Stitching the 21st century into a Gilded Age mansion
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ABSTRACT A pair of 17th-century silk velvet appliqué valances, repurposed in the 20th century for an American Gilded Age mansion, was retired from permanent display in 2011. This decision prompted an institution-wide debate on how to replace a fabric that was not intended to look new, while at the same time staying true to the historic setting, the narrative of the house, and the organisational mission. Staff developed a public outreach programme with the goals to explore the nuances of authenticity and to engage new audiences in ways that help serve and shape the community’s vision of stewardship. This paper provides an overview of the programme focusing on the decision-making, the management and the operations required to balance conservation, replication and authenticity.

Introduction

The decision to replace two elaborately designed 17th-century appliqué valances with reproductions in Rough Point, an early 20th-century American Gilded Age mansion in Newport, Rhode Island, prompted an institution-wide discussion on the attributions of authenticity. The Newport Restoration Foundation (NRF) executive director, collection and education staff, and contract conservator together explored in what context reproductions could both remain true to the 20th-century room setting and also be a compelling reflection of the organisation’s mission, cultural heritage policies and the narrative of the house. Was there a means by which the original and the reproductions could provide an equally accurate and valid appreciation of the historical visual intent and be considered authentic? Could the issues around authenticity be clearly communicated to visitors in such a way as to actively engage new audiences and advance the sustainability of the historic site? The decision-making and subsequent initiatives from these deliberations integrated the preservation vision of the founder of the NRF, Doris Duke, the cultural heritage policies that have guided the organisation since 2000, and the interpretive plan for the house. Using the reproductions as a focal point for exploring the perceptions of authenticity, an interactive public outreach programme evolved from discussions.

Doris Duke’s legacy vision

Doris Duke, tobacco heiress, philanthropist and art collector, founded the NRF in 1968 with the expressed goals to preserve, interpret and maintain buildings, landscapes and objects reflecting Aquidneck Island’s rapidly disappearing 18th- and 19th-century material culture. In the 1970s and 1980s she established an architectural collection of 80 significant early American buildings in order to save Newport’s colonial architecture from demolition.
To assist in these efforts, Miss Duke employed a large field staff of architects and draughtsmen to research and document the buildings, and carpenters, blacksmiths and fine craftsmen to accurately restore or replicate long-hidden architectural features. She demonstrated her commitment to her vision through an active participation in design reviews, restoration decisions and property management oversight. Her involvement reflected her hands-on learning style, her deep appreciation for time-honoured methods of fine craftsmanship and her depth of engagement with the fields of preservation and art conservation.

Miss Duke’s extraordinary efforts to preserve original fabric and return these colonial houses from dilapidation to their former glory was a personal vision to both serve the community and seed neighbourhood preservation efforts throughout the City of Newport. Her vision of authenticity was not to create an artificial environment to honour a past cultural heritage, but to infuse city life with a visible and historically accurate colonial presence that permitted an evolving urban setting to grow around the built heritage and engage residents in the ownership and responsible stewardship of their heritage. This was the legacy she left upon her death in 1993.

Newport Restoration Foundation cultural heritage policies

Upon her death, Miss Duke bequeathed the inventory of colonial buildings and her furnished 40-room Gilded Age ocean-side estate, Rough Point, to the NRF (Fig. 1). With the addition of a 20th-century historic house museum to the established real estate holdings, competing and new management needs were apparent. By 1999 the trustees had outlined programme directives to demonstrate Miss Duke’s legacy and ideals of preservation, stewardship and community engagement. An executive director was appointed to implement board directives and lead staff. Two museum-trained staff were hired in 2000 to address the stewardship of the house collections and transition the summer residence into a historic house museum. They focused on developing separate collection management policies for the historic buildings and the Rough Point house collection of 9,822 fine art, historic furnishings and personal effects. Both policies articulate the collecting objectives, and follow the management standards and protocols of the American Alliance of Museums. They emphasise the role of the NRF as a preservation and educational institution based on its collections. Policies focus on the preservation of collections and their refinement to serve the educational mission.

