

THE SEARCH

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Stewart Shillito Maxwell, Jr.

“The lot comprises an entire square, the northern half of which is improved to show the building to the best advantage. With lands gently rising to the spot occupied by the residence, with an abundance of evergreens and young shade trees, and splendid graveled drives, the surroundings, for their age, have not their superior about Cincinnati. The whole is enclosed by a substantial wall, finished with cut molded coping of freestone.”

“The style of the building is Elizabethan. It has a frontage on Highland Avenue of over eighty feet, and on Oak Street of one hundred and five. The material is blue limestone. The walls are broken ashlar work, with angles, windows, and doorways heavily trimmed with freestone, and a cornice constructed entirely of the same material. What distinguishes this building from many others built of this limestone, is the large quantity of freestone entering into its composition, by which the structure is entirely relieved from an appearance of coldness. This at once dissipates the appearance of the castle, and clothes it in the warmth of the hospitable home. The building is entered through a magnificent stone porch, eleven feet by eight feet six inches, ornamented and faced, within and without, by tooled stone work.”

“The hall running east and west through the building is twenty feet wide at its greatest breadth, and is finished with walnut wainscoting, which surrounds panels in fresco. Here, after the English custom, is the old-fashioned fire-place, six feet wide, for burning wood. Over it is an elegantly wrought black walnut mantel, surmounted by three human figures, representing Peace, Plenty, and Harmony. The hall is surrounded by a heavy black walnut cornice, that borders a handsomely-frescoed ceiling. The floor of the hall is composed of white and black marble tiling. On the left ascends the magnificent staircase of black and white walnut, exquisitely carved and highly polished.”¹

This elaborate description was written by my great grandfather, Col. Sidney Denise Maxwell (1831-1913) in his book Suburbs of Cincinnati published in 1870. A gentleman of many talents, he was, besides a writer, a Union colonel in the Civil War, the Superintendent of the Cincinnati Chamber of Commerce from 1871-1891, a lawyer, assistant city editor of the

Cincinnati Gazette, and agent at Cincinnati for the Western Associated Press, having twice declined being the New York agency for that latter association. In his book on homes in Cincinnati's early suburbs, Col. Maxwell was describing in explicit detail the home of my great, great grandfather, John Shillito. The home which was situated on a large block of property in Mt. Auburn was bounded by William Howard Taft Road, Highland Avenue, Oak Street, and Burnet Avenue, diagonally across the street from the current-day Vernon Manor Hotel.

Named "Highland Terrace" by the Shillitos, the home was designed in the early 1860's by one of Cincinnati's leading architects, James W. McLaughlin (1834-1923) and its builder, Truman B. Handy. A native Cincinnati, this architect was a son of William McLaughlin, the first business partner of John Shillito in 1830, whose later magnificent and innovative department store on Fourth Street (built in 1857) was McLaughlin's first major work.² That store later became the McAlpin's Department Store (now being renovated into condominiums) when the John Shillito Co. Department Store moved to Seventh and Race Streets. This newly relocated store, also built by McLaughlin in 1877-78, became Shillito's grand emporium as the largest and oldest store west of the Alleghenies, based upon New York's A.T. Stewart's Marble Dry Goods Palace and Bon Marché in Paris.

Due to "Highland Terrace's" ornate carving in stone and wood, the home took several years to complete, and the Shillitos took occupancy in 1866. Upon the death of widow Mary Wallace Shillito, the home became the new headquarters for Clara Baur's Conservatory of Music in 1902 and remained there until 1967. Following the 1955 merger with its rival, the College of Music and subsequently becoming the 14th college within the University of Cincinnati in 1962, it was inevitable that a new, larger, more modern facility would be built on U.C.'s main campus and necessitate both the move in 1967 to the Corbett Center for the Performing Arts as well as the abandonment of the Shillito home. The home and its property were sold to the Cincinnati Board of Education who demolished this significant historic and architectural mid-19th century building in favor of a non-descript yellow brick and aluminum sash structure named Merry Junior High School. This facility has since closed in order to be remodeled and added onto to become the new headquarters of the Cincinnati Board of Education and the Mayerson Academy.

