

Period Rooms in the **New Art of the Americas Wing** *at the Museum of Fine Arts, Boston*

BY DENNIS CARR

While the newly opened Art of the Americas Wing at the Museum of Fine Arts, Boston, offers a hemispheric view of 3,000 years of North, Central, and South American art, the period rooms tell a distinctly local story. Of the eight period rooms and other architectural elements interspersed within fifty-three new galleries, six of these rooms make their return to public view after a hiatus of nearly eight years, now carefully restored and rethought for a new generation of visitors. Two other rooms are on view for the first time. The American period rooms have been a popular part of the MFA's displays since they were first installed in the former Decorative Arts Wing of the museum, which opened to the public in 1928. Now, as then, the rooms focus on New England, complementing the MFA's significant holdings of colonial and nineteenth-century art from New England.

The most elaborate and well known of the period rooms are those from Oak Hill, Samuel McIntire's 1800–1801 archi-

tectural masterpiece created in Peabody, Massachusetts, for the Derby-West family and filled with luxurious furnishings and exquisite examples of his carved furniture. The three Oak Hill rooms now sit comfortably alongside a gallery devoted to the furniture of John and Thomas Seymour (who were heavily patronized by the Derby-West family) and the neo-classical silver of Paul Revere. Other rooms now reinstalled include the 1730 Jaffrey parlor and the 1803 Shepard parlor, with its original French scenic wallpaper. Two newly installed rooms from the 1840 Roswell Gleason House in Dorchester inform adjacent galleries of mid-nineteenth-century paintings and decorative arts; the earliest timber-frame structures—the 1692–1693 Manning frame and the 1704 Brown-Pearl hall—are placed in spirited dialogue with the museum's important collection of early Anglo artifacts arranged within and around their walls. Throughout, the period rooms inform our sense of place and scale, while providing a more intimate encounter with art.

FACING PAGE, TOP: Manning House frame, Ipswich, Mass., 1692–1693. John Lowell Gardner Fund, 1925 (25.552).

The second-floor timbers from the Manning House, formerly installed as a period room at the MFA, have returned as an innovative display highlighting the timber-frame construction of the earliest New England buildings. The freestanding sculptural frame suggests the scale of a seventeenth-century house for the paintings, furniture, and silver on display around it, and illustrates the basic joinery techniques that were common to both buildings and furniture of the era.

FACING PAGE, BOTTOM: Brown-Pearl hall, West Boxford, Mass., about 1704. John Lowell Gardner Fund, 1925 (25.553).

This early timber-frame room was one of two rooms from the Brown-Pearl in house acquired by the MFA in 1925. Built for Cornelius Brown and his wife, Susannah, about 1704, this small farmhouse passed to Richard Pearl about 1738, and descended in his family for nearly two centuries. This room, taken from the ground floor of the house, exemplifies the multifunctional nature of most seventeenth- and early eighteenth-century living spaces. Called simply the “hall,” it was a nexus of activity, where cooking, sleeping, eating, and other activities were conducted in front of a large cooking hearth. The furniture is not original to the room, but it represents the kinds of furnishings often described in household inventories of the period.





PREVIOUS PAGE, TOP: Jaffrey parlor, Portsmouth, N. H., about 1730. Henry Lillie Pierce Residuary Fund for Colonial Art and with contributions from Charles Hitchcock Tyler and J. Templeman Coolidge, 1920 (20.602). The Edward W. & L. Linder Lombard Gallery.

The woodwork in this room originally graced a grand mansion built for George Jaffrey II (1682–1749), a prominent New Hampshire merchant and politician. The paneling is from the front parlor, a place for entertaining guests and transacting business, as well as for private family gatherings. The room has been furnished based on a 1749 inventory, which lists, among other things, a desk, three tables, ten chairs with cushions, seventeen prints and maps, and ceramics from Asia. By the early twentieth century, the house had fallen into disrepair, and the museum acquired two rooms and a large painted cupboard in 1920, the year after the house was demolished.

PREVIOUS PAGE, BOTTOM: Shumway house wall, Fiskdale, Mass., about 1780–1785. Helen and Alice Colburn Fund, 1925 (25.620).

Formerly installed as part of a period room, this section of pine paneling from the Shumway house in rural central Massachusetts features an unusual set of drawers above the fireplace. The house descended in the Shumway family and may have been built for Abijah Shumway around the time of his marriage in 1783 to Lucy Weld.

BELOW: Shepard parlor, Bath, Maine, about 1803. Gift of Dudley Leavitt Pickman, 1927 (27.301). The Sandra Sheppard Rogers Gallery.

Reinstalled and refreshed by extensive conservation work, this room was the front parlor of the prosperous Shepard merchant family on the Maine seacoast in the early nineteenth century. The outstanding feature of the room is the original French scenic wallpaper reportedly installed shortly after the house was constructed in 1803. The paper makes a sweeping panorama, transporting the residents of a small wood-frame house in Bath to gardens outside Paris and a fantasy landscape with scenes of Rome and country villas. Hardly accurate representations of either place, these wallpaper panels epitomize an era that saw the rise of panoramas and other optical amusements. Recent pigment analysis of the woodwork revealed that the original color of the paint was not off-white, as it had been painted for generations, but rather a stunning blue that harmonizes beautifully with the wallpaper.