Programme initiatives derived from the buildings collection policy have enabled the NRF to maintain a strong public presence as a preservation advocacy group that monitors the
evolution of the city’s historic streetscapes and neighbourhoods. The houses – 71 of which in 2013 are still owned and meticulously maintained by the NRF as private residential rental properties – define two entire historic districts and several neighbourhoods (Foley et al. 2010). They remain an important part of the city’s economic engine and the basis for a World Heritage nomination. In addition, the NRF offers a series of hands-on preservation workshops and resource tool kits for historic homeowners. A preservation awards and grants programme also encourages exemplary historic preservation efforts within the City of Newport by recognising and rewarding activities or accomplishments that strengthen, broaden and advance the appreciation, understanding and involvement in Newport’s historic preservation. Through these programmes, the NRF continues to weave together the ‘real’ past with the ‘real’ present, engaging a city-wide pride in the historic and unique significance of the built environment.

These initiatives and policies established a stewardship standard for collection staff to follow as they turned to address the management needs of the historic house museum, Rough Point. The board’s directive was to maintain the furnishings as they were when Miss Duke lived in the house and prepare the rooms for tours by 2002. Guided by the primary responsibility for the care and safeguarding of collections for future generations, staff assessed the preservation risks from humidity, temperature, light, fire, pests, security, physical threats, emergency preparedness and collection management. A risk management approach was adopted for the care of collections.

The two staff implemented a multi-pronged programme for the physical organisation, accessioning and documentation of collections and collection records. Preliminary conservation assessments of the European and Oriental fine and decorative arts and significant historic collections were undertaken with the assistance of consulting art conservators to identify needs and priorities. Property-wide fire and security systems were added, and individual artworks were identified for passive or active security systems. A historic housekeeping manual was crafted by room for daily, weekly and seasonal tasks, supplemented by an emergency preparedness plan. Simultaneous to the collection efforts, facility staff implemented a multi-year schedule to waterproof the building and provide a stable interior ambient environment. The building’s stone façade, slate roof, flashing, window lintels, site drainage systems, and plumbing and heating systems were systematically repaired or replaced by 2013. Custom-fabricated, triple-glazed hurricane windows were installed as were interior light-mitigating window treatments. A long-range preservation plan continues to build upon this foundation, balancing collection exhibition requirements and curatorial priorities against the ongoing need for conservation of the collections.

Rough Point valances
After storm-related water damage in 2011, collection staff removed a pair of silk velvet appliqué window valances from the dining room for emergency stabilisation needs (Fig. 2). The valances, attributed to a 17th-century Italian or Spanish origin, are one of many examples of 16th-, 17th- and 18th-century European needle arts in the house. The pattern of the valances – a flowing sinuous arrangement of curling acanthus leaves, fruit and flowers – has near perfect design symmetry flanking a central axis. Each valance is 5.95 m in length and is pieced together from five 55.8 cm wide panels. They were mounted to a window header with Velcro strips at ceiling height, 4.26 m above the floor, over equally expansive east- and west-facing windows. Each valance was located above a set of three velvet panels that are overlapped to expose softly curved 10 cm lower borders. These sets are composed of a middle panel of dark red placed between a top and bottom dark olive green velvet panel. The overlapped panels create the illusion of a raised Roman curtain.

{Insert Figs 2 and 3 here}

Five different repeats, each composed of 25 to 60 appliqués, alternate 28 times along the length of each valance (Fig. 3). The 978 appliqués are cut from one of six coloured silk velvets (red, dark blue, grey blue, green, gold and brown) or a plain weave white silk. A thin silk-wrapped cord outlines each appliqué. A couching stitch secures the cording and each appliqué to a yellow silk sateen ground. Additional cording delineates supplemental flourishes that accentuate the individual shapes. A 4 cm tall metal bullion fringe, characteristic of the late 19th century, trims the lower edge.