In 2002, I had been asked to comment upon and assist in editing a chapter of a book being published by the Ohio University Press for the Cincinnati Art Museum entitled Cincinnati Art-Carved Furniture and Interiors compiled by then-Assistant Curator of Decorative Arts, Jennifer L. Howe. University of Cincinnati Professors Walter E. Langsam, a member of our

distinguished Literary Club, and Patrick A. Snadon were given the task of writing a chapter within the book titled “Artist Carvers and Connoisseur Clients: Art-Carved Interiors of Cincinnati.” Professors Langsam and Snadon asked me to assist them with this chapter, and so it was in the Summer of 2002 that I found myself nestled in a favorite chair and ottoman reading the proposed text for the book’s chapter.

As I read two pages of text describing McLaughlin’s Elizabethan and Jacobean-styled masterpiece for the Shillitos, I felt great sadness that there was absolutely nothing saved to allow people to view the high level of quality associated with every facet and detail of “Highland Terrace.” With the exception of Col. Maxwell’s written description, and a few exterior and interior photographs, nothing apparently remained. For an example of its splendor, the black walnut and ebony ornamented paneled Library, with its built-in glass-fronted bookcases, contained intricately carved Ionic pilasters of the Renaissance style defining the room’s geometry in an orderly manner while carrying a modified Doric frieze with carved triglyphs. Strategically placed around the perimeter of the room above doorways and bookcases were roundels of exquisitely carved sculptural heads crafted in high relief and representing celebrated Shakespearean literary characters. The ceiling of black walnut also contained panels finished in fresco, while the flooring exhibited beautiful marquetry consisting of alternating hexagonal blocks of black walnut and oak.³

In studying the photographs of the interior and exterior, it became evident that similar detailings, whether carved in black walnut, marble or limestone, were found in stylized versions of Elizabethan strapwork and Renaissance pilasters. It shows an effective cooperative relationship between McLaughlin as the architect and the stone masons and the wood carver decorators.

The magnificent wood carving was the work of the Fry Studio, a father and son team. The father, Henry L. Fry (1807-1895), and his son, William H. Fry (1830-1929), were originally from England and therefore were familiar with the range of English architectural styles spanning from the Medieval through the early 19th century. Since the Shillito’s ancestors were from England, the selection of these design motives was perhaps a conscious decision to allude to their family heritage. Henry Fry came from the city of Bath, England and stated that William Beckford influenced his career. Beckford, who built the now-famous Fonthill Abbey (c. 1789-1820) in Wiltshire, became a proponent of the emerging revival of the Gothic order. Beckford’s interiors were not limited to the Gothic period, but show an eclecticism composed of rare

antiques and decorative arts from a range of different styles. These rooms by Beckford were some of the earliest examples of “artistic” interiors which would anticipate the 19th century’s later fascination with the eclectic.⁴

Henry Fry claimed to have worked on the remodeling of Westminster Abbey and the new Houses of Parliament which were considered then and today as very fine examples of Gothic Revival. This heritage, combined with his familiarity with Beckford, allowed Henry Fry and his son William to be quite facile in designing and carving in a variety of historical styles.

Another influence on the Fry’s work was popular English author, John Ruskin (1819-1900) who opined that there should be honesty and truth in architecture and design, which was best achieved in Medieval times. He believed that the emulation of nature by creating handcrafted ornamentation should become the highest order of importance in transcending the purely utilitarian. Ruskin also felt that the decorative arts held a moral function which could elevate or debase a home’s occupants. The Frys - consistent in their eclecticism - could work in Ruskin’s naturalistic Medieval style, but also did not choose to be constrained by it exclusively: to them, it was simply one more style in their repertoire.⁵

