



ART LIBRARIES SOCIETY OF NORTH AMERICA

**35<sup>th</sup> Annual Conference**  
**Sheraton Colony Square, Atlanta, Georgia, April 26-May 1**

**Session 13: Fine and Folk: Traditional Decorative Arts of Georgia and the Southern States**

**Saturday, April 23, 2007, 1:30 p.m. to 3:00 p.m.**

**Moderator: Kathy Woodrell, Reference Specialist - Decorative Arts, Library of Congress**

**Speakers:**

Ashley Callahan, Curator of the Decorative Arts, Georgia Museum of Art  
Susan Neill, Vice President of Collections and Curator of Textiles and Social History, Atlanta History Center

Deanne Levison, Consultant in American Furniture, Atlanta, Georgia

**Recorder: Yuki Hibben, Virginia Commonwealth University**

**"The Georgia Museum of Art's Henry D. Green Center for the Study of the Decorative Arts" Ashley Callahan, Curator of the Decorative Arts, Georgia Museum of Art**

Ashley Callahan is the first curator of decorative arts at the Georgia Museum and oversees the biennial Henry D. Green Symposium of the Decorative Arts. She is a native of Georgia and received her M.A. in the History of American Decorative Arts through a joint program offered by the Parsons School of Design and the Cooper-Hewitt National Design Museum of the Smithsonian Institution. Callahan is the author of numerous publications including *Enchanting Modern: Ilonka Karasz* and *Modern Threads: Fashion and Art* by Mariska Karasz.

The Georgia Museum is part of the University of Georgia and is also the official state art museum. The Henry D. Green Center for the Study of Decorative Arts was established as part of the Georgia Museum in 2000. Henry Green was a businessman whose interest in Georgia history and furniture began as a hobby in the 1930's. He became an avid collector, expert, and champion of Southern decorative arts. In 1976, he organized *Furniture of the Georgia Piedmont before 1830* at the High Museum of Art in Atlanta. The exhibition and its accompanying catalog were the first important steps in bringing scholarly attention to the decorative arts of Georgia. Green donated his library to the Georgia Museum, creating a foundation for the Center's library.

Following Green's precedent, several exhibitions helped to promote interest and research in Georgia's plain-style furniture. In the 1980's, the Atlanta History Center organized *Neat Pieces: Furniture of 19<sup>th</sup> Century Georgia*. The accompanying catalog by Deanne Levison was recently reprinted in color. Another significant exhibition was *Hidden Heritage: Recent Discoveries in Georgia Decorative Art, 1733-1915*, held at the High Museum of Art in 1990. In addition to these early exhibitions, The National Society of the Colonial Dames of America sponsored a major survey documenting 4,300 decorative arts objects from Georgia. The findings of the Georgia Decorative Arts Survey are housed at the Henry D. Green Center for the Study of the Decorative Arts.

The Georgia Museum concentrates on decorative arts made in Georgia as well as other relevant works. Callahan showed images of objects from the collection, including a sideboard in the signature Georgia Plain-style.

The Georgia Museum established the Henry D. Green Symposium of the Decorative Arts to foster interest and research in the decorative arts. The first biennial symposium, *The Savannah River Valley to 1865: Fine Arts, Architecture, and Decorative Arts*, was held in 2002. The Savannah River Valley extends from Savannah to the fall line. Callahan showed an image of a secretary representative of furniture crafted in this area. The secretary is a simplified Backcountry interpretation of the more intricately ornamented High-style. The second symposium in 2004 was titled, *Georgia Inside and Out* and featured a broad approach to decorative arts throughout the entire state. The third symposium, *Decorative Arts in Georgia: Historic Sites, Historic Contexts*, was held in 2006 and focused on the medium of silver. Callahan explained that although there is a stereotype of desperate poverty in the South during reconstruction, postbellum Georgia was actually an excellent market for silverware from the North. The symposium also included a presentation on the Tallulah Falls School. This school, located near Athens, Georgia, trained students in the art of Appalachian crafts. The 4<sup>th</sup> symposium, *A Colorful Past: Decorative Arts of Georgia*, will take place in February of 2008.