An examination by the project conservators identified that previously noted areas of damage had been exacerbated by the recent water incident. New localised staining was attributed to window and ceiling leakage, but the long term display had also over time advanced the degradation of the ground silk and velvet piles along the length of the valances. Due to the extent of deterioration coupled with the continuing risks from display in a challenging ocean-side window location, they advocated for its relocation to the protective environment of study storage, to be available for scholarship and educational purposes. The collection staff, in turn, considered the valances’ collection status and requirement for permanent display. Due to an undocumented house history, they proposed that the valances be treated as supporting decorative features that could be reproduced, similar to other plain window draperies that were replaced as they became stained or damaged during Miss Duke’s lifetime. They also reasoned that the use of hand-crafted reproductions in the room setting could be viewed as authentic because it would be in accordance with Miss Duke’s aesthetic sensibilities and innate talent to decorate each room using a combination of furnishings of historical significance and commissioned artwork. They further argued that the protective storage environment provided sustainable access to
the original for current and future generations. The role of the valances as a permanently displayed collection item could be re-evaluated as additional historical information was identified.

The process of decision-making and programme development

The decision to remove the valances from long-term display prompted an institution-wide discussion on how to replace the valances in a way that stayed true to the visual intent of the room setting, the interpretation of the house, and the organisation’s preservation mission. The collaboration brought together multiple skills and approaches to strategise programme development, using a democratic interaction in which all members of the team felt free to argue their areas of concern without fear of alienating others. The debates fostered exchanges between the director, collection and education staff, and the lead contract conservator about how both the team members and visitors to Rough Point experience, perceive and value authenticity.

The team referenced the preface to the conference publication Conservation in Context: Finding a Balance for the Historic House Museum to initiate discussions:

House museums and more broadly, historic sites, have a special power to rivet a visitor’s attention and engage his or her imagination. The clarity with which the issue of authenticity is handled, both in interpretation and in fact, is therefore a major issue. It is central to recognize that the ability to mislead through what is seen and heard at historic sites is as great as the ability to engage … Our integrity as museum professionals is put to a special test at historic sites because what we present to the public is accepted as truth. We need to be sure, through our scholarship and stewardship, that the truth is not only clear, but that it is presented in a way that enlists the visitor to our cause (Sanchis 1995: III).

As a group they agreed that authenticity is context-dependent and can be perceived differently in different places or settings. The environment that surrounds objects and works of art helps to confer meaning and gives significance to the visitor. This view of authenticity shaped the team dialogue. The challenge was to design an interpretive framework around the attributions of authenticity, using the reproduction as a springboard to give visitors the opportunity to construct meaning that extends beyond pure aesthetics.

The team followed an adaptive planning model to encourage flexibility in thinking. They focused on answering a series of four progressively related questions about the organisation’s strategic direction: what vision they wanted to pursue; how they would make
a difference; how they would succeed; and what capabilities it would take to get there (O’Donovan and Flower 2013).

The dialogue began with identifying the overarching vision. As guided by Miss Duke’s legacy and the established NRF policies, the executive director, on behalf of the board members, challenged the team to embrace the organisation’s vision to be a leader in historic preservation in ways that help serve and shape the community. The secondary goal was to engage visitors in Miss Duke’s life through the guided house tour in ways that enlisted them to identify with and return to Rough Point.

With this as a foundation upon which to frame discussions, the second strategic question opened discussion on which part of the challenge the group should work. What was their role in accomplishing these goals and where would their efforts be focused? They identified their roles as collection caretakers and educators who were responsible for the preservation, the presentation and the interpretation of the house. The issue of authenticity as perceived through visitor experience was the focal point. The methods of interpretation and presentation of the valances would influence how visitors perceive authenticity and connect the reproductions as being ‘real’ in the context of their house experience. An expressed refinement of the issue was that the valances were intentionally installed with the properties of aged fabrics. While the lead conservator and collection staff agreed that the design elements needed to be copied, they debated what appearance accurately represented appropriate aesthetics. Educators queried how to clearly communicate the resolution to that debate.

