



ART LIBRARIES SOCIETY OF NORTH AMERICA

35th Annual Conference
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Session 6: Architecture of the Old South: Lowcountry, Backcountry and the Vernacular
Friday, April 22, 2007, 11:00 a.m. to 12:30 p.m.

Moderator: Lucie Wall Stylianopoulos

Speakers:

Lucie Stylianopoulos, Art and Architecture Librarian, University of Virginia
Elizabeth Gushee, Image & Photography Librarian, University of Virginia
Louis P. Nelson, Assistant Professor, School of Architecture and McIntire Department of Art, University of Virginia
Robert Leath, Chief Curator and Vice-President, Collections and Research, Old Salem Museums & Gardens

Recorder: Yuki Hibben, Virginia Commonwealth University

Introduction by Lucie Stylianopoulos

Romantic stereotypes of the South are often limited to Antebellum Plantations and the Founding Fathers. This session will reveal the "diversity and richness of the regional South, the material and photography that preserved it, and the cultural forces that shaped it."

Lucie Stylianopoulos, Art and Architecture Librarian, University of Virginia

"A Bed, a Chest, and a Chair: Researching Material Culture in the North Carolina Backcountry"

Stylianopoulos's interest in the material culture of the North Carolina Backcountry began with looking for information about furniture that had been passed down to her through her family. She explained that little research has been done on decorative arts in the Southern Backcountry, but she found that resources are abundant. During her research, Stylianopoulos found that wills were a particularly rich source of information. Stylianopoulos read from several wills dated to the early 1800's. These wills gave detailed information about the furniture, livestock, and other possessions owned by the inhabitants of the Backcountry. Almost always, furniture was valued as a commodity. Bedsteads and kitchen furniture predominated as gifts in Backcountry around 1820.

Stylianopoulos describes the Backcountry as a “moveable feast.” Early on it included areas of the Piedmont extending from Charlottesville, VA to Charlotte, North Carolina. Later, settlement to the west “moved” the Backcountry to the Appalachian mountains. The Backcountry was generally considered as behind-the-times and less than civilized. Scholars suggested, initially, that Backcountry furniture resembled simplified copies of the more sophisticated furniture made in eastern North Carolina and Virginia. At the time, a move toward “civilization” meant the importation of slavery and a move to the plantation culture long associated with the South but generally new to the Backcountry.

By the mid-1900’s, the North Carolina Backcountry was a melting pot of cultures. Many of the settlers were of Scots-Irish descent but there were also populations of Swiss, French and other immigrants. Native Americans and slaves were also a part of the increasingly heterogeneous population. Each of these groups contributed to the rich material culture of the area. Stylianopoulos showed examples from her family of a German style chest from ca. 1850, a chair made by an English-American Indian craftsman from ca. 1830, and a Scotch-Irish family bedstead from the mid-nineteenth century. All of these pieces were identified and dated by comparison to Backcountry pieces found in the photographic archives of the Museum of Early Southern Decorative Arts (MESDA) in Winston-Salem, North Carolina

There are two centers of scholarship that are particularly strong in the study of this area: MESDA in Winston-Salem, North Carolina and the College of William and Mary in Williamsburg, Virginia which has produced numerous dissertations on the Backcountry. The Research Center at MESDA houses many resources including an extensive photographic collection of furniture from the Backcountry as well as the Chesapeake and the Southern Low Country. This year, MESDA will offer their yearly Summer Scholarly Institute on one of the regions in collaboration with the University of Virginia.

Elizabeth Gushee, Image & Photography Librarian, University of Virginia. “Travels through the Old South: Frances Benjamin Johnston and the Vernacular Architecture of Virginia.”

Elizabeth Gushee received a Research & Development grant from the University of Virginia for research on the photographer, Frances Benjamin Johnston. The project to digitize approximately 1,000 architectural photographs made by Frances Benjamin Johnston and owned by UVA is currently underway. The bulk of Johnston’s work is housed at the Library of Congress; this collection includes her personal papers as well as her career photographic output. Johnston’s photographs created from her Carnegie Survey of the South consist of approximately 8,000 negatives.

Frances Benjamin Johnston began her Carnegie-funded photographic survey of the Colonial architecture of Virginia in 1933. Just prior to this period, Johnston became interested in the undocumented and often crumbling vernacular architecture of Virginia and the rest of the South. Johnston spent three years traveling throughout Virginia; visiting many of its 95 counties and traveling a distance of 50,000 miles. Over the following five years, Johnston would visit an additional seven southern states for her architectural survey and was reported to have covered a distance that would circle the globe three times over. There are many stories about Johnston's adventurous work. Gushee told the story of Johnston at the age of 72, building a make-shift bridge with her driver so that she could cross a creek that blocked the road to an abandoned house. She was widely regarded as a very independent and determined woman.

Born in 1864, Johnston grew up in Washington, D.C. and studied art at the Art Students' League, now known as The Corcoran Art School. She took an interest in photography early in her artistic career and reputedly received her first Kodak camera from George Eastman himself in 1889. Around this time, innovations in printing technology made it possible to reproduce photographic images in print publications. This led to the birth of photojournalism. This was also a time when women were gaining more independence making it possible, though challenging, for Johnston to venture into her future profession.