The pièce de resistance of “Highland Terrace’s” interior was undoubtedly the enormous carved mantelpiece located in the Foyer. Named “Peace, Plenty, and Harmony” after the three almost life-sized caryatids perched on the mantelshelf and carrying the weight of the projecting cornice atop their heads, this amazing tour-de-force mantelpiece in the Mannerist-Elizabethan style measured approximately 15 feet in overall height. This English custom of having a fireplace in the Front Hall combined practicality and charm: the six foot width of its opening provided both a visual and physical warmth for the family and visitors of the home. Such considerations on the part of the architect made this cold, austere castle-like fortress become a home centered upon this grandly scaled and detailed family hearth. On either side of the fireplace opening were carved lion busts acting as capitals for flanking scrolled pilasters, all carved in black walnut. Above the opening and resting upon the lions’ heads was a mantelshelf of intricate paneled carving with a rounded, bonnet hood in the center containing a built-in Tiffany clock. At approximately 7 feet 6 inches above the black and white marble floor, the shelf was slid horizontally under the feet of the aforementioned “Peace, Plenty and Harmony” caryatids, which was about midway in the mantelpiece’s overall height. These caryatids are reminiscent of their ancient Greek models at the Erechtheion in Athens where sensually draped female figures are employed effectively in support of an overhead cornice and roof instead of

using columns. Placed between these three walnut-carved figures were two architectural over-mantel panels, each measuring 45" high by 23" wide and celebrating the fine carving and craftsmanship of the Frys. The black walnut carving done in high relief a couple of inches thick reminded one of Elizabethan "strapwork" - a type of ornamentation which gave the appearance of a wooden band that had been folded, crossed, and interlaced. Reminiscent of the celebrated 17th century wood carver, Grinling Gibbons (1648-1720) whose Late Jacobean work became the standard by which all carving was measured, these walnut strapwork carvings by the Frys were a linear cornucopia of fruits, nuts, vegetables, and berries fashioned in an elliptical banding suspended by projecting curved forms, delicately etched as lattice, as part of a rear walnut paneled backdrop. In order to emphasize this extraordinary carving, the Frys placed this dark ornamentation against an even larger backdrop of figured maple in a brighter, warm, caramelized tone. Above the over-mantel panels and the heads of the caryatids was the projecting cornice a couple of feet in depth in order to be in scale with the room.

Contemplating the richness of these interiors and all of its incredible carving and ornamentation made me realize the permanence of the loss as decreed by the demolition of this home. To think that the authors of the Museum's book would spend two pages in description of the interiors of "Highland Terrace" without any surviving artifacts made me feel quite melancholy. At that moment, I remembered that Wooden Nickel, the local treasure trove of architectural retrieval, had managed to acquire some elements of the Shillito's home before it was demolished: the wooden balustrade of the staircase; fireplace mantels; wainscoting; paneled doors. I thought that it was worth a phone call to its owner, Michael Williams, to see if he might recall who had purchased some of these artifacts in the early to mid-1970s. In speaking to Mr. Williams, he remembered the Shillito artifacts well because he had just started his business, and these were exceptionally fine carvings to be offered to his new customers. Unfortunately, he did not keep careful records of who purchased these pieces, although he stated that almost everything at that time was being bought by decorators and collectors from California, Texas, and Colorado. Dejected that he didn't know anything beyond this, I began to hang up the telephone when I heard Mr. Williams say: "As luck would have it. . ." He immediately captured my attention as he continued to state that the demolition contractor of "Highland Terrace" had, at the time of the home's destruction, taken several significant carved panels, thinking that he would someday incorporate them into his own home. For about 35 years, these panels remained in this contractor's storage area without ever being used, and when he decided to sell his home,

he brought the panels to the Wooden Nickel for sale. So, Mr. Williams informed me that he just happened to have several carved panels from “Highland Terrace” and, if I would like to see them, he would gladly make them available for viewing. Overjoyed, I said that I would be down to his shop immediately. As soon as I concluded my phone conversation with Mr. Williams, I called Walter Langsam and shared with him our good fortune in finding these Fry panels. Armed with the few interior photographs that we had of “Highland Terrace”, I picked up Walter on our way to Wooden Nickel. Although both of us were quite excited about the prospect of what we were about to see, both of us were also mindful of exaggerated, embellished or even flagrantly “creative” attributions of supposedly famous artifacts. How could we really be certain that these panels had come from the interiors of “Highland Terrace”? This question was immediately dispelled the minute I viewed the three panels. Of this group, two panels were a pair identical in size, style and finish but subtly different in their carving ornamentation, while the other lone panel was clearly from the same carver but from a different room. Incredibly, although we only possessed a few interior photos, the pair of panels were in one of the photographs! This search had led us to the pair of over-mantel panels that had been located between the “Peace, Plenty, and Harmony” caryatids and were clearly a source of great pride for the Frys, given their prominent location in the Foyer. With little more than a coating of dust, these panels glowed in their original finish - never having received additional varnish coatings or an even worse fate of multiple layers of paint.