Oak Hill, Peabody, Mass. Photograph by Frank Cousins, ca. 1920.
 Courtesy of the Peabody Essex Museum.

The suite of three rooms from Oak Hill, built in 1800–1801, a parlor, dining room, and bedroom, acquired by the MFA in 1922, are among the most extraordinary Federal-style period rooms in an American museum. Notable for their fine architectural details created by the renowned Salem architect and carver Samuel McIntire (1757–1811), these rooms also contain many of the original furnishings by McIntire and such local artisans as Boston furniture makers John (1738–1818) and Thomas Seymour (1771–1848). Built a few miles outside Salem, Oak Hill was the country estate of Elizabeth Derby—daughter of Salem merchant Elias Hasket Derby, who amassed an enormous fortune in the China trade—and her husband Captain Nathaniel West. After a visit to Oak Hill in 1801, the Reverend William Bentley of Salem wrote: “The apartments are finished in as good order as any I have ever seen. The furniture was rich but never violated the chastity of correct taste . . . We could not enumerate the beauties we saw.” First installed at the MFA in 1928, the rooms have been redecorated and reinterpreted over the years, notably after significant gifts of family furnishings by descendants Maxim and Martha Codman Karolik in the 1920s and 1930s and by Richard Edwards in 1972. Many of these furnishings match the 1814 inventory of Oak Hill.





ABOVE: Oak Hill dining room. Charles Amos Cummings Fund and anonymous gift, 1922 (22.806).

Descendant Richard Edward's gifts to the museum in 1972 brought "home" many of the family's objects in this room, including the silverplate service on the sideboard and the china and glassware on the dining table—here set for dessert—as well as a large gilt mirror by Boston frame maker John Doggett (1771–1819). The mirror is among the most expensive items in the 1814 estate, listed at \$150.

BELOW: Oak Hill parlor. Charles Amos Cummings Fund and anonymous gift, 1922 (22.805).

The parlor boasts a lavish assortment of furniture by Samuel McIntire, including a pair of card tables, sets of side chairs, a sofa, firescreen, and the cornices above the windows, and other original furniture such as a large oval mirror and upholstered armchairs. The 1814 inventory lists "1 loo box," and one of the card tables has been set for playing that popular card game, using the original mother-of-pearl counters from the Derby-West family.

ABOVE: Oak Hill bedroom. Charles Amos Cummings Fund and anonymous gift, 1922 (22.807). The James & Darcy Marsh Gallery.

This room, one of five bedrooms at Oak Hill, served as the master bedchamber. After her 1806 divorce from Nathaniel West, Elizabeth Derby lavished attention on this room, commissioning additional furniture from Salem and Boston craftsmen. For the greatest pieces, she turned again to Samuel McIntire, who made the elaborate chest-on-chest in this room, as well as the exquisite dressing glass on the table. The reproduction wallpaper is documented to the contemporary Harrison Gray Otis House in Boston, while the carpet is based on an English pattern from the period.







MAIN IMAGE: Roswell Gleason parlor, about 1840. Gift of Mary V. Bowker and museum purchase from the Period Room Restoration Fund, 1977 (1977.955). Courtesy of the Museum of Fine Arts, Boston. The Heide Family Gallery.

The parlor served as a place for entertaining and as the nucleus of a Victorian home. Life in the parlor gathered around a center table—the one in this room descended in the Gleason family, purchased by Roswell Gleason in 1849 for \$25. An 1890s photograph of this room provided initial guidance for the furnishing plan; it showed a mix of furnishings typical of a Victorian parlor. Among the objects on display in this room are an elaborate étagère by the Boston furniture maker George Croome (1807–1879) and a suite of rosewood parlor furniture. An 1848 portrait of Roswell Gleason by Edward Dalton Marchant (1806–1887) hangs above the fireplace.

INSET: Roswell Gleason Dining Room. Gift of Mary V. Bowker and museum purchase from the Period Room Restoration Fund, 1977 (1977.956). The Heide Family Gallery.

The furnishings in the dining room, including a number of pieces that descended in the Gleason family, epitomize an era when increased industrial production of domestic wares in the early nineteenth century brought a wider range and greater quantity of household goods to market than ever before. One of the highlights of the room is the mahogany extension dining table—a model patented by Boston furniture maker Cornelius Briggs (1787/1788–1848) in 1843. An interactive touch screen in this room allows visitors to scroll through Gleason & Sons's 1866 catalogue and then find objects from its pages on view in the room.

***Dennis Carr** is an assistant curator of decorative arts and sculpture in the department of Art of the Americas at the Museum of Fine Arts, Boston.*

The author thanks the many people who made the installation possible, particularly—at the Museum of Fine Arts—Gordon Hanlon, Head of Furniture and Frame Conservation, Phillip Johns, and Gerald W. R. Ward, the Katherine Lane Weems Senior Curator of Decorative Arts and Sculpture; and also Jim Boorstein of Traditional Line, Ltd., New York, and Arron Sturgis of Preservation Timber Framing, Inc., Berwick, Maine.