The discussion, following the model’s progression for problem solving, turned to how to create a framework for presentation and interpretation, the third step in the planning model. What colours and level of damage should be reproduced? Should the design copy the original colour scheme, should it follow the existing faded and damaged colours, or should it follow some other middle ground noted in the concealed areas? What appearance would help the visitor engage with the room setting and still be considered valid and true? What changes to existing interpretive programmes or visitor perspectives were required to reach that goal? How were authenticity and the ongoing house preservation needs presented to visitors that would enlist them in their cause? The team members independently contributed answers to different aspects of the concerns and then worked together to design a public outreach programme.

The educator’s voice

Educators represented an important voice in the decision-making and set the tone to think creatively. They debated how authenticity would be perceived and experienced. They were
sensitive to interpretive trends that suggest visitors are better engaged if the house tour experience is presented in ways that allow them to make connections and see relevance to their own lives. Travel industry market research was reviewed to better categorise the attributes of authenticity. The research identified five attributes that influence visitor perception of authenticity when they visit historic sites: unique, human, real, trustworthy and non-commercial. The visitor perceives ‘unique’ as being original, artistic, inventive or spontaneous. ‘Human’ attributes embody genuine, trustworthy and caring traits. ‘Real’ is distinguished by places or objects that are historical, natural or landmarks. ‘Trustworthy’ enlists social/emotional qualities to involve an experience that fosters bonding. The last attribute, ‘non-commercial’, embraces simple qualities, avoiding the appearance of being fake or glitzy, or the sense of being ‘out to make a buck’ (PGAV Destinations 2009).

The educators proposed adapting the guide narratives to help visitors feel a synergy with ongoing preservation needs. Guides would trial a script that compared Rough Point’s valance project and other seasonal preservation challenges to the ‘to do’ list of all homeowners. They also proposed illustrating the narrative with examples of Miss Duke’s hands-on involvement with the conservation needs of the house collections. This created the context in which to connect to the decisions visitors make in the care of their own homes. This humanising link reinforced the visitor experience of what is ‘real’ by both personalising the visit and by being sincere and caring about the house preservation needs.

Guides already described Miss Duke as a lifelong learner who understood that ‘learning from’ is more engaging than ‘learning about’. To further spark visitor connections educators advocated adding an interactive discovery experience to handle fabric and stitching samples. The interactive opportunity would introduce visitors to the aesthetics of the reproduction fabric colours and textures, reopening discussions on authenticity and what is ‘real’ for the house. They also would elicit individual perceptions about how the reproduction influenced the overall ‘real’ appearance of the room. This, they felt, was helpful to raise visitor awareness concerning how the adjacent aged tapestries and rugs might have appeared in years past.

The collection staff’s voice

Collection staff focused on the presentation of the valances. The large room, extravagantly furnished with tapestries, and decorative and fine art is divided into three distinct areas. Upon entering the room the visitor’s attention is drawn directly ahead to a large fireplace centred on the south wall, in front of which is the central seating area. The two valances are to the far left and right of this area and peripheral to the viewer’s range of vision over windows which frame more discrete furnishings. They complement the colour schemes and provide the room with a balanced and unified aesthetic. Collection staff argued that it was
essential to replicate the design and colours. How to present truthful representation of the 20th-century visual intent of the valances posed a more challenging question to resolve.

A review of the collection files and archives housed at Rough Point, the Doris Duke Charitable Foundation in New York, and Duke University in North Carolina found little documentation in the form of historical images or records referencing the valances. Unlike all other antique needlework and upholstery in the house, but similar to other 20th-century draperies, these elaborate panels had not been documented in any of the three house inventories conducted before 1993. Only one 7.6 × 10 cm colour print from the early 1980s was located. The small print suggested richer colours and less damage, but the quality and size of the image curtailed a more definitive assessment.¹ The provenance and only other image were from the 1993 estate appraisal undertaken by the auction house Sotheby’s. Collection staff asked the conservators for evidence on materials, colours and construction methodology to inform a discussion on the valances’ appearance when they were installed sometime in the past 80 years.