**"Atlanta's Closet: Textiles from the Atlanta History Center Collection with an Armchair Tour of Designs of the Times: Twentieth-Century Georgia Quilts." Susan Neill, Vice President of Collections and Curator of Textiles and Social History, Atlanta History Center.**

Susan Neill studied Cultural Anthropology at Northwestern University and is the co-author of *Women in Atlanta*. The Atlanta History Center is located off Peachtree Road in the uptown Buckhead district. Neill encouraged ARLIS/NA members to visit the museum to see its current exhibition, *I have a Dream: The Morehouse College Martin Luther King Jr. Collection*.

The Atlanta History Center is situated on 33 acres and includes one of the Southeast's largest history museums, a library, archives, two historic houses, and eight gardens. The Tullie Smith Farm, one of the historic houses onsite, includes a complex of farm structures from the 1840's as well as period livestock. The Atlanta History Center houses the largest collection of Confederate artifacts in the world.

The Textiles and Social History Collection includes approximately 11,000 examples of clothing, domestic textiles, tools and equipment. Neill described several highlights from the collection: a boys jacket and trouser set from the 1850's preserved carefully due to the boy's untimely death; a pieced quilt made by a slave dating from the 1830's; and an appliquéd quilt made by a group of women who gathered for vacations at Gordon Springs Resort. Neill described one of her first exhibitions at the Atlanta History Center, *Gone with the Girdle: Freedom, Restraint, and Power in Women's Dress*. She also described a one-day event in which she selected formalwear for a private showing before the museum's volunteer group.

Neill showed images of the storage facilities for the textile collection and explained that the museum has digitized 2,000 images on an Argus database to facilitate access and reduce handling. She also showed images from their vast collection of mannequins, required to exhibit clothing of various sizes particularly because standards for the ideal figure have changed over time.

Neill closed her talk with an armchair tour of a 2006 exhibition at the Atlanta History Center, *Designs of the Times: Twentieth Century Georgia Quilts*. This exhibition featured a selection of quilts from the Georgia Quilt Project, a statewide survey of quilts conducted in the 1990's. The patterns and fabrics represented in the exhibition reflect the time and context in which the quilts were created. There were quilts made from feed sacks and repurposed clothing from the 1920's and 1930's. There were quilts made out of polyester double-knit from the 1970's and 1980's. The stories behind the quilts were equally varied and rich: A mother created a quilt made from maternity clothes to give to her child; A Barbara Streisand fan sewed an elaborate design to offer to his idol. Neill concluded by stressing the importance of documenting and preserving quilts before they are lost or destroyed.

**"Furniture of Georgia and the South." Deanne Levison, Consultant in American Furniture, Atlanta, Georgia**

Levison is the author of *Neat Pieces: The Plain-Style Furniture of Nineteenth Century Georgia*, a catalog which accompanied an exhibition of the same name at the Atlanta Historical Society in 1983. The catalog was reprinted in color in 2006. Levison explained that she will do her best to cover a wide geographical area during her brief 25 minute talk. This will include the

Piedmont that extends from Southern Maryland to North Carolina as well as the Lowcountry and Backcountry of the Carolinas and Georgia.

In 18<sup>th</sup> century and early 19<sup>th</sup> century, high-style furniture was unavailable in the South except in Baltimore or Williamsburg. Craftsmen in other regions of the South created simplified interpretations of the more finely crafted high-style. England was not the only stylistic influence on Southern plain-style furniture. Elements of French design were also reinterpreted in the furniture of the South. Levison recommended the Museum of Early Southern Decorative Arts (MESDA) as an excellent source for research in this area.

Levison showed many examples of furniture to illustrate stylistic characteristics from the South. The high-style pieces included furniture with dark and light wood inlay from Baltimore, furniture painted with Greek and Roman forms by the Finlay Brothers, furniture from Williamsburg with sophisticated joinery, and a federal chair from Norfolk. The Backcountry furniture bore English, German, French and American Quaker influences. Native walnut and birch were used instead of mahogany. Levison showed many examples of Backcountry furniture. Among these were a chest from the North Carolina shore painted with symbols thought to be of German origin; several slabs that show stylistic differences between Piedmont and Backcountry furniture; and a chest painted with a fishtail that shows the idiosyncratic nature of plain-style furniture. The slide show and lecture provided a thorough introduction to the diverse furniture designs that embody the culture and history of the American South.