In analyzing the wood carving of these two Fry over-mantel panels, the quality of the workmanship is outstanding. Each of the nuts, vegetables, fruits, and berries is exquisite in detail to the point of being life-like. Every element - no more than a few inches across - is truly remarkable considering that the Frys gave the surface its own texture replicating reality, including deep crevices revealing stamens and other interior details of flowering fruit, for example. All of this is especially incredible considering that these elements were carved in black walnut, a very hard wood. While this carving would be entirely consistent with John Ruskin’s principles of design, the Frys made a dramatic departure from him in selecting the figured maple veneer for the panels’ backdrops. This choice was clearly made by the Frys for aesthetic reasons, disregarding Ruskin’s feeling that the use of veneer was false and not true to nature. Because of this dichotomy between the carved walnut and the figured maple veneer, these over-mantel panels illustrated quite vividly the Frys eclectic and less principled nature in approaching their artistry and art carving as a business. If the shimmering and silky grain of figured maple

veneer was felt to be more appropriate to the Frys in the creation of this work of art, then that was the decision they made. It was perfectly fine to be theoretical, but sometimes rules should be broken in order to achieve a desired result, and that was what these panels represented.

Thrilled to have discovered them, I decided to purchase the pair of Fry panels in order to donate them to the Cincinnati Art Museum for posterity's sake so that current and future generations can behold their beauty. Unfortunately, while the panels' discovery and donation were purchased in time to be included in the Cincinnati Art Museum's Cincinnati Art-Carved Furniture and Interiors, museum officials were not able to locate them in the Cincinnati Wing given their large size and the timing of the new wing's opening; they are presently housed in museum storage awaiting a future where they can once again be admired. Noteworthy as works created by the Frys in the early 1860's, they represent some of the earliest known work in the Museum's collection for the Fry Studio.

For some who are less curious, the search might have ended here. However, Mr. Williams of the Wooden Nickel had mentioned in passing that he remembered having a large piece of furniture brought to him by a long time customer which had once belonged to a "Miss Shillito on Erie Avenue of Hyde Park". More importantly, Mr. Williams recognized it as a piece by Herter Brothers of New York and knew that he would never be able to achieve the true value of selling this piece in Cincinnati. Clearly, this was meant for auction in New York.

Herter Brothers was the leading cabinetmaking and decorating firm in America during the last half of the nineteenth century. In 1848, Gustave Herter (1830-1898) arrived in the United States from Germany in order to flee chaotic economic and political situations. Ten years later, his brother Christian (1839-1883) joined him in New York. It is believed that both brothers may have initially worked as designers for Tiffany & Co. In 1851, Gustave began his partnership with Auguste Pottier (1823-1896) to establish the cabinetmaking firm of Herter, Pottier & Co. of New York, although this partnership was short lived because two years later, Pottier left the firm. At that time in 1853, Gustave Herter took a new partner, Erastus Bulkley, in order to establish Bulkley and Herter. Almost immediately, this partnership proved to be successful since they began receiving awards and acclaim for their work. R.G. Dun & Co., predecessor of current day Dun & Bradstreet, reported in 1854 that Bulkley and Herter have considerable means, with employment of forty to fifty craftsmen in making costly furniture of the best quality.⁶ In 1858, Bulkley and Herter dissolved their partnership, with Gustave Herter buying his partner's share.

Cincinnati played an important role in Gustave Herter's career, when Henry Probasco (1820-1902) hired him to supply furniture, wallpaper and woodwork for his newly constructed Romanesque-styled residence of "Oakwood" in Clifton in 1860. This relationship with the Probascos was a lengthy one, because Gustave Herter and later Herter Brothers were hired twice to decorate and redecorate "Oakwood".

