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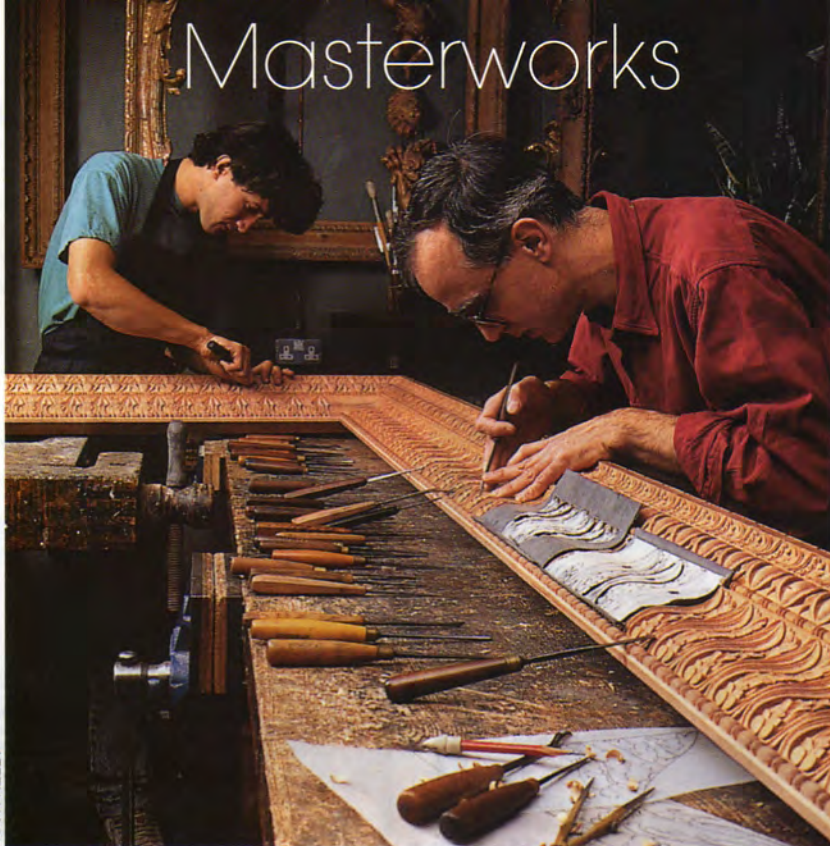
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# Masterworks



HUGH KELLY

## Spencer House Restoration

*Produced by Philip Mazzurco By Mary Vespa*

Both the Princess of Wales and her family's former London palace have proven themselves to be elegant survivors. One of history's small ironies is that Lady Diana's ancestral home, Spencer House, was built in the 18th century as a testament to one of England's great love-marriages. In 1755, the 21-year-old first Lord Spencer, an extremely wealthy British bachelor, secretly wed his beautiful 18-year-old sweetheart, Georgiana Poyntz.

When constructed, the 30-bedroom mansion on St. James Place was a pioneering example of neoclassical architecture in England. It subsequently survived bombing during World War II, a threat of demolition, and private and commercial tenants. Spencer House's savior was Jacob Rothschild, a financier and patron of the arts who is an heir to a great English dynasty and fortune. In 1985 his company, RIT Capital Partners plc, purchased a 125-year lease for the Palladian-style building from the Spencers — Lady Diana is a freeholder, or part-owner. The company also paid the Crown,

which counts the mansion's circa 1800 garden overlooking Green Park among its vast properties, for that land's use.

The exterior of the house and first-floor rooms were the masterpiece of John Vardy, while the family and main reception chambers on the second floor were designed by James Stuart. When Spencer House was built in 1756-66, it employed some of the greatest artists and craftsmen of the day. It was conceived as a classical temple dedicated to hospitality, love, and the arts. More than two centuries later, Lord Rothschild, who has been called "a modern Medici," approached the restoration project with a highly sophisticated vision of what Spencer House had been and what it could be in today's world. "Not only is its architectural history unique with its revolutionary use of Greek, as well as Roman, architectural sources," he says, "but it is the only 18th-century town house substantially in its original form to survive in London." Guided tours of eight state rooms are conducted on Sundays.

CHARLOTTE WOOD



*Above: A James Stuart picture frame for the Great Room is copied from an original at Althorp for Arnold Wiggins & Sons by Ben Bacon, right, in his studio. Left: Wooden sections from the Palm Room include, at top, an original Vardy molding.*



MARK FINNES



These rooms are rented out during the rest of the week for private and corporate entertaining.

Before restoration work was begun in 1987, Lord Rothchild assembled a prestigious five-member advisory panel of architecture and decorative arts specialists. Supplementing their work were five consultants, including experts on furniture, gardens, and Georgian architecture. They studied the project, surveying and assessing the building. An extensive two-volume report, which took nine months to prepare, became the foundation stone of the restoration.

What made Spencer House even more of a challenge was the fact that in 1942, during the World War II blitz of London, the Spencers had stripped the place of its fixtures. Everything from doors to marble chimneypieces was taken out and installed in the family's country estate, Althorp, in Northamptonshire. Later, from the 1970s to 1990, Lady Diana's stepmother, Raine, sold off many of the family heirlooms, including archives, architectural drawings for Spencer House, paintings, and furniture.

