

Objects of Desire; Symbols Of Affluence

There Is Nothing New About The Display Of
Wealth, But Just How Do You Go About Doing It?

BY JOYCE MACRAE

So you work hard, climb the corporate or whatever ladder, get lucky in the stock market and boom! You're a multi-millionaire. And what do you have to show for it? Not much, you've been working too hard. So you go out and buy a Rolls or Maserati, maybe even park it in the driveway so everyone can see that you've "made it," but that bungalow you live in just doesn't cut it!

So now, buy that big house in Bel-Air or Newport Beach, maybe one in Aspen, another for summer in the Hamptons, and one for winter in Palm Beach. Then comes the tricky part: what to put in all those houses? Unless this rich guy or gal is savvy enough to hire a knowledgeable interior designer, art consultant or private curator, what goes in these houses may be slightly underwhelming. You bought a \$200,000 car and a \$20 million house but don't stop there.

Recently a respected journalist from an important publication asked, "Why will people spend \$10 million and up for a house and then 'have the vapors' when told a beautiful bed will cost \$50,000?" The bed—a place where you spend at least one-third of your life, where complete personal comfort is imperative, should be as alluring as a good night's sleep is to an insomniac. All this which brings me to my point.

In the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries the bed of a noble or wealthy gentlemen made a statement, was a symbol of status and affluence. Especially in



the France of the Louis kings, the leveé of royals was a semi-public event, attended by courtiers as a sign of privilege and loyalty so said noble wouldn't want to be seen sleeping in anything but grandeur.

Many of the stately homes in Great Britain, which you now can tour, have incredible beds; masterworks of draping, upholstery, and carving, they often have canopies of finely carved gilt wood or are elaborately upholstered and be-fringed topped with clusters of ostrich feathers, coronets or carved scroll work. These were not only in the bedrooms of the master of the house but in rooms decorated for visits from the king or queen. These so-called "state beds" reek of one's affluence.

So, too, in centuries past, that little

orangery building in backyards spoke volumes about one's affluence and culture, much more than the most elaborate twenty-first century swimming pool ever could. First, you had to be tuned in, like Louis XIV, to the exotic fruits like oranges and lemons newly discovered in North Africa. As soon as Louis could have dozens of these trees shipped to Versailles, he built a winter garden or l'orangerie to shelter them from the cold European winters. Tout le monde followed suit, even in America where George Washington had one constructed at Mt. Vernon.

In his book, *Billy Baldwin Remembers*, the iconic twentieth century decorator speaks in awe of discovering the orangery at Wye House Plantation on the eastern shore of

Maryland as a young man in the 1920s. "I felt a shock of beauty so strong that I could only stand frozen in wonder—there stood a lovely building as French as the Trianon of Versailles. No beautiful building before or since has affected me as profoundly as the orangery." Even older than Mt. Vernon's, it is thought to have been built around 1755, dated by a circa 1755 portrait of a member of Wye's Lloyd family holding a precious orange. The building is distinguished by ten very tall, small paned, south facing windows to maximize the sun and light reaching the orange and lemon trees.

In 1984, the owner, Elizabeth Lloyd Schiller, spoke of her childhood visits to Wye where in winter her grandparents "kept tubs and tubs of oleanders and gardenias" to be brought outside in spring. When not a plant house, the stuccoed brick building was the site of parties and dances as well as the incubation place of baby quails, all according to the book *Where Land And Water Intertwine, An Architectural History of Talbot County Maryland*.

If building magnificent structures to house a few sweetly desirable oranges seems extreme, then consider the tea leaf which helped give birth to our great country. Tea reached Western Europe from China during the sixteenth and early seventeenth centuries. When Charles II of England married the Portuguese princess, Catherine of Braganza, in the 1660s, she brought a chest of tea as part of her royal dowry, illustrating the esteem given this exotic (and caffeine laden) drink. The English paid dearly for these unassuming leaves and rapidly joined France and the



rest of Europe in what became a fetish for "China tea."

Soon special tea tables, tea implements like handleless tea cups, caddy spoons and, for the affluent, silver tea pots and hot water kettles were *de rigueur*. And, of course, tea caddies, those often highly decorated lidded and locked boxes in which to store the precious leaves. By the eighteenth century, almost every house had at least one tea caddy.

American colonists acquired the tea habit for which the British king taxed them a great deal (on top of the already unseemly purchase price of tea). As every American schoolchild learns, in 1773 a group of independence minded colonists

OPPOSITE A replica of Mt. Vernon's Orangery, built by statesman and farmer George Washington in 1785 to house his exotic orange and lemon trees. Courtesy of Mt. Vernon Ladies Association.

ABOVE This circa 1770 carved and gilded Louis XV mirror has original glass in 2 pieces. One large piece was too expensive and difficult to make. At Urban Chateau, San Francisco.

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boarded three English ships and tossed 342 chests of tea into Boston harbor. They chose to sacrifice the highly coveted tea rather than pay the British the unjustified taxes. The Boston Tea Party became one of the rallying points for American independence which was declared a few years later.

Among the many Asian exports that set fashionable decorative trends and became symbols of affluence in the West was lacquer. Lacquered objects are reached through the arduous process of many, many layers of lacquer which were finally painted, often with gold, in Chinese or Japanese scenes and figures. In the seventeenth century, the trade in lacquer furniture and objects, plus lacquer panels that were used to embellish Western furniture flourished. "Closets" which in grand English houses often referred to small, very private reception rooms in which the owners' greatest treasures were displayed often held choice pieces of lacquer.

The "Lacquer Closet" at Drayton House in England (c. 1584-1770) shows in a 1710 inventory "3 Japanese hand tea tables." All that remains is one black and gold lacquer table and walls paneled with sections of a Chinese Coromandel (lacquer) screen.

Silver, even more than gold, constituted the riches of a household from the seventeenth century on and was often displayed in full everyday view. Identified in old inventories as the "family plate," it usually consisted of large silver chargers, "rosewater" bowls, goblets and tankards. Prior to that century silver objects were mostly made for church use.

And we all know that Louis XIV's Galerie de Glace at Versailles (circa 1680) was a breakthrough in the use of large panels of mirrored glass (at a cost only a



TOP From small locked and treasured boxes called caddies for storing precious tea (at Richard Gould, Los Angeles) to all sorts and sizes of furniture, the Asian art of lacquered finishes was an 18th century passion. BOTTOM The commode from Therien & Co. is 18th century English, lacquered and decorated in the oriental taste.

king could sustain). Despite the price, large expanses of mirror became the new "must have" among the eighteenth century's rich and mega-rich. The fashion for exquisitely carved, gilt and gesso framed mirrors grew during the eighteenth century. It has never abated. Every great house cries out for great mirrors; fortunately a

goodly number of the old ones survive. In fact, a knowledgeable advisor or decorator can lead you to many of these centuries old symbols of affluence—at a price. So why not sell one of those mega-million dollar houses and perhaps the yacht you never use and invest in some real beauty and history to savor inside your home. CH