Gustave and Christian officially became partners in 1864 and the firm made its final name-change to Herter Brothers in 1865. Cincinnati re-entered the picture, this time regarding the firm's management. Mr. Probasco and his brother-in-law, Tyler Davidson, had a prosperous hardware and import firm in Cincinnati that they shared with a business partner, Caleb P. Marsh. In 1870, Marsh joined Herter Brothers and continued with the firm through 1874.

The client list of Herter Brothers reads as a "Who's Who" of some of America's wealthiest patrons of the Gilded Age: J. Pierpont Morgan, William H. Vanderbilt, Jay Gould, John Jacob Glessner, Darius Ogden Mills, T. Harrison Garrett, Mrs. Mark Hopkins, Potter Palmer, and John D. Spreckels among many others.

It was no wonder that the wealthiest families were attracted to Herter Brothers. Their prize-winning designs, richness of materials, exquisite detailing, superb craftsmanship, and a diversity of styles ranged from Greek, Egyptian, Pompeian, Renaissance, Louis XV, Louis XVI, to Anglo-Japanese along with many other variants. In an age that prized eclecticism, Herter Brothers represented the quintessence of design in the last half of the 19th century. Although they were extremely knowledgeable about the multitude of styles through the ages, it was the Herter Brothers' ability for ingenious combinations and unique interpretations which brought them international acclaim.

The Shillito armoire cabinet designed by Herter Brothers exemplified this eclectic spirit. With this commissioned piece of the late 1860's, the firm combined seemingly disparate styles of Renaissance, Egyptian, and Pompeian Revivalism into an extremely elegant, aesthetic, cohesive design. Composed of rosewood accented with numerous exotic woods for inlay, gilt, ormolu, and brass, this armoire set a standard for lavishness and sophistication which would be difficult to exceed. The central section, approximately seven feet in height, had a pair of tall, double doors with Pompeian inlaid fresco-work adorning their surfaces. Two central panels with ebonized backgrounds recalled mural decorations at Pompeii at the House of the Vettii with its fanciful mythological female figures protecting the doors. Above and below these central panels were two sets of roundel cameo profiles of men from mythology, all set against lightly stained

rosewood to create a strong contrast in tones. Elaborate classical inlaid borders trimmed the edges of the doors echoing the wall treatment panels found at Pompeii. Above the double doors was an entablature with a crowning triangular pediment, alluding to both the pyramids of Ancient Egypt as well as the classical orders and the Renaissance. Flanking this central and tallest section were two lower dark rosewood stained cabinets with doors and drawers exhibiting floral motifs bordered in a classically designed inlay. Brass hardware, shaped to remind one of ornamental strapwork or stirrups, was selected for drawer pulls and became a hallmark for Herter Brothers' designs. Atop these lower two flanking cabinets were found rosewood carved sphinxes combining Greek mythology with Egyptian antiquity: a mixture of a male Egyptian wearing a headdress with a lion's body, but with wings following the Greek's interpretation. This piece of furniture was truly a work befitting the Gods, or, in this case, the reigning merchant family.

When speaking to Mr. Williams of Wooden Nickel regarding his purchase and sale of this armoire, he had told me that it had been owned by "Miss Shillito on Erie Avenue in Hyde Park." The only problem was that my maiden great aunt, Beatrice Shillito (1884-1964), late in life lived off Erie Avenue on Ashworth Drive near the Hyde Park Country Club in what is today Chestnut Station. On the other hand, her sister and my grandmother, Mildred Trimble Shillito Maxwell (1886-1951), lived in a Tudor-styled home directly on Erie Avenue at Raymar Boulevard, but she would have been properly known as Mrs. Maxwell, not Miss Shillito. Thankfully, my aunt, Dolly Maxwell Peirce, was still alive at the time to solve this puzzle. When visiting her at Thanksgiving, I brought pictures of the armoire to show her, and she immediately exclaimed "that was our Living Room Monopoly Game Cabinet!" Evidently, the Shillitos had commissioned the piece in New York in the late 1860's, and it had been placed, according to the description of Col. Maxwell, in their large Drawing Room which measured twenty by thirty feet. "The walls and ceilings are frescoed in admirable taste, the colors and tints being of unusual beauty." He continues that the fireplace mantel in this Drawing Room "is pure white Italian. The shelf of this is supported by statues of Summer and Winter, and the whole sustains a French mirror extending thence to the ceiling. The floor is rare marquetry, into which oak and walnut largely enter. Two features of the room are the "étagère" (which I believe to be the Herter Brothers' armoire), a piece of elegant furniture, finished in mosaic, and the chandelier of twelve burners, consisting wholly of glass." The woodwork of this room consists of oak and mahogany.⁷ Although my great grandfather described the piece as an étagère (defined as a tall