**The conservator’s voice**

The contract conservators documented the appliqué construction, materials and design elements, while seeking visual clues to suggest the appearance at the time of installation. Microscopic fibre analysis identified that the ground fabric, all appliqués, cording and stitching threads were silk. The Velcro mounting strip suggested an installation date after 1960.

The conservators examined both ends of the appliqué panels that had been folded under and concealed from light. They were compared to the visible areas that had, over the same length of time, been exposed to the room environment. The protected areas had retained significantly more velvet pile and were notably less damaged, soiled and faded. The comparison confirmed that the ensuing period of display had exacerbated the degree of damage and disfigurement. The protected areas also suggested the values, chroma and pile-wear patterns of the appliqué when they were installed.

To assess the colour and condition of the original ground silk, two velvet appliqués were removed from the protected panel ends. These silk areas had been protected by the appliqués from airborne particulates over the history of the appliqué. They were brighter in colour, clean in appearance and undamaged. A comparison of the silk ground areas from the exposed front, the concealed panel end, and from under the appliqués on the panel end confirmed that the appliqué panels had been repurposed and not newly created for the windows.
Project conservators documented the range of hues, values and chroma from the protected areas using Muncell colour chips to suggest colour schemes for the reproduction. They argued that silk velvets from the French firm Prelle et Cie were the closest match, visibly and historically, to the valances’ original colours, texture and weight. Still, using these new silk velvets represented a quandary. A reproduction using these velvets would be authentic in kind, but they cautioned that new silk velvets would have a different sheen and texture than the valances’ repurposed 20th-century appearance. It seemed doubtful that a reproduction made from new silk velvets could convincingly suggest the striated and dulled appearance of the aged velvets. The feasibility to custom colour and texture new velvets to look aged or to seek a suitable quantity of period silk velvets to repurpose was equally implausible to the team. These debates helped open consideration to a wider variety of replacement fabrics. The lead conservator built consensus to create a reproduction that in practice copied the same stitching and pattern sequencing but substituted cotton velvets on a polished cotton ground. She proposed that the matte finish suggested the dulled sheen of the soiled silks. The team chose cotton velvet fabrics from a range of manufacturers, matching colours to the Prelle et Cie silk velvet sample card. In the event that once installed the reproduction colours appeared too rich for the aesthetics of the room, the conservators anticipated applying a dyed bobbinet overlay to tone the colours as needed.

**Volunteers in Partnership programme**

With these aspects of presentation and interpretation resolved, the team turned to the final planning steps to identify the logistics and skills needed to fabricate the reproduction. The lead conservator proposed a preservation ambassador programme to enlist qualified volunteers to reproduce the valances in-house as a live exhibit. The ambassador programme, called Volunteers in Partnership (VIP), was a positive means to emphasise community engagement and education about preservation practices, the ideals of the Newport Restoration Foundation. The programme invited volunteer needleworkers to participate in a six-month preservation programme to learn about cultural stewardship, explore the nuances of authenticity and reproduce the 978-piece velvet appliqué. The initiative structured a number of incentives to attract volunteers with a goal to enlist a previously unconnected audience to the opportunities at Rough Point. The project recruited from regional needlework groups and visitors, and emphasised the novel work environment and opportunities to work with museum professionals, learn about historic preservation, network and build friendships. In addition, volunteers were provided access to other area historic sites. Each six-month session concluded with a day of preservation-focused activities during which project conservators hosted a preservation clinic where the volunteers brought in family heirlooms for evaluation of preservation needs. The day also included behind-the-scenes tours in area historic sites. A well-received incentive that fostered a personal ownership of the stewardship of the house museum was the celebrated
signing of the lining of the valances by all participants. The 30 volunteers were particularly proud to be recognised as part of the documented ongoing history of Rough Point and considered the reproduction more relevant and authentic to the house setting than the original now in storage (Fig. 4).