Once the Spencer House project was conceptualized, a great deal of painstaking work was undertaken. Paint was analyzed; museums, such as the Victoria & Albert, lent furniture, as did private collectors; and a small army of craftspeople were assembled. They are scheduled to finish their work by the end of 1994.

*The dining room has gold-leaf molding and a column whose faux marble was done circa 1785 (above left). The room itself (above right) is Regency in feeling. The sideboards are by Vardy. Michael Koumbouzis (below) restores the scagliola.*



DENNIS GILBERT

Some furniture pieces were copied from originals by John Vardy, who looked to Imperial Rome for inspiration, and James Stuart, who was a great proponent in England of the second classical revival. Ben Bacon, a wood-carver in London who is from Maryland, made 17 pieces. "I learned how both designers thought," he says. "Vardy, for example, designed furniture that was

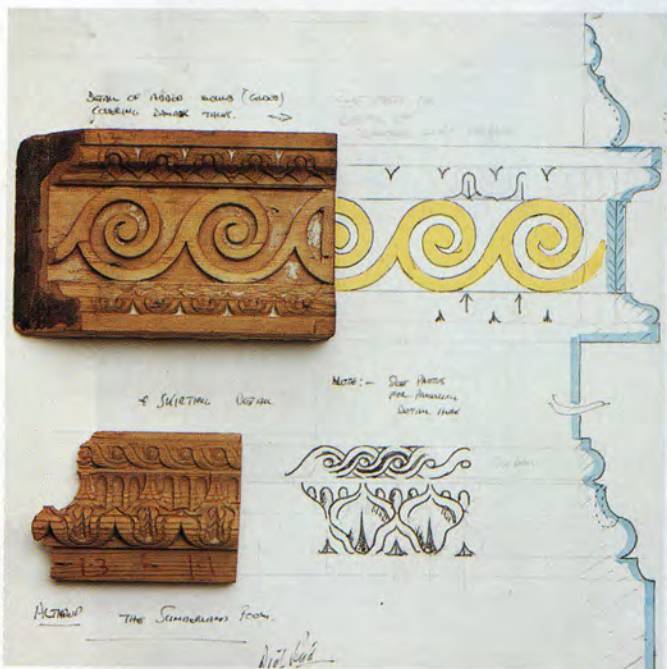
the right size and shape for the room it was to go in. His pieces are architectural and sculptural. That's a pretty sobering lesson to realize how many things he was grappling with at once."

Bacon traveled through England and the United States studying originals. He photographed each piece; drew front, side, and aerial views; and then took notes on construction details such as carving and upholstery. "Periodically," he recalls, "we would take a leg and go back to the original to make sure it was right. Some had to be checked three or four times."

He and his craftsmen used British tools last manufactured in the 1930s and 1940s. "They made beautiful ones," says Bacon. "Even the French, who are so chauvinistic, scour London for them." The pièce de résistance of Bacon's work is the Vardy sofa in the Palm Room. "It was the most complex," he says, "and it's huge — the size of an aircraft carrier." (The frame measures 90 inches long and 39½ inches wide.)

Peter Thuring, a West Sussex upholsterer, used fine scrim and horsehair for the Vardy pieces. "It was like applied sculpture," he says. "Each frame needs the right height and shape upholstery. It's a delicate balance." Fabrics were made in England and France from documents of the period. Where they weren't available, material was chosen to complement the design schemes. "In some ways, this is the most interesting part of the job: making a credible aesthetic decision when the research runs out," says

Discarded sections of the original dado rail and skirting from the Music Room (below) were found at Althorp and stripped. Next to them are Dick Reid's working drawings. His studio copied Vardy's lion's head and drapery for the library chimneypiece (right).



CHARLOTTE WOOD

MARK FIENNES



David Mlinaric, who was the interior designer for the project.

Clare Kooy-Lister, a London gilder, used 23¼-karat gold leaf on the Vardy pieces, employing the same method as Egyptians did more than 2,000 years ago. "It took me one month to finish one chair," she remembers. An interesting footnote to this melding of 18th- and 20th-century craftwork is that in some cases, the furniture that was copied was improved upon.

"One of the benefits of hindsight is that you see they had structural problems," says Bacon. "In the 18th century they used lime wood which carves well, but is too soft

to be reupholstered time and time again. So for the internal framing and seat work we used beech, which is stronger and more robust." Machinists also improved the joining. "When you see how something has worn for 200 years, you can do internal refinements to make the pieces stronger," he adds.