open sided cabinet with shelves for the display of curiosities, bric-a-brac, and books), I believe that this is merely a confusion in French terms with the word “armoire” (a large ornate cabinet or wardrobe closet).

According to my Aunt Dolly, the Herter Brothers’ cabinet left “Highland Terrace” when the home became the Conservatory of Music and traveled across the street to the home called “Bellevue” owned by Stewart Shillito, my great grandfather and namesake. The armoire then passed to my grandmother, Stewart Shillito’s daughter, Mildred Shillito, who had married my grandfather, Nathaniel Hamilton Maxwell, and they were the parents of my father and Aunt Dolly. It stayed at the 2960 Erie Avenue address in their Living Room until the house was sold at the time of Mildred Shillito Maxwell’s death in 1951. Afterward, my father inherited the armoire which he had dearly loved, according to his sister. However, he had just completed a very contemporary home in Indian Hill with the late Woodie Garber, a Literary Club member by the way, and there simply wasn’t a long enough wall for it -- not to mention that the house was the antithesis of eclectic with only modern art and furnishings allowed. This piece just would not have looked acceptable amongst artwork of Kandinsky, a sculptural mobile by Calder, exposed brick fireplace, floor-to-ceiling glass, and furniture designed by Eero Saarinen, Alvar Aalto, Charles and Ray Eames, and Marcel Breuer. Even if my father had had a weak moment of sentimentality and agreed to accept the piece, I am certain that Woodie would have blocked the door! Realizing his dilemma, my father decided to give the armoire to his friend, the late Dr. Byron Bernard, the former veterinarian with the Cincinnati Zoo. Dr. Bernard was very much a lover of antiques and a proponent of eclecticism. For example, while working with Dr. Albert Schweitzer in Africa, he was able to assemble a large, early collection of African art before the nations banned its exportation. He gladly accepted the armoire and included it in his Northern Kentucky home filled with collections of the exotic and rare.

It had been Dr. Bernard who had come to Michael Williams at Wooden Nickel wanting to sell this armoire. Recognizing the piece as Herter Brothers cabinetry of the Renaissance Revival/Aesthetic Movement styles, Mr. Williams sold the armoire at Sotheby’s in New York in 1989 for a record breaking price at a public auction of \$77,000 for a single piece of Victorian furniture. The buyer was the Margot Johnson Gallery in New York who then sold it to the Denver Art Museum where it is on display today. It was thanks to the Denver Art Museum who supplied me with photographs of this amazing armoire and permitted my Aunt Dolly to identify its image. This allowed me to do further research and to eventually write this

paper.

In researching a topic, inevitably I stumble upon at least several other tantalizing tidbits of information which create a seemingly endless search for greater knowledge. “Seek and ye shall find.”

FOOTNOTES

- 1 Sidney D. Maxwell, The Suburbs of Cincinnati, Sketches Historical and Descriptive (C. E. Stevens Publishers, Cincinnati, 1870; reprint: Arno Press, Inc., New York, 1974), p. 107.
- 2 Jennifer L. Howe, Cincinnati Art-Carved Furniture and Interiors (Ohio University Press for the Cincinnati Art Museum, Athens, Ohio, 2003), p. 89.
- 3 Maxwell, Suburbs of Cincinnati, p. 108.
- 4 Howe, Cincinnati Art-Carved Furniture and Interiors, pp. 80-82.
- 5 Ibid, p. 81.
- 6 Sophia Riefstahl, et. al. Herter Brothers: Furniture and Interiors For a Gilded Age (Harry N. Abrams Publishers, Inc. for the Museum of Fine Arts-Houston, New York, 1994), p. 226.
- 7 Maxwell, Suburbs of Cincinnati, pp. 107-108.

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