Interested candidates were required to submit an application, attend a project orientation and present examples of recent fine hand-sewing skills to the project conservators. Qualified participants committed to a minimum of three hours per week. At the beginning of each session, volunteers, named VIPs, received a resource-filled curriculum that included detailed sewing instructions and practice kits as well as information about Gilded Age history, historic textiles, period decorative interiors and principles of preservation and preventive care. They spent the first four weeks examining the original valance construction methods and materials, learning how to prepare and stitch the reproduction fabrics and plan the pattern construction, before they were qualified to stitch the reproduction. Over the remainder of the session, VIPs set their own learning pace to pursue the more advanced curriculum resources. Project conservators and museum staff encouraged learning by arranging weekly discussions on conservation issues and the challenges of single focus historic house museums. These varied learning formats successfully achieved the programme goal to raise awareness about preservation, scholarship and perceptions of authenticity. It has also sustained the legacy of Miss Duke’s sense of authenticity because the programme both sustained the practice of a fine handcraft and enabled the volunteers to return to their own communities as more knowledgeable preservation advocates.

Visitors to Rough Point have also embraced the valance project with enthusiasm. In addition to interacting with the project, guides present opportunities throughout the house for visitors to reflect on how they experience, perceive and value authenticity and to identify the ways in which what they are experiencing confers a ‘real’ meaning to them. The theme of authenticity is introduced as part of the narrative of the dining room setting, a first stop on the tour. It is referenced throughout the tour with examples of current preservation projects and Miss Duke’s past involvement with house projects. Later in the tour visitors are brought into the workroom to experience the valance work in progress. The guides explain the project, emphasising the ongoing preservation needs and decisions that are part of the long-term care of collections. Project conservators augment the guide dialogue by answering questions. They encourage visitors to touch fabric and stitching samples and examine the mapping and reproduction logistics. This hands-on opportunity has proved to be a popular means to confer meaning, especially to visitors who have personal interests in handcrafts. Throughout the tour all these voices have influenced the
visitor experience enabling them to better appreciate the variable perceptions of authenticity within the challenges of house museums.

As a memento that reinforces the experience, visitors can also purchase the aprons that the valance project workers wear. The proceeds from these sales are used to support the community preservation grant programme, further extending the impact of the project into the community. Once visitors leave Rough Point they also have the opportunity to follow updates on the progress of the project through the NRF social media sites. This exposure to the project reconnects them with their discovery experience at Rough Point and often encourages them to explore more educational and historic preservation resources through NRF’s online presence. These online initiatives are derived from the organisational vision to serve and shape community preservation efforts.

Conclusion

The valance initiative evolved into a forward-thinking yet pragmatic programme that has stimulated people to learn, collaborate and celebrate preservation. It has engaged them in exploring the nuances of authenticity within the historic house and the broader contexts of both ongoing community-based cultural heritage needs and their own lives. The reproduction itself has not been the end goal, but rather the means to clarify what visitors see, feel and hear through multifaceted experiences that inspire them to draw their own connections in ways that are most meaningful to them. Nominated for a 2014 National Leadership Award, the programme has also expanded the institutional capacity to be a leader in preservation by presenting and interpreting a socially pertinent topic in ways that are relevant to today’s actively evolving historic urban and rural communities. It has proved to be a positive means to take ownership of the meanings of authenticity, uniting the ‘real’ past with the ‘real’ present.

Notes


2. The progress of the project can be followed at www.newportrestoration.org/exhibits_collections/slideshow/37-rough_point_valance (accessed 10 July 2013).

3. Information on the Leadership in History Awards can be found at www.aaslh.org/aaslh_awards.htm (accessed 10 July 2013).
References


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