and fancifully painted rooms.

The local legend in Virginia is that Major Fitzhugh found a wounded Hessian soldier on the bank of the Potomac, brought him home and nursed him back to health. In gratitude, the visitor is supposed to have decorated the room. The family believes the story; scholars, however, with their cool view of factual possibilities, doubt it very much.

We do not know who the artist was and it is unlikely that we ever will, but whatever its real history, a visit to the Marmion Room is a memorable experience. It is possible to share the special sensibilities of those who created it while savoring its exceptional quality. Inevitably, one reflects on what has been lost to us in a lifetime of ordinary plain and papered walls — not just in richness, but in the pleasures of illusion.

Illusion is fashionable again; under the rubric of postmodernism, the art of painting scenes on walls has been revived. Michael Graves, an architect of pronounced pictorial bent, deals suavely in illusory effects that range from trompe l'oeil trellises to wall-dissolving murals. The painter Richard Haas transforms exterior walls into something they never were with stylish, painted imagery, and turns the interiors of windowless lofts into nostalgic, classical gardens.

Illusion looks back, or outward, or to far-off worlds; it exchanges the walls of a room for unlimited visual delights. But illusion of this kind requires a sense of the past and a commitment to the future. Today, such rooms are the casualty of costs, uncertainties, a mobile society that moves on quickly and a passion for sleek and fashionable neutrality.

To live in a room like this, you must believe that windmills and grottos go naturally together, that ships never founder, and flowers never fade. The painted room transcends time and place. Only people change; the illusion endures.