Master carver Dick Reid, owner of a York workshop that bears his name, agrees. For the past seven years, the brawny Englishman has employed up to 22 workmen to replace the architectural carving in both wood and marble. They copied such wooden (Turn to page 118)

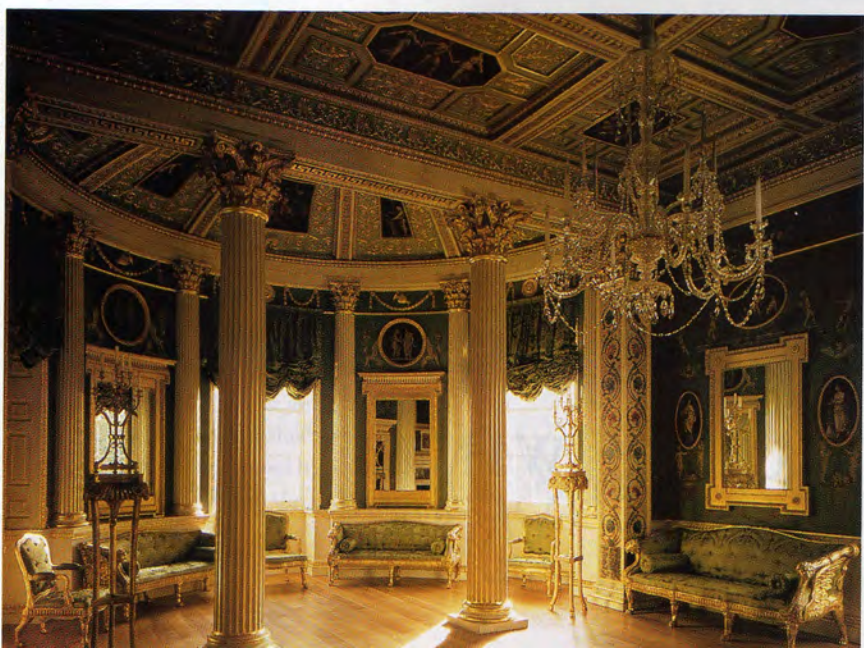


DENNIS GILBERT

In the dining room (above), a craftsman works on the cornice. Gilding the architectural moldings at Spencer House took about 4,500 man-hours and used 87,500 leaves of 23¼-karat English gold. In James Stuart's Painted Room (left), his original neoclassical sofas and chairs were designed on a curve to stand against the wall of the apse. The upholstery by Peter Thuring was executed after consultation with the Victoria & Albert Museum, and follows the slimmer lines appropriate to such 18th-century pieces.

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## INDUSTRY AND ARTISTRY

*continued from page 89*

One unusual aspect of Reynolda House is the informality, one could even say congeniality, of its presentations. Ubiquitous sofas invite visitors to comfortably view paintings, in the hope they may "capture the special emotion that is felt in one period but lost to another," says Millhouse. According to author Brendan Gill, "Reynolda House marks an unprecedented development in American domestic architecture. We are not in the presence of wealth made formidably manifest...but in circumstances charmingly of the family; the intention here is plainly not to show off, but to be happy among friends — a pleasing novelty in the first decades of the twentieth century."

Educator Elliot Eisner wrote that "in the arts, choice is always multiple; the difference, however, is that there is rarely a single certain answer. Hence, when well taught, the arts free the mind from rigid certainty." For Nicholas Bragg, Reynolda's executive director, this means that "we must always reach out beyond the art history professions." The common ground offered by Reynolda House is particularly useful in 1994, a time of extreme specialization in which practitioners of one art are largely ignorant of developments in other areas.

## SPENCER HOUSE RESTORATION

*continued from page 39*

fixtures as doorcases, chair rails, and skirting molding. But he is most proud of the Italian marble chimneypieces that his workshop copied from the originals at Althorp.

"To do Spencer House's great chimneypieces," he says, "we needed to put a team together who could get under the skin of the original carving." The team accomplished this by making plaster casts of the originals. To make the mold for a cast, Reid's men painted each chimneypiece at Althorp with liquid rubber, which set 1/4-inch thick on the surface. They then coated it with a plaster mix, letting that also set. Finally, they lifted off the plaster cast, putting it face up, then peeled away the rubber, laying it back into the plaster mold. The men made the actual cast by pouring plaster into the mold, then peeling away the rubber layer. "You're left with an exact replica," Reid says.

So far, he has installed four of the six chimneypieces he has been commissioned to reproduce. "We're doing them the same way as they did in the 18th century, except we use small pneumatic hand chisels," he says. To date, his men have clocked about 24,200 man-hours turning out the finished chimneypieces.

"We were trying to capture the spirit of the age, rather than pure geometry," Reid says. "Imagine copying Michelangelo's David. It either looks like him, or it doesn't."

To Reid's surprise, he discovered that occasionally the 18th-century originals were of variable quality. "I know that some of our work is better than what was originally done," he says. "On the Great Room chimneypiece the general ornament is slightly better than what was done. We carved it crisply instead of clumsily."

But he tips his hat to his predecessors' overall craftsmanship. "The consistent high quality of the architectural carving in Spencer House is rarely found," he says. "Normally, one room is better than the other. It is unusual."

Spencer House, in some ways, became something of a professional triumph for the craftspeople who worked on its restoration. "The interesting thing about the place is that each room is a piece in itself," says Reid. "The marble chimneypieces are the focal points of the rooms. Each chimneypiece has become personal to me and the workshop. We love them all."