Johnston's early work was primarily as a photojournalist and portraitist. Her family connections in Washington, D.C. helped her to become a photographer for the first family and other political figures. She is credited for taking the last picture of President McKinley at the Pan American Exposition in 1901. She also took photographs of Progressive Era schools. Particularly notable are her documentary photographs of African American students at the Hampton and Tuskegee Institutes.

From 1927 to 1952, Johnston devoted her work to documenting the architecture of the Colonial South. She began with landmarks but soon became fascinated with vernacular structures such as mills, farmhouses, country stores, and log cabins. She received successive Carnegie Grants to travel through the South to document the vanishing architectural landscape. Johnston also photographed interiors, furniture, and architectural details, preserving information about the material culture housed within these structures.

Johnston continued to be very active until her death in New Orleans in 1952. She spent some of her time at the Library of Congress, organizing and annotating catalog cards to accompany her work. In 1945, The American Institute of Architects awarded Johnston with an honorary membership for her contributions to architectural history.

Louis P. Nelson, Assistant Professor, School of Architecture and McIntire Department of Art, University of Virginia. "Anglican Church Architecture and the Social Order of the Early Church"

Louis Nelson specializes in the colonial architecture of the Greater Caribbean and the American South. He serves as the Senior Co-editor of *Perspectives in Vernacular Architecture*. His first monograph, *Pulpits, Piety, and Power: Anglican Architecture and Material Culture in Colonial South Carolina*, is forthcoming publication. Nelson explained that his interest in vernacular architecture and artifacts does not rest with the recording and interpretation of objects but extends to what they reveal about the human experience. His talk today will focus on St. Michael's Church in Charleston, South Carolina and what the church architecture reveals about the social order of that time.

In 17th century English churches, the social order of the congregation was evident in the size, ornamentation, and location of the rented pews. The most distinguished parishioners rented Great Pews that were centrally located near the altar. In 18th century colonial America, Anglican Church leaders denounced Great Pews because they served only to "proclaim pride or hide a vice or disorder." Church interiors were designed with architectural uniformity to instill values of equanimity among the congregation.

St. Michael's Church in South Carolina is one example of a colonial era church filled with plain box pews that are indistinguishable in size and form. Despite efforts toward equanimity, Nelson's research into pew subscriptions exposes a subtle social hierarchy. Church records indicate the occupation of the pew owners and Nelson found that "layers of wealth radiated from the center." The Governor, the Governor's Council, and the Colonial Assembly claimed pews at the heart of the church with public officials, merchants, and plantation owners seated behind them. A system of bidding for the best pews was opened privately to select parishioners. This ensured that the plantation owner had a chance to bid before the schoolmaster. A second bidding was opened up to the public and usually included professionals and artisans. The price of the bids were far from equal, with some artisans paying more for less desirable pews.

Nelson noticed that a parishioner had placed a high bid on pew 78, one of the outer pews near the west entrance while Pew 51, located in the same place on the opposite side of the church, received a low bid. His research led him to conclude that the west entrance offered extraordinary social and political access because it was near the principal entrance.

The lower classes also vied for seats according to social standing. Poor whites, who were initially seated in the aisles with the slaves, protested until Negroes were banned from sitting on benches. Church dissenters owned pews as well. Choosing not to subscribe to a pew would mean social and political alienation. Despite the uniformity of the pews, the seating

arrangements at St. Michael's provide evidence of the social order within the community.

Robert Leath, Chief Curator and Vice-President, Collections and Research, Old Salem Museums & Gardens. "One Hundred and Fifty Years of Southern Architectural History in Forty-Five Minutes: MESDA's Period Rooms

The Museum of Early Southern Decorative Arts (MESDA) is located in a converted Kroger grocery store in Winston-Salem, North Carolina. Leath describes this as an apt setting for period rooms from yet another place and time. MESDA was founded in 1965 by one of the country's leading antiquarians, Frank L. Horton, to preserve the decorative arts history of the early South and to provide educational opportunities through exhibits and period rooms.

Today, MESDA has twenty four period rooms and six galleries that represent decorative arts from the three regions of the early South: the Chesapeake, the Lowcountry, and the Backcountry. The Lowcountry includes the coastal regions along Georgia and South Carolina. The Chesapeake includes the Chesapeake Bay and Tidewater areas of Virginia, Maryland, and North Carolina. The Backcountry includes the mountainous areas of Virginia, the Carolinas, and Georgia. It also extends to eastern Kentucky and Tennessee. Leath showed a series of images of furniture and period rooms representing these areas.

The period rooms include authentic architectural details such as paneling and mantels that allow architecture to be examined as artifacts. However, a number of early period rooms in the museum are inaccurate. MESDA curators know that sometimes liberties were taken with the earlier period rooms: wall panels were left out; doors were relocated to suit the layout of the museum; paintings that were out of context covered authentic interior features; color palates were incorrect; etc. Research and improved methodologies have helped the museum install newer period rooms with greater historical accuracy.

MESDA strives to preserve historical context for both the museum visitor and the dedicated scholar. Currently, MESDA is launching several key initiatives to promote new scholarship in southern decorative arts. These include a total reexamination of the exhibition strategies for the period rooms and how they can best further the museum's educational mission.